

Body and Soul – An Autobiographical Study of Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar.

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Abstract: THE BELL JAR, the only Novel written by Sylvia Plath contains a deep autobiographical vein to it. On one hand it unveils Plath’s ‘Seemingly Perfect Life’ – her glamorous poetical / literary journey, her expectation, her status in the literary world. On the other it surfaces the theme ‘underlain by grave personal discontinuities’. Esther Greenwood impresses as a symbolic representation of Sylvia Plath’s print heroine. Some critics have pointed out that the title ‘The Bell Jar’ might be a metaphorical exploration for her balanced mind. Esther Greenwood and Sylvia Plath bear many similarities – inability to adapt to the New York city, taking excessive dose of sleeping pills, suicidal tendencies, depressive disorders, recovery after psycho–therapies and many more. Studying thus, the autobiographical co-relation between the two heroines, the present paper proposes to analyze the biographical elements in the novel ‘The Bell Jar’, and Esther’s / Plath’s evolution thus.

Keywords: Autobiography, Novel, Psycho – analysis, Exploration, Journey, Character Study, Autobiographical Literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Bell Jar is the only novel by Sylvia Plath. It is the study of social expectations, pressures and psychological disturbances in the life of women of the 1950s America. Plath imprints her own life in this Novel to a large extent. The life of Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood is similarly laid bare in the novel. Esther Greenwood represents her writer and narrator in the novel. She is a talented college student just like Plath who describes her experience in the city of New York during the warm summer. Her experience is not close to normal like her other college mates where she begins to feel gradually indifferent and separated from the people around her. Eventually she is going through mental breakdown and even attempts suicides after which she has to undergo electric shock therapy. Even Sylvia Plath had under gone similar conditions because of her partner Ted Hughes who proved unfaithful in marriage. On one hand Sylvia Plath emerged successful by being honored for her published journals and winning Guest Editorship at Mademoiselle at New York. On the other hand she is under terrible mental trauma and even attempts suicide by taking sleeping pills. Esther in the novel is disturbed due to Buddy where the question of virginity poses hypocritical questions in her mind. The body and the mind seem to be at war in both the heroines’ case. The Bell Jar is used to refer something created with the popular tastes of the day in mind. The story of Sylvia Plath – her troubled life and tragic death – was the basis for 2003 biopic Sylvia starring Gwyneth Paltrow in the title role. Plath fell into a deep

depression and suffered huge mental trauma when Hughes left her in 1962. This became a repeated phenomenon in her life. All her poems are seemingly an outcome of this depression and sadness of existential living. Plath and Esther are mirror figures in her beautifully depicted novel The Bell Jar. Esther seems to be a peppy and smiling girl but depression takes her over because of her relationships. Although she has a caring attitude towards her mother and her friends her mental trauma puts her in trouble and she seems to be selfish amongst her family and friends especially with Buddy. Her own terrifying world occupies her thoughts completely. Plath feels affection towards her protagonist, but she is reliable in depicting Esther’s fascination and confusion. The Bell Jar opens up with a reference to execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg on the electric chair. This is an episode that parallels and foreshadows the protagonist’s / Narrator’s own treatment with electron convulsive therapy. The first half of the novel follows Esther through a summer internship at Ladies’ Day magazine in New York, same as, when Plath won a Guest Editorship in Mademoiselle in 1953. Esther and Sylvia Plath grow similarly, Esther’s life to a large extent echoes Sylvia Plath’s evolution, her thoughts, her confusions and her existential questions. The duality of existence often clouds Sylvia Plath’s thoughts. Same goes with Esther.

The Bell Jar is written under a pseudonym of VICTORIA LUCAS. Plath used this pseudonym for two reasons: one was to protect the people she fictionalized in the book – not only would it embarrass her mother, but her publisher even worried about libel suits. Esther observes a gap between what society says she should experience and what she does

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experience. This gap identifies her madness. Society expects women of Esther's age and station to act cheerful, flexible and confident and Esther feels she must repress her natural gloom, cynicism and dark humor. She feels she cannot discuss or think about the dark spots in life that plague her: personal failure, suffering and death. Her relationships with men are supposed to be romantic and meaningful, but they are marked by misunderstanding, distrust and brutality. Esther almost continuously feels that she is the only one to view the world as she does, and eventually she begins to feel a sense of unreality. This sense grows till it becomes unbearable and attempts to suicide and madness follow.

The Bell Jar is a different kind of a modified glass jar, generally used to display an object of scientific curiosity, containing a certain kind of inert gas or vacuum. The Bell jar symbolizes vacuum, confusion, suffocation and madness for Esther. When gripped by insanity, she feels that she is inside an airless glass jar that distorts her perspective on the world and prevents her from connecting with people around her. The figurative indication of the physical and mental suffocation caused by bell jar is a direct representation of Esther's mental suffocation by the unavoidable setting of depression upon her psyche. Same does Sylvia Plath faced in her real life, when she utters, "how we stand blankly as walls", "how much is my brain willfully my own? How much not a rubber stamp of what I have read, heard and lived?"

Majority of critics, tend to view the heroine of The Bell Jar primarily through the social constraints of the 50s. However the lineage of events within the novel is entrenched in Esther's personal psychological disorder. The narrative simply portrays depressive events in the heroine's life, further it's construct largely depends upon Esther's mental outcome. The narrative is however pertinent on both the levels – psychological and social critique. In Reflecting on The Bell Jar, Pat Macpherson interprets Plath's novel solely through a lens of social criticism. Esther's suicide attempts become an act of retaliation against suburbia, and her ultimate release from the mental hospital, or her "last-passed- test" is simply a reflection of her "social" and "psychic" maturity.

The psychoanalytic principles, propounded by Freud are quite instrumental in the analysis of the novel and the issues which are problematized therein. Human attitude, mannerisms, experiences and thoughts are largely influenced by irrational drives that are rooted in the unconscious. These aspects may explain Esther's/ Plath's complex relationship with her father and other men she

comes across. Esther seems to have an ambivalent attitude towards her father, one that of both hatred and submission. The ambivalence of man woman relationship in Plath's world would summarize in the following:

"What a man wants is an arrow into the future and what a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from."

--Sylvia Plath

The Depressive Plath committed suicide in 1963. Paradoxically her life has garnered accolades after her death for the novel The Bell Jar, and the poetry collections The Colossus and Ariel. In 1982, Plath became the first person to win a Posthumous Pulitzer prize. Plath was a gifted and an anxious poet, known for the confessional style of work. Her interest in writing emerged at an early age; she started out by keeping a journal. Her journey as a poet and a writer coincides with the journey of her life, where overly hyper, passionate and sensitive humans faced duality of existence, digged deeper into the meaning of life, questioned the real versus the unreal, sometimes even succumbing to the abyss of unanswered question that is life. Such questions seem relevant even today in the realms of the human mind.

"If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days."

--THE BELL JAR

II.CONCLUSION

In The Bell Jar, Esther describes the relationship between mind and body as one in which each imprisons the other. She calls the body "a cage" that prevents the mind from extinguishing itself. "If only there was something wrong with my body", she tells her nurses. She views problems of her mind as different from the problems of her body.

The Bell Jar becomes a key to the complex psyche of both Esther and Plath herself. Esther's slow dissent into madness is the result of her ego's incapability that compensates between her id and superego, finally bleeding to depression and neurosis. The novel may be seen as an attempt from the part of Plath to find relief through confessional mode, an attempt to bring the mysteries of mind into the conscious realm. Writing may thus have been a sort of relief mechanism.

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