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**Research Question:** To what extent did the patriarchal society of 1960's America affect *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath?

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**Abstract**

In this study, the effect of patriarchal society in 1960's America to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is investigated through excerpts from her only book *The Bell Jar* and her journals that parallel her semi-autobiographical character Esther Greenwood. In early 1960's America, the patriarchal society manifested itself in such a way that limited the career choices of women. The phenomena 'The Suburban Housewife Syndrome' was also coined at the same decade by Betty Freidan as '*the entrapment of highly educated, intellectual, aspiring women to the limited, domestic life by the post-World War II society*'. Her book 'The Feminine Mystique' was considered to be controversial and infuriating, however, in a very short period of time it became a milestone in Women's Rights' movement. In spite of the worldwide acclaim of the book, millions of college-educated American Women were still waiting to be waken up from their mundane lives as home-makers. Sylvia Plath, a young successful American poet committed suicide at the same year by putting her head in a gas oven. Her suicide was almost symbolic; the oven, a symbol of domestic life. Her confessional poems reflected her despair and anxiety over her refusal to choose but try to have both. However the personal and social conflicts she faced, contributed to her mental breakdown, and eventually suicide.

(216 words)

*What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel the mysterious  
fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor?*

(The Feminine Mystique, Freidan, 62)

## I. Introduction

Extolled for her poetic mastery and her semi-autobiographic 'The Bell Jar', Sylvia Plath shaped a literary form that encompassed a plethora of ideas full of comprehensive metaphors and unusual imagery that only in-dept analysis can fully elucidate. Just like her poems that integrated seemingly contrasting thoughts, her life was also filled with contradicting motives and ambitions. Although her intricate and enigmatic metaphors sometimes shadow the main ideas of her texts, lots of literary critics and contemporary feminists have argued that Plath's works incorporate most genuine and prominent insights to what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society.

Plath's 'The Bell Jar' is a *roman à clef*; it reflects real-life characters and events behind a façade of fiction. The protagonist of the novel, Esther Greenwood is the fictional identity of Plath herself, during the time period from her college years in Smith College to her summer job in Mademoiselle magazine in New York and her mental breakdown. Similar to other novels with autobiographical elements and personal reflections, The Bell jar entails a retrospective analysis that involves an account of Plath's psychological and literary evolution. Therefore it should come as no surprise that The Bell Jar is seen as one of the most confessional and revealing literary pieces: 'The Bell Jar is by turns funny, harrowing, crude, ardent and artless. Its most notable quality is an astonishing immediacy, like a series of snapshots taken at high noon.' (Time Magazine, 1963)

The Bell Jar stands as a contemporary example of Bildungsroman; its main focus is on the psychological, moral and intellectual development of Esther Greenwood, a youthful protagonist in the quest for beauty and meaning in life. Acknowledging this, The Bell Jar offers an abundant resource for understanding what truly determines the character of a protagonist, such as loss of a parent or a prestigious college education. However, when The Bell Jar is analyzed in a strictly erudite means, it can be seen that the novel has a great value in a social and feminist context with its striking imagery and metaphors of social corruption in a patriarchal society.

In 1960s America, the 'so-called problem of unsatisfied women' prevailed like a dagger that cut through the image of the stereotypical happy American housewife. Attention to such a national, but yet universal issue augmented in all branches of media; in television commercials beautiful housewives with neat cooking aprons greeted their husbands with almost a forced smile and joyfully ran back to the kitchen to satisfy the needs of them in such sycophant manners that such a scenario was the script of the famous soup commercial 'The American Soup'. The same housewives beamed over their shiny dishpans on Time's cover story on "The Suburban Wife, an American Phenomenon". The article protested that these women who were trained to be doctors, lawyers, teachers were, "Having too good a time . . . to believe that they should be unhappy." Sylvia Plath, who lived in the same era, was never a stereotypical housewife. Nevertheless, she experienced an oppression to confine to a domestic life as such, that she repeatedly protested to this superficial notion in her works.

Hence, the scope of this study will be the analysis of how the patriarchal society in 1960's America affected The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath and the analysis of the novel through a feminist lens.

## **I. Under The Bell Jar: Retribution**

“What I've done is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color- it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown.... I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar” (Wagner-Martin, 10)

Esther Greenwood, the protagonist and the narrator of ‘The Bell Jar’ is an ambitious, diligent young woman who aspires of becoming a prolific writer in the future. The novel begins with the description of New York weather as ‘ it was a queer, sultry summer’ foreshadowing a distressing twist in her life; just like the ‘sultry summer’, her youth is going to be entangled by a dark ambiguity, like the hot New York summer with clouds that are likely to carry storm. Such an opening line suggests that Esther is already in a gloomy mood and somehow disappointed that her expectations about New York did not turn out be like what she anticipated. At the end of the first paragraph the readers acquainted with Plath’s life can seize the foreshadowing of her electric shock therapy. Esther contemplates on the electrocution of Rosenbergs; ‘ I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.’(Plath, 1) and yet this is exactly what she will end up having; it is ironic that what she states in the first paragraph of the book as ‘the worst thing in the world’ is the treatment her psychiatrist Dr. Gordon will require her to undergo in the following chapters of the novel.

She constantly states her disappointment with ‘the city that never sleeps’ and how disillusioned she was with her choice to participate in Mademoiselle magazine as the guest editor; ‘...how all the little successes I’d totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue’(Plath, 2) Although she is obviously dulled and stuck between her high expectations and diminishing reality, Esther can not help but wonder why she does not feel complacent. The first insights of her dissatisfaction as a woman in such a society that will last throughout her life starts to prevail itself.

‘I was supposed to be having the time of my life (...) I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.’(Plath, 3)

Gradually, Esther is so jaded by the mundane routines of the magazine and the vapid women she meets there, that she starts to scrutinize these women one by one like a surgeon working on a body. She underscores that they are all at some level similar; they have all won a fashion magazine contest, ending up in New York, all expenses already paid to be indulged with piles of gifts and free bonuses from ballet tickets to hair styling at a famous expensive salon. Although she grasps the similar ambition of hers in these girl’s eyes she dislikes them by criticizing that they all try to lose weight and confine to a stereotypical beauty. Among these insipid girls, a young woman named Doreen attracts her attention. Doreen not only exposes her to a better social life in New York, but also introduces her to a different kind of femininity by encouraging Esther to flirt with men. However, most importantly, Doreen functions as a mirror in reflecting Esther’s moral dilemmas.

Esther's way of attributing suffering to sin and misbehaving is manifested in several circumstances of the novel. For instance, Esther attributes Doreen's alcohol coma and sickness that follows it as a retribution to Doreen's misbehavior by flaunting her sexuality and then to her own failure to protect Doreen almost maternally; 'I think I still expected to see Doreen's body lying there in the pool of vomit like an ugly, concrete testimony to my own dirty nature.' (Plath, 23) It would not be a wide assumption to claim that although Plath wanted to pursue an authentic life that was only defined by her own desires, she did feel a strange bond to the traditional image of women as 'saints'. Because whenever she feels like she fails to fulfill her so-called duties as a woman, a daughter, a wife she punishes herself mentally by attributing others' pain to her own foundering. Esther, herself is the subject of her own vengeance. For example, she encounters the breaking of her leg during a skiing accident as retaliation for being bad and refusing to marry Buddy Willard. In the following chapters of the book, she wonders what a horrible blunder she must have made to deserve electroshock therapy. By delineating Esther as a character who punishes herself for not being complacent, Plath is, in an unconscious level, revealing her own dissatisfaction as an unsatisfied woman in a patriarchal society where women are the source of all misdemeanors.

The *Bell Jar* also encompasses the extent of conflict between protagonist and society as well as protagonist's internal conflict. Esther is expected to be constantly joyful and light-hearted but her melancholic nature resists peppiness. Instead of indulging herself with an all-expenses-paid life in New York, a city that any teenager would do anything to go, she preoccupies herself with gloomy despondent events such as the execution of Rosenbergs, the cadavers and jarred fetuses she encounters at Buddy Willard's medical school, due to the fact that her brooding nature can find no

conventional means of expression. Esther is rather infuriated with this 'silence' that blocks her imagination and recognizes her depression; 'The silence depressed me. (...) It was my own silence.' (Plath, 18) The patriarchal society also condemns pre-marital sexuality, however Esther acknowledges the duplicity of this notion and concludes that like Buddy Willard, she intends to lose her virginity before marriage only to prove that she is fully independent in her actions, embarking on an emotionless sexual encounter. However, the society's notion that women should be virtuous is so deeply ingrained in her, that she exposes Buddy to the same notion and deem his tuberculosis as a punishment for his gloated infidelity with a waitress. ' Now I saw he had only been pretending all this time to be innocent.' (Plath, 70)

## II. The Fig Tree: Girl Who Wanted to Be Everything

“I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. (...) One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor. (...) I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet” (Plath, 115).

The protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, Esther, reads the story of a nun and a Jewish man who used to meet by a fig tree. Because of their inherent differences, their relationship was doomed to cease. Esther feels that her relationship with Buddy Willard, who represents the average, conventional male in that decade, is doomed as well. However later in her life, the fig tree becomes a striking image in her life, also becoming the central metaphor of the novel. The tree symbolizes the epitome of all the choices Esther can make with her life. She imagines each branch as a path of life that reaches to a different ending and a different story. However, since these choices are mutually exclusive she can only choose one fig, which would result in the dismissal of other branches; other choices in life. The fig tree is not only functional in reflecting Esther's personal struggles to find herself an aim to built her life upon, but it also represents all the possibilities the society can offer to a women in early 1960's America. The tree itself is a paradoxical element by nature; although its branches (choices) feed on the same soil (person), they symbolize massively contradicting

notions like career and domestic life that, the tree is bound to rot. Just like a woman in early 1960's America trapped between domestic life and career, although Esther wants all of the figs, she can only choose one. Therefore she rests paralyzed with indecision, and the figs rot and fall to the ground. The complete rejection of choosing was already ruled out by the patriarchal society, which by all means made sure that a women's place is at home. But Esther, also in a wider context Plath herself, found choosing strenuous because as her editor in *Mademoiselle Magazine* put it; 'she wanted it all.' (Plath, 101)

Being one of the few male characters in *The Bell Jar*, Buddy Willard has a great importance in the novel since he fully represents the patriarchal society. A contemporary critic of the novel may color Buddy Willard as a perfect stereotype of the ideal 1950s American male that every teenage girl craves for since by the standards of that time he was almost pristine. He is handsome and athletic. He never neglects the church, adores his parents, me and athletic, he attends church, loves his parents, advances in school and fully committed to traditions. Although Esther admits liking Buddy Willard as a young girl; 'I've adored him from a distance for five years before he even looked at me' (Plath, 52), she becomes aware of his flaws that shatter the image of a perfect male in her perception indefinitely. 'Buddy Willard was a hypocrite.' (Plath, 52) Although she recognizes that Buddy is intelligent, she condemns him for not understanding her aspiration to become a famous writer. He steadfastly claims that poems are as ephemeral as dust and will soon lose their flavors as she matures and goes on to become a wife, and then a mother. This superficial and arrogant presumption portrays him as a callous stereotypical male who is ignorant to a women's right to choose. It is palpable that he adopts his mother's conventional ideas and that he is controlled by the urge to achieve his one last wish as a successful doctor

and public man; that is, keeping a clean public image by taking a wife. Esther's account for him as disrespectful and arrogant only proves to be true when Buddy contemplates on no one will marry Esther now that she has been in a mental institution. His last remark that dismisses Esther's chances of getting married thoroughly reflects the societies alienation of unconventional woman. Because prejudices about genders are circumscribed with bluntly simple formulas; if a woman is not in accordance with the conventional female image, than she is mad, that simple. It would not be a hasty generalization to claim that things have worked this way for centuries in patriarchal societies; accusing hundreds of innocent women by witchcraft and hunting them down only reinforces this notion. In spite of his anti-hero qualities, Buddy endures a few similarities with Esther. Both of them represent promising youth; they are both college students eager to get into the real world. However, towards the end of the book they end up in undesired places that creates an anti-climax; Esther in a mental institution and Buddy in a sanatorium. This similarity, however, does not change the fact that Esther will never marry Buddy, because by rejecting his proposal, she is also rejecting the life that the society prescribed for her even before she was born. She refuses to become a subservient wife and mother to terminate her artistic passions for writing. Although Ester asserts that she never intends to marry in various parts of the novel, she is bewildered that everyone assumes that she will end up getting married with Buddy Willard; '(...) although everybody still thought I would marry him when he came out of the TB place, I knew I would never marry him if he were the last man on earth' (Plath, 52)

The commitment to a conventional life that Buddy offers is contradicted with a minor male character in the novel named Marco who calls Esther a slut when she declines sexual intercourse with him. Doreen introduces Marco to Esther and instantly Esther

is convinced that Marco is a woman-hater; 'I could tell Marco was a woman-hater, because in spite of all the models and TV starlets in the room that night he paid attention only to me.' (Plath, 106) Marco, functions in the novel in such a way that demonstrates the objectification of women as mere tools of sex. Esther, who is first inclined to act like her promiscuous friend Doreen, she quickly becomes disgusted with the disparaging attitude of Marco; thus feeling not empowered but diminished by what her sex suggests to society.

#### **IV. The Suburban Housewife Syndrome**

Post-World War II American society, offered more and more education opportunities; a college education and thus more career options that women can choose from. Yet, by the early 1960's, the rate of college dropouts had increased and the average marriage age had dropped significantly. Related surveys and consensuses showed that women were leaving their college education to better integrate themselves to a domestic life and get started to build a family as soon as they can. Women, who were first exhilarated to confine themselves to such domestic circumstances, were slowly getting restless about their situation. The New York Times article published in June 28, 1960 called 'Road from Sophocles to Spock is Often A Bumpy One' in which this phenomena was covered. It said; 'the reason a college-bred housewife usually feels like a two-headed schizophrenic is this: She used to talk about whether music was frozen architecture, now she talks over frozen food plans. Once she wrote a paper on the Graveyard Poets, now she is writing notes to the milkman. Once she determined the boiling point of sulphuric acid, now she determines her boiling point with the overdue repairman.' The problem that had no name was growing so massively that hundreds of women were going to therapy asking their doctors why they do not feel content with their lives although they have everything a woman can possibly have; a nice house with reasonable amount of appliances, a great husband, at least 2 children...

Every suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night — she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question — "Is this all?"(Friedan, 69)

A writer in Harper's Bazaar cynically mocked societies disregard to women's needs in his article in July, 1960 by suggesting that the issue could be remedied by taking away a woman's right to vote. He humorously stated that before women gained their right to vote, all the decisions she has to make for herself were in the hands of her husband, but now she has to make decisions for the sake of her family and he political; it was simply overwhelming for her. Not only media was completely ignorant to women's right to choose between a career and domestic life, but also plenty of educators were trying to integrate domestic life into these women's education by adding home appliances tutorials to their curriculum and arranging seminars about domestic management, thus making the transition from a college town to a suburb less burdensome.

Sylvia Plath never fitted the housewife definition. She always introduced herself to others as a poet, writer or a professor. At seventeen, in 1949, she scabbled in her journal; "I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day-- spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free..."(V. Kukil, 34) However during the time period in which she was separated from her husband, she had to take care of her children all by herself which made her life more complicated as she had to fulfill all the chores the society loaded to a suburban housewife only to wake up at four a.m in the morning to pursue her own career as a poet. Fulfilling the duties society places on women and finding time to be artistically creative is an issue touched upon by many writers and thinkers. In 1929, Virginia Woolf said that; "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." (Woolf, 4) This twist in Plath's life also manifested itself in her novel *The*

Bell Jar to almost an ironic extent because although Esther discloses Plath's quandary, when she equivocates marriage and having a parcel of babies; "If I had a baby to wait on all day, I would go mad."(Plath, 87), the reader acknowledges the fact that Esther will have a baby; "I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses for the *baby* to play with."(Plath, 3) She is deluged by the concepts that proclaim the myth that a husband, handful of kids, and a nice house are mandatory for a women's fulfillment of her existence. Therefore, although Esther's character experiences a decline in the story; she graduates from a mental hospital instead of graduate school, Esther can be considered as a heroic iconoclast because refusing to marry and to give up her other objectives in such a society is bold, and if anything, feminist.

## V. Conclusion

As an outstanding Bildungsroman in women's literature, *The Bell Jar* successfully portrays a young woman's search for identity in a patriarchal society where the spectrum of a woman's choices is strictly circumscribed by traditions and conventional wisdom. Plath voices her awareness of what it means to be a woman in such a society through her mask of fiction that is Esther Greenwood; "I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses (...) what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat." (Plath, 76) Her domestic nightmare is flourished by her apprehension that such a limiting mundane life can cause her creativity to cease. Esther's monolog articulates Plath's concern: "(...) that after I had children I wouldn't want to write poems any more. (...) maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state." (Plath, 93)

What dragged Sylvia Plath to a domestic dark abyss will remain enigmatic. It is also ambiguous whether-consciously or unconsciously- she needed these elements in her life to feed her creativity on. In her journal, however, Plath wrote that she was artistically released from the sedative domesticity that choked her. Therefore, it wouldn't be an extreme statement to say that committing suicide with her head in the gas oven was a final symbolic statement.

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