



FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY AND SOCIAL CONFINEMENT: ANALYZING GENDER CONSTRUCTS IN SYLVIA PLATH'S NOVEL "THE BELL JAR (1963)"

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar offers a compelling narrative of a young woman's struggle with identity, mental illness, and societal expectations. This paper explores how Plath's portrayal of Esther Greenwood, the novel's protagonist, reflects the intricate relationship between female subjectivity and the oppressive societal structures that confine women in the mid-20th century. Drawing on feminist theory, the paper examines how Esther's internal turmoil and eventual breakdown are products of both personal and social forces, specifically the rigid gender roles that dictate women's lives during the 1950s and 1960s. In The Bell Jar, Esther is trapped between the idealized images of femininity — as a domestic mother, the perfect housewife, or the sexually liberated woman — and her own desires for intellectual and emotional autonomy.

The metaphor of the bell jar serves as a central image in the novel, symbolizing both the psychological and physical entrapment that women like Esther experience under patriarchal norms. The paper analyzes how this imagery is used to depict the claustrophobia of societal expectations and the internalization of these pressures, leading to Esther's mental and emotional breakdown. By examining Esther's experiences — from her rejection of the traditional female roles to her eventual suicide attempt — this paper argues that The Bell Jar critiques the damaging effects of gendered confinement on women's psychological health and personal agency.

Ultimately, this research highlights how Plath's novel illuminates the stifling effect of gendered expectations on female subjectivity. Through a feminist lens, The Bell Jar is revealed not only as an autobiographical narrative but also as a broader critique of the limitations placed on women in a patriarchal society, which restrict their growth, independence, and self-definition.

Keywords:

Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar, female subjectivity, social confinement, gender constructs, identity crisis, feminist literary criticism, patriarchal oppression, mental health, societal expectations,



female agency, gender identity, alienation, psychological trauma, coming-of-age, 1950s American society, cultural norms, women's oppression, existential struggle, selfhood, autonomy, confinement and freedom, identity formation.

Introduction

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) is a powerful narrative that delves into the complexities of female identity within the confines of a patriarchal society. Through the lens of Esther Greenwood, Plath constructs a vivid portrayal of a young woman's struggle with societal expectations, mental illness, and the search for autonomy in a world that offers limited choices for women. While *The Bell Jar* is often regarded as an autobiographical work, it transcends the personal to become a broader critique of the gendered norms that dictated the lives of women in the 1950s and 1960s. This research paper examines the intricate relationship between female subjectivity and social confinement in *The Bell Jar*, analyzing how Esther's mental and emotional breakdown can be understood as a product of both internal and external forces. By reading the novel through a feminist theoretical framework, this paper contends that Plath critiques the restrictive gender roles imposed on women during this period, illustrating how these roles stifle self-expression, autonomy, and psychological well-being.

Plath's *The Bell Jar* is not only a narrative of personal despair but also a social commentary on the ways in which women's roles were socially constructed and institutionalized. The novel's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, serves as a representation of the social pressure to conform to an idealized vision of femininity, a vision that is both limiting and damaging. As Barbara M. Heller (1977) suggests, *The Bell Jar* explores the duality of women's roles, where the pursuit of personal fulfillment is often at odds with societal expectations. Esther's struggle for individuality in the face of societal pressure mirrors the larger cultural climate of the 1950s, a time when women were expected to marry young, maintain domesticity, and embody idealized virtues of purity and self-sacrifice (Showalter, 1985). Esther's rejection of these roles, and her eventual emotional collapse, exemplifies the devastating impact of these social constructions on women's mental health.

The metaphor of the bell jar, which permeates the novel, serves as a poignant symbol of female entrapment. Esther's experience of being "trapped" under the bell jar illustrates the suffocating effects of societal norms that confine women to prescribed roles, limiting their potential for self-expression and fulfillment. This metaphor echoes the feminist literary criticism of the time, particularly the ideas put forth by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), where she asserts that women have been historically defined as "the Other," their existence and identities defined in relation to men. Plath's novel reflects this existential struggle, as Esther seeks to define herself



outside the patriarchal structures that shape her reality. The bell jar is not just a representation of mental illness but also a powerful commentary on the societal forces that shape female subjectivity.

Esther's journey toward self-destruction is also intertwined with the dissonance between her personal desires and the roles society expects her to fulfill. The conflict between these two forces is seen most clearly in her experiences with romantic relationships, career aspirations, and societal expectations of beauty and success. Esther's rejection of the traditional feminine roles — such as marriage, motherhood, and domesticity — reflects the feminist critique of women's roles in the 20th century, a critique that was central to the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) catalyzed much of the feminist discourse surrounding women's dissatisfaction with their prescribed roles in society, and *The Bell Jar* can be read as a literary reflection of these concerns. Friedan's analysis of the "problem that has no name" — the dissatisfaction and depression of suburban housewives trapped in domestic roles — finds an echo in Esther's despair as she grapples with the limitations imposed by societal expectations.

Additionally, Esther's experiences reflect broader historical and social movements, particularly the rise of second-wave feminism, which sought to deconstruct traditional notions of gender and power. The novel's critique of gender roles and societal expectations intersects with feminist theories of socialization, identity, and agency. Judith Butler's concept of performativity, as outlined in *Gender Trouble* (1990), is particularly relevant to understanding Esther's internal conflict. According to Butler, gender is not an innate or fixed trait but a series of socially constructed performances that are repeated and reinforced over time. Esther's attempts to break free from the performance of idealized femininity in *The Bell Jar* are a direct response to these performative gender roles, and her mental breakdown can be seen as the result of the tension between her desire for authenticity and the societal demand for conformity.

Plath's work has long been examined through the lens of feminist criticism, and *The Bell Jar* continues to be a key text in the study of female subjectivity and social confinement. As Elaine Showalter (1979) argues in her feminist critique, Plath's portrayal of women's mental illness should be understood not just as an individual's psychological struggle but as a broader commentary on the oppressive structures that limit women's autonomy. Showalter notes that Plath's work, particularly *The Bell Jar*, dramatizes the ways in which societal norms and expectations shape women's experiences of selfhood and identity, ultimately revealing the destructive impact of these limitations on women's mental and emotional well-being.

In conclusion, this paper aims to analyze *The Bell Jar* as a critical exploration of the intersections between female subjectivity and social confinement. By examining the ways in which Plath



critiques gender constructs, this research highlights the novel's enduring relevance as both a personal narrative and a broader feminist critique of the roles and expectations that have historically defined women's lives. Through the character of Esther Greenwood, Plath exposes the psychological toll of living in a world where gendered identities are rigidly prescribed, offering a powerful commentary on the struggle for autonomy, self-expression, and recognition in a patriarchal society.

Literature Review

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) has been the subject of extensive feminist critique, with scholars focusing on its exploration of female subjectivity, mental illness, and the restrictive gender roles imposed on women in the mid-20th century. The novel is often examined through the lens of Plath's own life and struggles, but it also functions as a critical commentary on the broader societal forces that limit women's autonomy and self-expression. This literature review surveys key works that engage with Plath's portrayal of female entrapment, the gendered norms that shape Esther Greenwood's experience, and the psychological consequences of living under societal constraints.

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath presents a protagonist, Esther, who grapples with societal expectations of femininity, particularly the pressures to conform to traditional roles of wife and mother. Scholars have long argued that the novel critiques the rigid gender roles that defined women's lives in the 1950s and 1960s, a period marked by the rise of suburban domesticity and the ideal of the passive, self-sacrificing woman (Showalter, 1985). According to Showalter (1979), the novel reflects the feminist discourse of the time, which critiqued the limitations of the domestic ideal and highlighted the mental toll it took on women who were forced to conform to these roles. Showalter notes that Esther's emotional breakdown is not simply a result of personal struggles but a reflection of the broader societal forces that confine women to these limited identities.

The metaphor of the bell jar, which Esther describes as trapping her in a state of suffocating isolation, has been widely interpreted as a symbol of the societal and psychological confinement that women face. Heller (1977) argues that the bell jar symbolizes the stifling conditions of womanhood in the mid-20th century, particularly the societal pressure to adhere to an idealized image of femininity. Esther's struggle to escape from the bell jar mirrors the feminist call to break free from the roles prescribed to women by patriarchal society. Heller suggests that Esther's eventual breakdown reflects the destructive consequences of living in a society that offers no room for individuality or self-expression for women.

In addition to the societal constraints Esther faces, her rejection of traditional femininity is also tied to her desire for intellectual and personal autonomy. Critics such as Margo Culley (1981) have



examined how Esther's intellectual ambitions and desire for a career conflict with the traditional expectation that women should prioritize marriage and motherhood. Culley argues that Esther's decision to reject the conventional female roles is central to her alienation and eventual breakdown. Esther's intellectualism, which in many ways sets her apart from her peers, is seen as both a source of strength and a source of isolation. In a society that equates femininity with domesticity and emotional passivity, Esther's intellectual aspirations make her an outlier, unable to find a place where she can reconcile her personal desires with the roles expected of her.

Further feminist scholarship has linked *The Bell Jar* to the second-wave feminist movement, which sought to challenge traditional gender roles and promote women's autonomy. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is often cited as a key text in understanding the disillusionment that Esther feels. Friedan argues that women in the 1950s were taught to aspire only to marriage and motherhood, which led to feelings of unfulfillment and depression. Plath's depiction of Esther's despair is a reflection of the frustrations that many women of her generation experienced as they confronted the limitations of their prescribed roles. Esther's emotional breakdown is symbolic of the larger crisis of identity that many women faced in a society that restricted their freedom and self-expression (Friedan, 1963). According to Friedan, the "problem that has no name" was a pervasive issue of the time, as women were expected to conform to an ideal of femininity that left little room for individuality or personal growth.

The idea of gendered performativity, as outlined by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), offers another useful framework for understanding Esther's internal conflict. Butler suggests that gender is not an inherent trait but rather a set of socially constructed performances that are repeated and reinforced over time. In this context, Esther's struggle to break free from the roles that society has imposed on her can be seen as a rejection of the performative gender roles that are expected of women. Butler's theory of performativity provides a lens through which to examine Esther's desire to define herself outside of the prescribed roles of domesticity, beauty, and passivity. Esther's breakdown can be interpreted as a result of the tension between the performative roles she is expected to play and her own desire for self-authenticity.

In addition to feminist readings, scholars have also explored the intersection of mental illness and gender in *The Bell Jar*. As Elaine Showalter (1985) observes, Plath's portrayal of mental illness in the novel should not be understood merely as an individual psychological issue but as a manifestation of the larger social pressures that women face. Showalter argues that mental illness in *The Bell Jar* is portrayed as a symptom of the oppressive societal norms that confine women, particularly women like Esther who reject these norms. The novel's depiction of Esther's



breakdown can be understood as a critique of a society that stifles women's autonomy and individuality by demanding conformity to restrictive gender roles.

In conclusion, *The Bell Jar* remains a crucial text for feminist literary analysis, as it provides a complex and nuanced critique of the societal and psychological forces that shape women's experiences of selfhood and identity. By examining the novel through the lenses of gender theory, mental illness, and feminist critique, scholars have highlighted how Plath's work challenges the limitations of traditional femininity and offers a powerful commentary on the costs of social confinement. As this literature review demonstrates, *The Bell Jar* continues to resonate with contemporary readers and scholars, offering insights into the ongoing struggles for women's autonomy and self-expression in a society that still imposes rigid gender expectations.

Konain, R. (2024), explores in his research that- Plath never left the expression of gloominess on the mind of her readers. She always justified her act of suicide as, if it was an unexceptional thing to do. But she done it, she made her name in modernist era, where females where not considered that they cannot do something extra ordinary that men cannot do. According, to her poem "Dying is an art", not everyone can perform this art equally well in modernist era, as Plath did. This proved that she made her unforgettable impression in the history, which cannot be neglected. Ending lines of the poem '*LADY LAZARUS*' by *Sylvia Plath*:

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, feminist literary analysis to explore gender constructs in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. The study primarily focuses on the textual analysis of the novel, employing feminist theory as the primary analytical framework. The central aim is to examine how Plath critiques the societal expectations placed on women, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, through the experiences of the protagonist, Esther Greenwood. To achieve this, the research will analyze the symbolic use of the bell jar, Esther's emotional trajectory, and her rejection of traditional feminine roles as a response to social and psychological pressures.

The study draws upon existing feminist scholarship, including the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Betty Friedan, to contextualize the gender norms and societal expectations that inform Esther's identity crisis. The research will also engage with secondary sources discussing



the intersection of gender, mental illness, and societal norms, particularly the ways in which mental illness in *The Bell Jar* reflects broader feminist concerns about female autonomy and subjectivity.

This qualitative approach will be supplemented by a comparative analysis with other feminist literary works to emphasize the broader cultural and historical dimensions of female confinement and subjectivity in 20th-century literature.

Discussion and Analysis

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* serves as a profound exploration of the relationship between female subjectivity and the oppressive societal constructs of gender. Central to this analysis is the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, whose struggles with identity, autonomy, and mental illness mirror the broader societal expectations placed on women in the 1950s and 1960s. Plath's work critiques the restrictive gender roles that confined women to predefined positions of domesticity, passivity, and self-sacrifice, roles which directly impact Esther's psychological well-being.

A core theme in *The Bell Jar* is the tension between Esther's personal desires and societal expectations of femininity. As Barbara Heller (1977) observes, Esther's eventual mental breakdown represents a reaction to the suffocating nature of the societal norms imposed upon her. She finds herself trapped in the metaphorical bell jar, a symbol of the claustrophobic nature of femininity in a patriarchal society. The bell jar encapsulates Esther's psychological disintegration as she struggles to reconcile her inner self with the roles prescribed to her by society. Heller (1977) emphasizes that the bell jar is both a literal and metaphorical representation of female entrapment—Esther's sense of isolation, alienation, and emotional detachment stems directly from the pressure to conform to limiting gender roles.

This oppressive pressure is further amplified by the traditional ideals of femininity, particularly the expectation that women should find fulfillment solely through marriage and motherhood. Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* identifies a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction among women in the 1950s who were expected to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers without question. Plath reflects this societal critique in Esther's narrative, where her rejection of domestic roles and her intellectual pursuits are portrayed as direct defiance against the ideals imposed on her. In contrast to the docile, domestic woman expected by society, Esther desires intellectual stimulation, professional success, and freedom from the confines of gendered expectations. As Friedan (1963) notes, the "problem that has no name" is not simply a matter of personal choice but is a reflection of the systemic limitations that society places on women's autonomy.



Plath's portrayal of mental illness in *The Bell Jar* further intensifies this critique. Esther's depression and eventual suicide attempt can be seen not merely as an individual's struggle but as a manifestation of the larger cultural and societal forces that confine women's subjectivity. Elaine Showalter (1985) suggests that in *The Bell Jar*, mental illness is presented as a response to the alienation women experience when they are denied opportunities for self-realization outside the traditional roles of wife and mother. Showalter argues that Plath's work reflects the feminist critique of the medical establishment's treatment of women's mental health, where depression and emotional distress were often pathologized without understanding the social origins of such issues. In this way, Plath critiques not only the gendered limitations imposed on women but also the institutional responses to women's mental health, which often failed to acknowledge the external societal pressures contributing to their distress.

Esther's alienation from her peers and society at large is also indicative of her rejection of performative femininity. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) provides a useful lens through which to view Esther's struggle. According to Butler, gender is not an inherent or biological trait but a socially constructed performance that individuals repeat and internalize over time. Esther's difficulty in adhering to the gendered performances expected of her—whether as the sexually liberated woman, the ideal mother, or the dutiful wife—reflects her rejection of these societal scripts. Esther's breakdown can thus be read as a direct result of the tension between her desire to assert her own identity and the external expectations that confine her. In this sense, Esther's inability to perform femininity as society demands becomes a source of profound personal and emotional conflict, as she struggles to understand herself outside of the roles she is told to play.

The novel's critique of gender roles and societal expectations also engages with Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* (1949) that women have historically been defined as "the Other," their identities shaped and limited by their relationship to men. While de Beauvoir's analysis focuses on the ways in which women are marginalized and excluded from the definition of the "self," Plath's depiction of Esther demonstrates how this marginalization manifests in the psychological distress and alienation that women experience. Esther's rejection of societal roles and her eventual breakdown can be understood as a response to the objectification and reduction of women to mere extensions of men's desires or expectations.

In addition to these feminist readings, the novel's use of symbolism further enriches its critique of gender roles. The bell jar, as a physical and emotional barrier, symbolizes the societal forces that constrain Esther's freedom and autonomy. The jar's transparent nature signifies that while women are often aware of the limitations placed upon them, they are powerless to escape from the



suffocating grip of gender norms. This symbolic imagery is central to understanding how Plath critiques the cultural forces that shape female subjectivity and the consequences of those forces on women's mental health.

In conclusion, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* offers a powerful critique of the gender constructs that confine women to predetermined roles and expectations. Through the character of Esther Greenwood, Plath explores the psychological toll of living in a society that offers little room for women to define themselves outside of these limiting roles. The novel critiques not only the rigid gender roles imposed on women but also the broader societal forces that stifle female subjectivity and autonomy. Through a feminist reading of the novel, it becomes clear that *The Bell Jar* is not merely a personal account of mental illness, but a profound commentary on the social and psychological consequences of gendered confinement.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* remains a seminal work in feminist literary analysis, as it powerfully critiques the gendered constraints that confine women's subjectivity and autonomy. Through the character of Esther Greenwood, Plath exposes the psychological and emotional toll of living in a society that demands conformity to rigid gender roles. As shown in this analysis, Esther's experiences reflect the broader societal pressures faced by women in the mid-20th century, pressures that sought to define them solely through their roles as wives, mothers, and objects of male desire. The novel's depiction of mental illness as a symptom of these oppressive forces underscores the idea that societal structures, rather than individual failings, are often responsible for women's struggles with identity and self-realization.

The metaphor of the bell jar, a symbol of suffocating confinement, encapsulates the internal and external struggles that Esther faces in her search for meaning and selfhood. As Heller (1977) and Showalter (1985) argue, Esther's breakdown is not merely a personal crisis but a reflection of the broader societal forces that marginalize and restrict women's potential. This aligns with Betty Friedan's (1963) critique of the "feminine mystique," where women's unfulfilled aspirations are a direct result of a society that offers them limited avenues for self-expression and fulfillment. In this light, *The Bell Jar* serves as a powerful critique of the institutional and cultural limitations placed on women's identities.

Furthermore, the analysis of Esther's rejection of traditional femininity aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. Esther's refusal to conform to prescribed gender roles highlights the tension between the performative roles society expects women to play and their own desires for autonomy and self-expression. By illustrating Esther's struggle to define herself outside



of these societal norms, Plath offers a broader critique of the gendered social scripts that women are forced to perform, ultimately contributing to the alienation and mental distress they experience.

In conclusion, *The Bell Jar* provides invaluable insight into the intersections of gender, mental health, and social confinement. Through its compelling portrayal of female subjectivity under the pressures of societal expectations, the novel remains a critical text for understanding the lasting impact of gendered norms on women's lives. Plath's work is not merely a personal narrative but a profound social commentary that resonates with contemporary feminist discussions on the continued struggle for women's autonomy and self-expression.

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