

Research article

## Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar as A Psychological Space

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### Abstract

The research area was American literature with special emphasis on The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath. It was an academic research primarily focused on defining an American female's sense of enclosure in a psychological 'Bell Jar'. This objective was realized through a text based exploration of the social injustice generating a woman's 'psychological space'. The research highlighted female-degradation through male-dominance and double sexual standards in 1950s American society. This idea was explored as a triggering force behind the female-predicament reflected in the image of the 'Bell Jar' resulting in her feminist revolt for the attainment of freedom. The study of a woman's struggle against confinements was scanned through three layers of the 'Bell Jar' around her. The social entrapment led to the physical confinement causing a 'psychological space' that resulted in thirst for liberty. Moreover, the relevant themes of death, identity and self-discovery were also worked out to support the debate. Each of the three jars involved different thematic concerns by building up a vacuum in woman's life. The basic concern that consistently ran throughout the research was of the female-strength of fighting against all forms of vacuity in her life instead of passively resigning to it. Thus, a woman's journey from imprisonment towards freedom through her will- power was traced in the study. The American woman's experience could be linked to the Pakistani woman's plight also, serving to establish a point of commonality thereby enhancing the idea of universal sisterhood of women.

**Keywords:** Feminist revolt, 1950s America, Social entrapment, Physical confinement, Psychological space, Identity crisis and self-discovery, Death and resurrection

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## Introduction

American literature aims to explore human relationships and the psychological dilemmas of modern man. Sylvia Plath's novel "The Bell Jar", thus pictures an American female figure struggling against the stereotypical roles assigned by a conservative society and exercising her rebellious spirit by breaking through the chains of social confinements.

This research aims to focus on Plath's image of the Bell Jar, involving a definite sense of entrapment and suffocation at various levels, causing an urge for freedom and resulting in the feminist revolt. The objective of this research is to explore the bell jar image by criticizing the 1950s American social ideology and analyzing the space between self and society, body and soul.

This particular aspect has been the researcher's interest on account of being a woman herself who is fighting for rights in a relevant context. The idea of captivity presented in the story with a girl rising like a phoenix to challenge it, is what most of the women can relate to, regardless of their geographical boundaries.

The protagonist of the novel, Esther Greenwood, has constructed a 'bell jar' in her mind. What does it signify and what social pressures have led to the formation of this psychological space? To what extent has it affected the protagonist's existence in society and contributed to the fragmentation of her soul? How far has she been successful in making her psychological space porous?

This research report portrays the emotional decay of an ordinary girl, the epitome of womanhood, living under an imaginary 'bell-jar' and struggling against the confinements inflicted upon her by both the society and her own self. The researcher will be analyzing the symbolic image of the "Bell Jar", tracing major thematic concerns of the book from this particular symbol. Moreover, the psycho-analytical study of the protagonist would be focused in this report as her living in the 'Bell Jar' and being reduced to an object in a deadly suffocating glass-shell. The image of the 'Bell Jar' could be taken at three allegorical levels: (1) The 1950s America; (2) The vacuum between self and society and (3) The space between body and soul. The 1950s America evolves the themes of male-hypocrisy and double sexual standards as a 'Bell Jar' descended over the female figure that leads to her outburst for freedom. This extreme urge for 'freedom' causes Esther's death-wish that finally takes form of a feminist revolt

against the social standards. The second metaphorical level of the “Bell Jar” image, that is the vacuum between self and society develops the idea of alienation and detachment from the world outside the ‘jar’, causes a need for self-discovery and further provokes the notion of being ‘enclosed’. Thirdly, the conflict between physical and spiritual selves brings forth an identity crisis. The protagonist’s search for identity results in her masochistic attitude in form of suicidal tendencies, for she views death as a measure to be free and gain a new identity for herself.

The research concludes on a note of freedom that the protagonist eventually attains. She succeeds in shattering the jar around her, stepping out to confront reality and moving forward in life.

## **Literature Review**

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), a prominent literary figure of Post World-War II era, sought to give birth, through her writings, to a “deep” creative self hidden within. The subject of her literary output has always been the innermost thoughts and the perspective of her own life. Using forceful imagery and intense focus, Plath, explored the morbid themes such as depression, suicide and death accompanied with a sense of hope for resurrection, healing and redemption through it. The final part of her career consists of a semi-autobiographical novel, “The Bell Jar (1963)”, and her “Confessional Poetry” about which she says, “I speak them to my self...and what ever lucidity they may have come from, the fact that I say them to myself, I say them out loud.” (Plath 1982, p.75)

Erin Catherine O’Neill (2000) writes that Plath has been called a heroine, a cult figure, even a goddess, but beneath the façade lies a delicate woman, a mother, and a literary genius. The subject matter of her work revolved around a few elemental aspects of her short life: her illness, her parents, and her family, all of which she cleverly masked in her works. Plath took Yeats’s words, “We only begin to live when we conceive life as tragedy...” in her writings, using strong images and symbols to represent her personal tragedy and to convey herself through her work.

Sylvia Plath adopted literature as a healing balm for her wounds in life. Ted Hughes (1982) states that there was something like “contempt” and “rage” behind her writings. She showed in her work an intense, violent, very primitive, perhaps very female need to sacrifice everything for a renewal. For the very reason, she wanted to remove the old false self of hers to give birth to a new real one. Moreover, he says, “Plath was a person of many masks, both in her personal life and in her writings” (pg. xii). He believes that each one of her created characters reflected some part of Plath’s own personality. Hughes spent every day

with her for six years; however, he says that she never showed her real self to anybody—not even to him. This true self of hers is only visible in her work and particularly in her apprenticed novel “The Bell Jar”.

Edward Butscher (1976) says that Plath intends to explore her inherent dilemma of “evil double” (pg. 307) in her novel “The Bell Jar” using an “alter-ego” as her protagonist. He believes that Plath decides to discover the cruel depths of modern world by inflicting pain on her “innocent” mirror image, Esther. That’s why, instead of killing Esther in the novel, she kills Esther’s ‘alter-ego’, Joan Gilling, to form a chain of mirror-images viewing each other’s torture and experiencing brutality of the world indirectly.

One symbol that appeared profusely in Plath’s works is that of the bell jar. O’Neill (2000) states that along with the bell jar comes images of suffocation and torture that show themselves in Plath’s writings such as “The Bell Jar”, and countless poems. Plath was cursed with mental illness, but at the same time, she recognized that. She was able to document her illness through her writing, “The Bell Jar” being a prime example, in which she stated, "How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again?" (“The Bell Jar” 1966, p. 254)

O’Neill (2000) also informs that although Plath wrote “The Bell Jar” about her life in 1953, it was not completed until 1962, and published until two months after her tragic suicide in London. Even then, “The Bell Jar” was published under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas," not the author’s real name. Plath’s mother was against the novel being published in America under Plath’s actual name, out of concern for the people upon whom the characters were loosely based. Against her mother, Aurelia Plath’s, desires to withhold the book from further publication, it was published under Sylvia Plath’s actual name in 1966 and then many times, in many languages afterwards. Ted Hughes, who was in control of the publishing of Plath’s works, has stated:

Sylvia went the furthest in the sense that her secret was most dangerous to her. She desperately needed to reveal it. You can’t overestimate a compulsion to write like that. She had to write those things—even her most vital interests. She died before she knew what “The Bell Jar” and the “Ariel” poems were going to do to her life, but she had to get them out. (Hughes 1995, p.1).

Bill Gilson (2000) says that the bell jar is entrapment, and a way of placing one on a display of sorts, behind glass. It rises at one point in “The Bell Jar”, but it hangs above, even still. It’s "a relief to the mad person, separating the air

she breathes from the air of the sane. The fluted glass allows the girl to breathe 'fresh' air" (pg.8). He says that Plath's semi-autobiographical main character in the novel, Esther, "arranges an appointment with death like one arranges a doctor's appointment" (pg.8).

Lynda K. Bundtzen (1947) calls Plath's bell-jar a "mental structure" (p. 131). She says it's a symbol of social oppression that causes Esther's reduction to a still-born baby who is unable to grow. This mental stagnation in the jar signifies the psychological state of all 1950s American women. "The bell jar is an over determined symbol. Its general meanings are (1) that Esther feels sealed off from rest of the world because of her illness, and (2) that all women tend to be sealed off from experience because of social inequities. The symbol is used with greater precisions to represent the feeling of (3) being a dead fetus preserved in a jar, and (4) being physically imputed." (p. 141)

Feminism is central to Plath's entire literary output. "The Bell Jar", story of a sensitive girl, captures a feminine sense of being 'enclosed' resulting in an utmost desire to be liberated from it through self-victimization. Esther's sense of social-suppression has developed a psychological space between her own inner and outer selves.

Butscher (1976) states that Sylvia Plath in her Bell Jar shows the struggle against social repression that gives birth to the "dual demon" of a woman reducing her to a split personality. He also states that the American critique in the novel is its author's catharsis of a collective female rebellious spirit. "The Bell Jar is more than a personal vendetta; it is a solid...masterpiece of sardonic satire and sincere protest, an authentic American novel about the disintegration of America". (pg. 310)

E. Miller Budick (1987) states that Plath's feminist criticism on the 1950s American society is of an unconventional nature in her novel. Most of the women writers adopt an aggressive attitude in their writings, however, Plath launches her comment through thematic growth in her work. She pictures a female protagonist hitting at the walls of her contemporary jar-like society, with an urge to be released. Esther's self-destructive approach is the feminist response to the social confinements that is not meant to withdraw from the imprisonment of life but to reestablish the social norms.

Moreover, Budick (1987) says that Plath explores suffocating male dominance through the difference between masculine and feminine languages also. Physics and chemistry are typical male subjects presented as being associated with the powerful male figures in the novel like Mr. Manzi. The language of

these subjects is of a masculine nature that reduces the universe in physical principles. However, botany and literature that breathe and grow are the feminist languages existing under the jar of male linguistic powers. “Esther retreats from a language that abbreviates and shrinks and kills, to a language that, like the language of botany, breathes fascination and sustains life.” (pg. 875)

Another critic Melody Zajdel (1984) states that the image of the ‘bell-jar’ mirrors Esther’s paranoia, extreme apathy, anxiety and insomnia that cause her nervous break-down. Zejdel also throws some light on the conflict between the ‘real world’ and ‘the world of artifice’ that parallels the battle of one’s pure self and impure society. Moreover, she says that it is Esther’s choice of action against the hypocrisy of 1950s America that leads to her feminist revolt.

Stan Smith (1975) writes about the tension between one’s self-articulation and ritual image as presented in “The Bell Jar”. His idea of purity vs. artificiality parallels the space between soul and society as experienced by Esther in the novel. Moreover, Smith believes that a woman’s self- alienation and reduction into a ‘small black dot’ due to the social marginality results in a devastating rebellious outburst. Stan Smith, further, says that the ‘Alienating Effect’ introduced by Bertolt Brecht could be seen in “The Bell Jar” at two levels: (1) The distance between narrator’s own personal and social experiences and (2) between the reader/ audience and the narrative/ event.

Sandra M. Gilbert (1978) also talks about the gap between one’s self and society that mostly leads to his/her escapist attitude. Moreover, Gilbert presents an in-depth analysis of the womb-imagery presented in ‘The Bell Jar’. She says that womb parallels the image of a ‘bell-jar’ in which the child is ‘still’ before being born, however, his birth signifies ‘the liberating sense of oneness with life’—the spirit becoming one with body and the soul getting united with society.

Thus, the critical debates over the book and its author explore the idea of living under the bell jar of a conservative society and of one’s own physical and psychological selves. Moreover, this literary criticism further generates the debate of women’s space in society and their duty to their body and soul.

## **Methodology**

The basic source for this academic research has been the book ‘The Bell Jar’ by Sylvia Plath, for the research primarily is structured around an analytical study of the novel by tracing the themes of imprisonment and aloofness

at social and personal levels. The abstract image of the Bell Jar in the novel intrigues the researcher to explore the female enigma.

Secondary sources include both the print and electronic media. Print media that has been used consists of scholarly journals, critical approaches to Sylvia Plath as a novelist and general information conducted in various books on feminism and American literature. This printed information has been collected from various libraries and book stores of the city.

The electronic media that has facilitated the research includes online articles, debates and DVD versions of the novel and its author's life. The DVDs are not available in the country, hence have been accessed through shipping from abroad.

Larry Peerce's movie "*The Bell Jar*", based on Sylvia Plath's novel, is an apt adaptation of the book. It has helped the researcher in comprehending the intangible 'psychological space' that represents womanhood in the novel. Thus, the movie has contributed to the research as a visual support: the sound effects, colours and varied tones of light mirror the suffocation in the vacuum.

Similarly "*Sylvia*", Karen Lindsay Stewart's 2003 production, presents a very realistic account of Sylvia Plath's life. The film builds up such a protagonist who draws awe from the viewers. Writer John Brownlow creates in Sylvia a character for whom the viewer feels a great deal, both as a writer expressing her thoughts, and as a human being afraid of the dangerous complexities of her unsteady relationship. This adaptation of the author's life has also been a great help for the researcher in exploring the emotional depth of the narrative that originates from its creator's personal experiences.

Conclusively, the methodology used for this academic research is simple being literary and non-scientific. Yet it is time-taking. It has sharpened the researcher's critical skills in the psycho-emotional study of the subject. Moreover, this work has been challenging considering the fact that there's a serious dearth of resources in Pakistan.

## **Discussion**

"The Bell Jar" traces Esther's journey—from within the jar to the world without. . Her sense of being enclosed in a bell jar develops a definite urge for freedom that she seeks through death, because death for her is not the end but the beginning of a new life with an alternate identity of her own. Moreover, she adopts a feminist revolt as another measure to attain liberty. As an American female figure, she struggles against the stereotypical roles assigned by

conservative society and exercises her rebellious spirit by breaking through the chains of social confinements. This discussion aims at an analysis of the protagonist's mental state while living under an illusory bell-jar—a psychological space.

Her inability to make choices, to decide on responsibilities, plus the scattering tendencies, the fragmentation—all these were responses to the overly rigid, conservative times of the 1950s. (Skerritt 2000, p.3)

Sylvia Plath portrays the conservative 1950s America in her novel. “The Bell Jar” struggles to define a sensitive girl in a world that denies the development of the female self. It is a bitter critique of 1950s American society that has rules, regulations, double standards and emotional as well as physical constraints on the female. Plath pictures the devastating effects of such elements experienced by women who are slowly driven insane by the gender stereotypic confines of their social world.

Esther's sense of living in a bell-jar of social pressures is the root cause of her psychological space between self and society, body and soul. As a bright, unmarried woman of the 1950's, she is either expected to be a virgin, or destined for a marriage where husband dominates wife, or likely to have a career of a secretary and most appreciatively all of the above. These social confinements have fragmented her existence in a dismembered society itself.

Plath's novel criticizes the jar-like contemporary society for its double standards, male-dominance and hypocrisy. The double sexual standard in 1950s America gave men a privilege of premarital sex; however denied women of the similar sexual expression that generated a definite sense of depression and frustration in them. Esther's childhood friend, Buddy Willard, is the epitome of male hypocrisy of double standard. He is viewed as “a fine, clean boy...a model person...so intelligent” by the typical contemporary women. However, he is “an awful hypocrite” to act like a virgin while having had an affair with a hotel waitress. “What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face” (“The Bell Jar” 1966, p.75).

Esther feels suffocated by these limitations of a double standard and sexual hypocrisy imposed on women. When her mother sends her the *Reader's Digest* article entitled “In Defense of Chastity”, she wonders at the idea of cultural hypocritical divisions in terms of gender roles presented in the article. It says that a man's world and emotions are different from that of a woman and could only be brought together through marriage. Esther does not



accept the notion of two *different* worlds and gets disillusioned of the social elements that let this cultural sexual arrangement stay like this. “I couldn’t stand the idea of a woman’s having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not” (“The Bell Jar”1966, p. 86).

Another double standard in the 1950s America was set within the female community. Women were judged as being good or bad in terms of being ‘pure’ or ‘impure’—“Madonnas or whores” (Bundtzen, 1947:121). “Nice” girls remain pure for marriage according to Mrs. Willard, Esther’s mothers and their college friends. The social hypocrisy and injustice reflects at the point that this standard of purity and impurity was not for men but for women only. “When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue. Instead of the world being divided into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t” (“The Bell Jar”1966, p. 86).

The idea of double standards gives way to another social debate in the novel that is the male-dominance in 1950s America. Mrs. Willard’s words sum up the typical conventional view of contemporary male-dominating society that “What a man is, is an arrow into the future and what a woman is, is the place the arrow shoots of from” (“The Bell Jar”1963, p. 75). In that society the only fair way for a woman to be with a man was marriage, however it wasn’t the same for a man that gave him a definite power and supremacy as Mrs. Willard says that in marriage “what a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security” (“The Bell Jar”1966, p. 75). The contradiction of these two conventional views lies in the fact that a woman being “the place the arrow shoots of from” is herself a source of security and protection for the man, “the arrow”, and not vice-e-versa.

Moreover, Esther believes that marriage curbs female creativity by giving the man complete authority. She remembers Buddy saying that after having children she wouldn’t like to write poetry and would feel differently. “I began to think...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” (“The Bell Jar”1966, p. 90). Mrs. Willard is the most appropriate example of a typical 1950s American wife acting as “a slave in some private totalitarian state” and feeling perfectly happy about it. On her visit to Willards’ place Esther finds Mrs. Willard making a rug out of Mr. Willard’s old suits and instead of hanging it on the wall, putting down as a doormat before the kitchen. This doormat personifies a conventional marital relationship in that society marked by the exploitation of female creative powers through male-dominance and hypocrisy. “And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a

man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" ("The Bell Jar"1966, p. 89).

Esther views child-birth as another form of masculine power on feminine creative energies. For instance, the episode where she sees a baby being born in the hospital strikes her the idea of man's control over woman: "Buddy told me that the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain...I thought It sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent."("The Bell Jar"1966, p.69) "To Esther's mind, they (men) have deprived the woman of both the pain and pleasure of birth and used her body for their own purposes; their own ends. The woman and baby are their opus, their engineering feat". (Bundtzen, 1947:124)

The depression and despair caused by such conservative social norms generate a gap between Esther's self and society, body and soul. A constant sense of living in an airless environment of a jar-like society results in her desire for freedom that she earlier seeks in death and finally attains through a feminist revolt by shattering the walls of this social bell jar.

Sylvia Plath's personal revolt against the male-hypocrisy and social bigotry is reflected in her rebellious protagonist who rises up with a vindictive spirit against the male members of society and "at the end of the novel seems intent on exploiting and punishing men, out-smarting them to prove she's not inferior" (Bundtzen, 1947:114). The conflict between purity and impurity, virginity and prostitution experienced by Esther, makes her take up the challenge to lose her purity while not becoming impure at the same time. In other words, she wants to lose her virginity without losing dignity because for her it is merely a measure of feminist rebellion against the double sexual standards for men and women in society. Her repeated attempts to lose virginity are not targeted on developing a sexual relationship but to attain that level of freedom which the male members of society enjoy freely—to challenge the social hypocrisy and conventions. The episode where Marco rapes her into the mud and calls her a "slut" she fists her "fingers together and smashed them at his nose" ("The Bell Jar"1966, p. 116) because she can't compromise on the loss of her dignity.

Esther Greenwood's psychological 'jar' is thus formed by the above mentioned social pressures of 1950s America, being the bigger jar itself, causing the dismemberment of self and society. "Servitude, brainwashing, numbness, drugs that wipe the mind clear, shock treatments—all of these are closely associated in Esther's mind with the connubial state and its threat to her creativity. Later, this victimization is made a part of her experience as a

mental patient, and a bell jar that descends over all women, suspending them forever in a state of arrested development” (Bundtzen, 1947:126).

The idea of life in the jar itself denotes a sense of entrapment, suffocation and vacuity. Esther, being trapped in a ‘Bell Jar’, remains aloof from the outside world. Her inability to be really connected to outside roles, or groups, is clearly seen in her relationship with her family and friends, and also in the scenes set in the mental institution. “I kept feeling the visitors measuring my fat and stringy hair against what I had been and what they wanted me to be”. The unlimited expectations of society and Esther’s failure in their fulfillment drives her to the state of utter depression and disillusionment. Consequently, she produces a vacuum around her in order to live at a distance from the outside world.

Her time in New York provides her with an exposure to the world’s reality that she is unable to absorb. The city of New York, a dreamland of thousands, turns out to be an airless jar for Esther. She cannot associate with the people around her and feels so lonely among the ‘peanut smelling mouth of every subway’ and ‘the fake country-wet freshness’ of that world. “I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls...everybody would think I must be having a real whirl” but what depresses Esther more is that she “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” (“The Bell Jar”1966, p. 2-3).

The psychological space of the bell jar that separates Esther’s self from society is originally an outcome of the social confinements. Her disillusionment of the gender roles and social hypocrisy makes her believe that there are no windows for a woman to breathe in the open air. “At first I wondered why the room felt so safe. Then I realized it was because there were no windows. The air-conditioning made me shiver” (“The Bell Jar”1966, p. 134). To deliberately live in a state of alienation and detachment in order to ensure her a sense of security, Esther has formed the bell jar around her. However simultaneously, she feels being reduced to an object from a human being that makes her all the more isolated and dejected. “I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot...a hole in the ground...getting smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier rushing away from all those lights and excitement at about a million miles an hour” (“The Bell Jar”1966, p. 17).

Esther’s depression is well reflected in Sigmund Freud’s (1917) essay “Mourning and Melancholia” in which he states:

In grief the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it's the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any effort and morally despicable; he reproaches himself vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and chastised...this picture of delusional belittling is completed by sleeplessness and refusal of nourishment, and by an overthrow, psychologically very remarkable, of that instinct which constraints every living thing to cling to life. The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. (pg. 165-167)

'The expectation of punishment' as a result of melancholia and depression is seen in Esther's reaction to the electroshock treatment she receives at the mental institution. She views her shock therapy as a punishment because it reminds her of the Rosenbergs' electrocution that is reflective of the cruel reality outside the jar. "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done", she says. Moreover, this gap between her self and society results in a search for the self. The electroshock treatment being symbolic of the world's shocking reality takes her to the innermost regions of the soul where her physical self begins to crack away: "Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the saps fly out of me like a split plant" ("The Bell Jar"1966, p. 151). Esther's self-discovery is shown at various points in the text. For instance, the episode when Esther goes to see her boss, Jay Cee, in her office, she discovers the emptiness of her life and future as Jay Cee asks her about her future plans and she doesn't have an answer for that— "I don't really know", I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it I knew it was true"("The Bell Jar"1966, p.34). At another point in the novel (chapter 9), Esther's self-discovery takes place when Marco rapes her into the mud and calls her a "slut" she discovers the purity and innocence of her soul. "Marco set his teeth to the scrap at my shoulder and tore my sheath to the waist. I saw the glimmer of bare skin like a pale veil separating two bloody-minded adversaries...Blackness like ink spread over the pale cloth"("The Bell Jar"1966, p.115-116). Like the electroshock of outer reality, Esther discovers a reality within her through the shock of a rape experience. Her attempt to lose virginity is merely to gain a feminist freedom, that's why her soul being pure does not accept the prostitute-like treatment by Marco and rebels against it.

Esther's search for the self fragments the bond between her body and soul, for she realizes that her body being a social figure and soul a personal property live at a distance from each other. This space between body and soul develops an identity crisis resulting in a death-wish.

Esther's search for identity is highlighted in the episode where she views her life as a fig tree in which she cannot choose a single branch. "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree...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" ("The Bell Jar" 1966, p.81). Esther wants to become "everything" as Jay Cee says because the society has given her a scattered and incomplete image of herself.

The sense of incompleteness and lack of individuality is caused by Esther's split social identity. Her soul being stationed in a psychological space of its own does not want to become one with her body that is living in the bell jar of society. This split bond of body and soul has fragmented her identity, hence lacking an identity of her own; she views every female figure around her as compensating some part of her personality. For instance, she shares with Doreen her idea of revolt against the social barriers. "Everything she (Doreen) said was like secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones...being with Doreen made me forget my worries. I felt wise and cynical as hell." ("The Bell Jar" 1966, p.7-8). However, afterwards getting disillusioned with Doreen for her flirtatious nature, she begins to associate herself with Betsy. She feels that Betsy forms the Pure and innocent side of her existence. Similarly, Jay Cee stands for Esther's desire to live a balanced life in an imbalanced society. "I tried to imagine what it would be like if I were Cee...Cee, the famous editor, in an office full of potted rubber plants and African violets my secretary had to water each morning" (p.41). Likewise with Dr. Nolan Esther identifies her feminist spirit as she permits her to refuse visitors and to buy birth control. She allows Esther freedom and air to breathe, "air not soured from stewing" (p.195) within the bell jar. "Dr. Nolan led me through a door into fresh, blue skied air...I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air." (p. 227). Else than that, Joan Gilling is such a character in the novel whom Esther considers the half part of her existence. "Sometimes I wonder if I had made Joan up. Other times I wonder if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose." (p. 231). That's how, she keeps on struggling to ensure her a sense of completion

and security by collecting the fragments of her scattered identity. “Doreen’s cynicism, Betsy’s naïve enthusiasm, Jee Cee’s ambition, Hilda’s dybbuk voice, and Dodo’s Madonna like serenity are all Qualities Esther looks for or fears in herself” (Bundtzen, 1947:150)

A fragmented and dismembered existence caused by the gap between her body and soul results in Esther’s death-wish. Death for her is not the end; it is rather a beginning of a new life with an alternate identity. In other words, Esther wants to be reborn in order to attain a new identity of her own. “The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower.” (“The Bell Jar”1966, p.102). Her predicament is reflected in these lines: “It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse...but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, a whole lot harder to get at” (“The Bell Jar”1966, p.155). She finds her physical self dead already in the bell-jar of society. Thus, it’s her inner-spirit that she wants to remove and reshape according to her personal will. Esther’s death-wish results in a self-destructive attitude as she rationalizes suicide attempts and plans various methods for that. “That morning I had made a start. I had locked myself in a bathroom and run a tub full of warm water, and taken out a Gillette blade...It would take two motions. One wrist, then the other wrist... then I would step into the tub and lie down.” (“The Bell Jar”1966, p.155-56). Being an artist, this masochistic behavior also reflects Esther’s creative sensibilities like Plath herself. “Dying/ Is an art, like everything else/ I do it exceptionally well/ I do it so it feels like hell/ I do it so feels real.” (Sylvia Plath 1962, Ln. 43-47).

So, the macrocosmic bell jar of society produces a psychological jar at the micro level that makes Esther lose control over herself by generating a vacuum between her physical and spiritual selves. However, the novel closes on an optimistic note as Esther eventually succeeds in gaining control and stepping out of her psychological space by adopting a rebellious feminist attitude towards social injustice.

‘I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person...just because of sex, freedom from...regardless...’ I was my own woman. (“The Bell Jar”1966, p.235)

## **Conclusion**

Like most of Sylvia Plath’s works, “The Bell Jar”, being a cathartic outburst of her emotions, was therapeutic for her troubled soul. She says “The Bell Jar—an autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past” (Robert Lowell, 1966. pg. viii). She explored the harsh realities of the outside world by discovering the anxiety of her own soul. A constant sense of loss, betrayal and disillusionment that overshadowed her life sought its outcome in “Art” through which the fervent feminist inside took its voice. Plath, due to her

personal tragedy—the ‘Bell Jar’ of her own life, succeeded in using the weapon of ‘words’ against the “Enemy” without, but failed to kill the demon within that emerged in form of her sentimental violence and a terrible suicide.

To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream. (“The Bell Jar”1966, p.250)

On the contrary, Plath’s own created shadow of hers, Esther Greenwood, manages to generate the ability of rising against the social hypocrisy, challenging the stereotypes and shattering the ‘bell-jar’ around her.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And eat men like air. (“Lady Lazarus”, 1962)

Esther not only succeeds in breaking through the societal jar of confinements but also in filling the psychological space between her body and soul, self and society. Her psychological detachment from society and from her own soul was originated from the double-standards offered by her contemporary male-dominant society. However, unlike Sylvia Plath, Esther did not remove herself from the earth to be relieved but rose to erase the earthly values she despised. “...as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room”. (“The Bell Jar”1966, p.257)

Plath (1982) called Esther her ‘alter ego’ because she wanted to attain an identity through death that could engender the will-power to fight with her psychological demons, live according to her own desires and shape the world at her own standards. In other words, she wanted to attain the utmost freedom by demolishing all the layers of glass-shell around her, the way Esther does.

Conclusively, the research on Sylvia Plath’s novel “The Bell Jar”— Esther’s journey from innocence to experience, from girlhood to womanhood and from confinement to liberation, shows avenues for change in life. It also highlights the fact that the solution lies very much within the claustrophobic Bell Jar; it is only how one constantly makes an effort to rise above it. Moreover, the realization of the fact that man has been bestowed the ability to fight the battle of life, turn the black into white and break the ‘jar’ to be free, has made the researcher more receptive towards challenges offered by society and by her own self.

This research report has paved way for further research in academia on the study of a free-woman’s life questioning her individuality: Does the ‘freedom’ ensure her utmost independence or make her even more dependent on her own self?

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