

CHAPTER II

THE BELL JAR

The Bell Jar is an autobiographical novel, published in January 1963. It was published by William Heinemann Ltd. under the pseudonym Victoria Lukas. But really Victoria Lukas was the American poet and novelist, Sylvia Plath, or had been the novel's characters and settings were equally American. In 1965 Faber and Faber published a paper back edition under Sylvia Plath's name.

The Bell Jar is a novel about the events of Sylvia Plath's 20th year, about how she tried to die, and how they stuck her together with glue. It is a fine novel, as bitter and remorseless as her last poems. In this novel we really see that the authority of failure is but a pale shadow of the authority of suicide, as we feel it in The Bell Jar. This is not so much because Sylvia Plath, in taking her own life, gave her readers a certain ghoulish interest they could not bring to most poems and novels; through this is no doubt partly true. Her works do not only come to us posthumously. They were written posthumously. She wrote her novel The Bell Jar and her Ariel poems feverishly like a person, "stuck together with glue", and aware that the glue was melting. Here we ask question about ourselves, should we be grateful for such things? Can we accept the price she paid for what she has given us? Is dying in an art?

We really know that, there are no easy answers to such questions, may be no answers at all. But we do not like to think about it. And those men and

women who take the matter into their own hands, and spend all at once with disdain seem frighteningly different from common people. Sylvia Plath is one of such others.

The Bell Jar is about what it is to lose one's grip on sanity and recover it again. It is easy to say and it is said too often that insanity is the only sane reaction to the America of the past two decades. And it is also said frequently that the only thing to do about madness is relax and enjoy it. But neither of these clever responses to her situation occur to Esther /Greenwood, who is the narrator, protagonist and central character in this novel.

To Esther Greenwood madness is the descent of a stifling bell jar over her head. In this state, Esther Greenwood says, "When I sat... I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my soul air." And again Esther Greenwood adds, 'To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.' Which is not to say that Esther believes the world outside the asylum is full of people living an authentic existence. She asks, 'What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the College to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort.'

In this novel The Bell Jar, we see that the world in which the events of this novel take place is a world bounded by the cold war as one side and the sexual war on the other. We follow in this novel The Bell Jar Esther

Greenwood's personal life from her summer job in New York. With Ladies Day magazine, back through her days at New England's largest school for women, and forward through her attempted suicide, her bad treatment at one asylum and her good treatment at another, to her final re-entry into the world like a used tire : "Patched, retreated, and approved for the road."

In The Bell Jar Esther Greenwood's personal life is delicately related to larger events, especially the execution of the Rosenbergs, whose impending death by electrocution is introduced in the stunning first paragraph of the book. The novel is a curious combination of stories. It begins in high spirits as a cheerful, shallow, fast moving, and satirical account of the author's barely fictionalized summer in New York as one of the undergraduate guest editors of Mademoiselle. The Barbizon Hotel becomes the Amazon, Mademoiselle is simply "a fashion magazine", and Esther Greenwood, a cheerful female Holden Caulfield, tells us about her terrible blind dates, her interest in sex, at that time Esther Greenwood the narrator or the protagonist says, 'When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue', and her memories of college and of her Yale boy friend Buddy Willard. The anecdotes are very well told : after all, Sylvia Plath was a poet, which means that she knew how to use words economically and unostentatiously. But Esther Greenwood's voice is a nineteen years old's, pure and simple. When eleven of the twelve guest editors came down simultaneously with Ptomaine poisoning, pure and simple, Esther Greenwood

comments cheerfully that 'there is nothing like puking with somebody to make you into old friends. Remembering the time when Buddy Willard took it upon himself to show her what a naked man looked like, she says : He just stood there in front of me and I kept on staring at him. The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed. But then the New York adventures end, Esther returns to quiet, suburban Connecticut, and a strange new book begins. The funny incidents are funny in a different way, and suddenly Esther is undergoing psychiatric treatment, and suddenly she is in an asylum.

Here the question of where exactly the tone of the novel shifts, where exactly madness begins, can provoke some very curious discussions, complete with many a side long glance. Some insisting that Esther was never crazy at all, that she was merely the victim of a plot, and others insisting that they knew it from the start, that Esther was crazy to have accepted that first blind date.

In the novel The Bell Jar Sylvia Plath has used the most important technical device of realism. Sylvia Plath's technique of realism ranges from tiny verbal witticisms that bite, to images that are deeply troubling. When she calls the hotel for women that Esther Greenwood inhabits in New York the "Amazon", she is not merely enjoying the closeness of the sound of that word to "Barbizon". She is forcing us to rethink the entire concept of a hotel for women. She says mostly girls of my age with wealthy parents who wanted to

be sure that their daughters would be living where men could not get at them and deceive them. And she is announcing a major theme in her work, the hostility between men and women.

Again in this novel we see that, with Esther Greenwood this hostility takes the form of obsessive attempts to get herself liberated from a virginity she finds oppressive, by a masculinity she finds hideous. When her medical-student boy friend suggests that they play around of the traditional children's game, I will show you mine if you show me yours - she looks at his naked maleness, and Esther Greenwood felt very depressed. This is ~~the~~ realism with a vengeance. The image catches up all cocky masculine pride of flesh and reduces it to the level of giblets. It sees the inexorable link between generation and death and makes us see it too because the image is so fitting. All flesh comes from this - and comes to this.

In the novel we see that in the face of such cosmic disgust, psychological explanations like "penis-envy" seem pitifully inadequate. In the novel The Bell Jar the main character Esther Greenwood is not a woman who wants to be a man but a human being who cannot avoid seeing that the price we pay for life is death. Sexual differentiation itself is only a metaphor for human incompleteness. The battle of the sexes is, after all, a war.

Then we see Esther Greenwood's account of her year in the bell jar- is as clear and readable as it is disturbing. It makes for a novel such as Dorothy

Parker might have written if she had not belonged to a generation infected with the relentless frivolity of the college humour magazine. The brittle humour of that earlier generation is reincarnated in The Bell Jar, but raised to a more serious level because it is recognized as a resource of hysteria. But we see that, why, then has this extraordinary work not appeared in the United States until eight years after its appearance in England?

This story is partly told in the useful biographical note that has been written for the American edition by Lois Ames. The novel was initially rejected its American Publisher and when, after its success in England, Harper and Row sought to publish it, they were refused permission by the family.

Sylvia Plath's mother has insisted by the family. Sylvia Plath's mother was insisted that her daughter thought of the book as a "Pot-boiler" and did not want it published in the United States. And Mrs. Plath herself felt that the book presented ungrateful caricatures; of people who had tried to help her daughter. These sentiments are understandable. But a book published in England cannot be kept away from the United States. Already, the student underground has been smuggling copies from abroad into the country. Literature will out. And The Bell Jar is not a pot-boiler, nor a series of ungrateful caricatures; it is literature. It is finding its audience, and will hold it.

The Bell Jar is a fiction that cannot escape being read in part as autobiography. It begins in New York with an ominous, lightness, grows

darker as it moves to Massachusetts, then slips slowly into madness. Esther Greenwood, one of a dozen girls in and on the town for a month as 'guest editors' of teen age fashion magazine, is the product of a German immigrant family and a New England suburb. with fifteen years of straight A's behind her, a depressing attachment to a dreamy but handsome medical student, Buddy Willard, still unresolved, and a yearning to be a poet, she is the kind of girl who does not know what drink to order or how much to tip a taxi driver but is doing her thesis on the "twin images" in *Finnegans Wake*, a book she has never managed to finish. Her imagination is at war with the small town tents of New England and the big time sham of New York. She finds it impossible to be one of the army of College girls whose education is a forced stop on the short march to marriage. The crises of identity, sexuality, and survival are grim, and often funny. Wit, irony, and intelligence as well as an inexplicable, withdrawn sadness separate Esther from her companions. Being an involuntary truth-seeker, she uses irony as a weapon of judgement, and she is its chief victim. Unable to experience mime emotions, she feels defective as a person. The gap between her and the world widens.

Camouflage or disguise and illness go together in *The Bell Jar*; moreover, illness is often used to lift or tear down a facade . Doreen, a golden girl of certainty admired by Esther Greenwood, begins the process by getting drunk. The glimpse of her lying with her head in a pool of her own vomit in a

hotel hallway is repellent but crucial. Her illness is followed by a mass ptomaine poisoning at a fashion lunch. Buddy gets tuberculosis and goes off to a sanatorium. Esther Greenwood, visiting him, breaks her leg skiing. When she has her first sexual experience, with a young mathematician Professor she has picked up, she hemorrhages. Taken in by a lesbian friend, she winds up in a hospital. Later, she learns that the friend has hanged herself. A plain recital of the events in The Bell Jar would be ludicrous if they were not balanced by genuine description at one side of the scale and a sure sense of black comedy at the other. Sickness and disclosure are the keys to The Bell Jar. On her last night in New York, Esther climbs to the roof of her hotel and throws her city wardrobe over the parapet, piece by piece. By the end of the novel, she has tried to get rid of her very life, which is given back to her by another process of divestment - psychiatry. Pain and gore are endemic to The Bell Jar, and they are described objectively, self mockingly, almost humorously to begin with, taken in by the tone, the reader is being lured into the lion's den- that sterile cement room in the basement of a mental hospital where the electric-shock-therapy machine waits for its frightened clients.

In the novel, The Bell Jar there is casualness with which physical suffering is treated suggests that Esther is cut off from the instinct for sympathy right from the beginning for herself as well as for others. Though she is enormously aware of the impingements of sensation, her sensations

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remain impingements. She lives close to the nerve, but the nerve has become detached from the general network. A thin layer of glass separates her from everyone, and the novel's title, itself made of glass, is evolved from her notion of disconnection : the head of each mentally ill person is enclosed in a bell jar, chocking on his own foul air.

In the novel, The Bell Jar there is another point that is torn between conflicting roles the sweet heart mother and the life of the novelist, neither very real to her. Esther finds life itself inimical. Afraid of distorting the person she is yet to become, she becomes the ultimate distortion nothing. As she descends into the pit of depression, the world is a series of wrong reverberations; her mother's face is a perpetual accusation, the wheeling of a baby carriage underneath her window a grinding irritation. She becomes obsessed by the idea of suicide, and one of the great achievements of The Bell Jar is that it makes real the subtle distinctions between a distorted view point and the distortions inherent in what it sees. Conventions may contribute to Esther's insanity, but she never loses her awareness of the irrationality of convention. Moved to Bel-size, a part of the mental hospital reserved for patients about to go back to the world.

In the novel terms like 'mad' and 'sane' grow increasingly inadequate as the action develops. Esther Greenwood is 'Psychotic' by definition, but the definition is merely a descriptive tag, by the time we learn how she got to be

'Psychotic' the word has ceased to be relevant. Because it is written from the distraught observer's point of view rather than from the view point of someone observing her, there is continuity to her madness; it is not one state suddenly supplanting another but the most gradual of processes.

In this novel there is also a suicide, a grimly compulsive game of fear and guilt, as addictive as alcohol a drugs, is experimental at first, a little blood here, a bit of choking here, just to see what it will be like. It quickly grows into an overwhelming desire for annihilation. By the time Esther climbs into the crawl space of a cellar and swallows a bottle of sleeping pills - by this time we are faced by the real thing - the event, instead of seeming grotesque, seems like a natural consequence. (when she is about to leave the hospital, after a long series of treatments, her psychiatrist tells her to consider her breakdown a bad dream". Esther thinks that, this patched, retreated and approved for the road. Again she knows that to the person in The Bell Jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.

In The Bell Jar that baby is only one of many times. They smile up from the pages of magazines, they sit like little freaks pickled in glass jars on display in the pediatric ward of Buddy's hospital. A sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly seems to wait for Esther at the end of the ski run when she has her accident. And in the course of the novel she witnesses a birth. In place of her never to-be-finished thesis on the twin images in Finnegans Wake, one

might be written on the number and kinds of babies that crop up in The Bell Jar. In a gynecologist's office, watching a mother fondling her baby, Esther wonders why she is so separated from this easy happiness, this carrying out of the prescribed biological and social notes, she does not want a baby; she is a baby herself. But she is also a potential writer. She wants to fulfill herself, not to be fulfilled. To her, babies are the trap, and sex is the bait. But she is too intelligent not to realize that babies do not represent life, they are life, though not necessary the kind Esther wants to live, that is, if she wants to live at all, she is caught between the monstrous fetuses on display in Buddy's ward and the monstrous slavery of the seemingly permanent pregnancy of her neighbour Dodo Conway, who constantly wheels a baby carriage under Esther's window, like a demented figure in a Greek Chorus. Babies lure Esther toward suicide by luring her toward a life she can not literally bear. There seem to be only two solutions, and both involve the invisible, to pledge faith to the unborn to the dead. Life, so painfully visible and present, defeats her, and she takes it, finally, into her own hands. with the exception of the psychiatrist's disinterested affection for her, love is either missing or unrecognized in The Bell Jar. Its overwhelming emotion is disgust-disgust that has not yet become contempt and is therefore more damaging.

We see fear in The Bell Jar many times. In her all work-novel, poetry, short stories there is occurred the pervasive of fear in her work alongwith its

invariable variants like vulnerability anxiety, threat, awe, panic, and horror. In this chapter I discuss the role and presence of fear in The Bell Jar. We see in this novel, the presiding deity of the muse is present, alongwith its usual minions. But critics, overwhelmed by the novel's obvious theme of mental breakdown, double or mirror image, and feministic slant, seem to have missed the pervasive presence of fear in the novel. The purpose of this chapter is to underscore that fear which dominates the novel also, though there may be some inevitable changes in expressing it due to the demand of a different genre, as Plath herself points out :

‘If a poem is concentrated, a closed fist, then a novel is relaxed and expansive, an open hand: it has roach, detours, destinations; a heart line, a head line; morals and money come into it. Where the fist excludes and stuns, the open hand can touch and encompass a great deal in its travels.’¹

The Bell Jar is an autobiographical novel. It remains highly disturbing and controversial, and controversies that are generated, are still continuing. Though the first draft of the novel was ready by as early as 1957, it continued to grow to its final shape till 1962. The final revision of the novel during the last half of 1962 influenced. Perhaps even the tone and temper of Plath's last poems. She wrote both the novel and her last poems with urges common to

both; an aggressive mood, sardonic humour, lean but taut texture, and a brilliance which is harsh and chilling both.

The Protagonist or the heroine of the novel, Esther Greenwood, is a highly intelligent, sensitive girl of nineteen, breaking “out of cramped adolescent cocoons.”² Throughout the novel, she is harried and haunted because of a very fragile and vulnerable self. At college, she is “panic struck” by diagrams and formula of Physics, and it is with ‘horrible’ effort that she drags herself through the first half of the course. In New York, she is apprehensive of the bearer inside the hotel and cabbies outside on the road, for she does not know how much to tip them. The tiles of the bathroom in the hotel remind her of some glittering white torture-chamber, and the delivery table in the hospital, where she has gone with Buddy Willard out of curiosity, too seems to her ‘some awful torture table’ when she meets constantin and a Russian girl- both interprets at the UNO, her ignorance of foreign language makes her think herself ‘dreadfully inadequate’.

But what Esther Greenwood dreads most is the shock treatment. During an accidental shock, when she has, by mistake, touched her father’s electric lamp, she becomes so sacred that ‘a scream’ is ‘torn’ from her throat. The most fearful nightmare, however, is the first shock-therapy which Doctor Gordon gives her :

“Then something bent down and took hold of me and shoots me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shripped, 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 sap fly out of me like a split plant.”³

This shattering sense of fear continues even after she leaves Doctor Gordon’s private hospital; Dodo Conway’s slack station wagon outside the hospital seems to her a ‘panther’ waiting for its prey to pass by. In a better private hospital, Doctor Nolan assumes her a great deal, even then Esther feels that the sight of the shock-therapy machine would ‘strike’ her ‘dead’. She is ‘sacred to death’ till the end of the novel, although she is cured of the mental break-down and is to be allowed to move to the college after a formal meeting with the board of doctors.

It is on account of this fearfulness on the part of Esther, she fails in her suicide attempts. She fails to cut her veins, for she shivers at the sight of the blood. When she tries to drown herself in the sea, the resisting life force within her begins the existential chant “I am I am I am”. Then she realises that what she fears and wants to destroy is not her body but the sense of fear itself. The fear is also expressed in such way in the novel The Bell Jar; it was as if what I wanted to kill was not in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret and whole lot harder to get at.

There is a metaphor through which fear is expressed in the novel The Bell Jar. The image of glass enclosure is recurrent in Plath's poetry prior to The Bell Jar, indicating her obsession with it. References to glass-jar are in such poems as "Two views of Cadaver Room" (In their jars the snail nosed babies moon and glad"), "A Life" ("Like a foetus in a bottle"). Even in her short stories, Plath refers to various jars; such as in "Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams" ("human embryos bubbling around in laboratory bottles"), and "Initiation" ("The basement room was dark and warm, like the inside of a sealed jar").

In the novel, the jar is a stifling enclosure around Esther, trying to suffocate her with the poisoned air inside her own body. It also distorts her vision of the World outside, since she looks at the world through the lens of the jar around her neck. It also prevents people outside the jar to have a proper understanding and appreciation of her problems. Esther Greenwood fails to break the glass barrier till the end of the novel. The glass cage turns out to be a many-faceted monster, isolating her from others, and something her in the polluted air of its enclosure, and at that time Esther Greenwood says like I was so sacred, as if I were being stuffed farther and farther into black, airless sac with no way out.

The main event directly responsible for The Bell Jar clamping itself on the heroine is her trip to New York as the guest editor of a fashion magazine.

Demands exerted on Esther by her mother and middle class social mores, make her a dissatisfied satisfier of other people's expectations. Contradictions involved between her inner urge and the outer compulsion turn her "tight and nervy as the top string on a violin."⁴ But the final blow is dealt by Esther's disconcerting experiences in New York, which trigger a chain of depressing events leading to insanity, suicide attempts, and a perpetual presence of The Bell Jar around her. All the eager expectations of a stimulating and adventurous exploration of the mystery and magnificence of a great metropolis, end in increasing ennui and nausea. When she is supposed to be having the time of her life, enjoying 'a real whirl' and becoming every of thousand of college girls who had tried but lost the magazine contest, Esther Greenwood, in reality, feels marooned among a crazy crowd.

Then Esther tries her utmost to arrest her drift toward the tight enclosure of The Bell Jar. She strikes intimacy with Doreen and Betsy- two of the dozen girls selected by the magazine. Doreen is seductive, voluptuous vamp. Esther is drawn to her by her sophistication and intelligence. But she watches with horror and fascination as Doreen plays seductress with Lenny Shepherd - a dandy disc-jockey. They dance, and bite each other in a frenzy generated by song, drinks, and passion - Esther, mute and demoralised, is the third Lenny's apartment. Left to herself, Esther begins to suffocate in the

company of sex-maniacs and leaves them in the midst of their hugging and 'jitter-bugging.'

The experience proves quite unsettling for Esther, but the worse is still to come. After a lot of persuasion and assurance, Doreen brings her next time to a country club where she meets Marco, the woman hater, Marco dominates her against her wish by his gift of a diamond, and then by his superior will power and brute force. After the dance he brings her to a field outside the club and attempts to rape her by flinging her on the muddy ground. Though she saves herself from the rape, it creates in Esther a deep distrust of the city. It also makes her realize that Doreen's way is not hers to experience the high class society.

Esther Greenwood then turns to Betsy, the 'Pollyanna cow girl' straight from Kansas. She symbolizes purity and innocence to Esther. Yet even this friendship ends in an unfortunate incident, Esther accompanies Betsy to a party thrown by Ladies Day Journal. She eats a bellyful of stuffed arocadoes which results in several ptomine poisoning. Thus the glittering whiteness and hygienic purity of Ladies Day kitchen proves as disastrous for Esther as her encounter with lechers like Lenny and Marco. Neither the "marvellous, elaborate decadence" of Doreen, nor the unpolluted innocence of Betsy, lead Esther anywhere away from her own isolation and disenchantment. Despite a series of glittering parties, interviews, with successful writers, and free for and

movie shows, she feels more and more pushed inside the enclosure of her mind.

Esther Greenwood begins to doubt not only her social compatibility, but also her academic and literary abilities. Jay Cee, the editor attached to Esther, senses her growing numbness and gives her a through dressing-down for not making the most of her stay with the journal. This 'unmasking' jolts her from within and she begins to see the futility of her ambitious career :

"After nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race."⁵

From this period Esther Greenwood begins to dread the reality of her existence that she is fast becoming a burnt out case.

The cruel impersonality behind New York's glittering facade has shattered Esther, the city seems to her 'like some restless island rockabying itself on nothing at all'. Before leaving the city, she throws all her costly dresses to the wind as a gesture of dissociating herself from the metropolitan glamour and corruption. When she returns to her hometown she wants to return empty-handed and empty headed. But these traumatic events cannot be shaken off so easily. As a sadomasochistic gesture, she keeps dried-up blotches of blood on her cheek, a reminder of her encounter with Marco, 'like the relic of dead lover'.

Once outside the cage of New York, Esther is entrapped in another something enclosure- her hometown. This sense of impending enrichment is amply clear when Esther described her feeling about the approaching suburb :

“The grey, padded car roof closed over my head like the roof a prison van, and the white, shining identical clapboard houses with their interstices of well groomed green proceeded past, one bar after another in a large but escape-proof cage.”⁶

An escape from this cage is hardly possible, for Esther’s application for a course on short-story at Harvard that summer has been rejected. She tries her hand at writing an autobiographical novel and feels that this ‘would fix a lot of people’, but the novel does not shape. As she lacks experience of life, she does not know how to write in a convincing way :

“How could I write about life when I could never had a love affair or a baby or seen anybody die?”⁷

At the same time failed at writing, Esther Greenwood tries to learn shorthand because of her mother’s encouragement and guidance. But soon ‘the white chalk curlicues’ of shorthand blur into senselessness, like the Physics formula of Prof. Manzi at her college. As a last desperate attempt to disengage her mind from the descending bell jar, she thinks of writing her honours thesis on James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, but the thick book makes “an unpleasant dent” in her stomach. Because of these failures to concentrate

on some productive work she takes her life as meaningless and her future devoid of any sense. Suffering from insomnia now, night after night she stares blankly at the ceiling of her bed-room. This is ominous sign that The Bell Jar is tightening its grip over her mind, which makes Esther quite apprehensive, for she would 'have anything wrong' with her body than something wrong with her mind. There is distressing realization all the same that there are 'real glasses' in the corner of the mind.

The Bell Jar progressively alters her normal vision and Esther's capacity to appropriate men and women, her deprecation becomes purely uni-dimensional. All women in her life, with the single exception of Doctor Nolan, are dolls, Zombies, and men either hypocrite like Buddy Willard, a violently selfish like Marco or sexually cold like constantin, or crude and cruel like Irwin. Marriage is nowhere in her designs, for it means 'being brain washed and becoming a slave in some private, totalitarian state. Instead of being a launching pad for the corner of her husband as Mrs. Willard thinks every woman should, Esther wants to shoot of in all directions herself, and refuses to be mere event in the life of a man.

But paradoxically enough, Esther has a vulnerable self incompatible with her bold plans. For security and protection, she wants a father, and when she senses this intention in Mr. Willard, she spontaneously responds to his gesture, "I was so glad he wanted to be a father to me." But when he leaves

her in the company of Buddy Willard at sanatorium, she feels dejected and deserted. She goes in search of her own dead father whose death has always seemed unreal to her. But the rubbish dump in the graveyard and the crowded gravestones there depress her more, for she thinks her father deserved better. When she fails to resurrect the grand image of her dead father, she weeps bitterly.

In this way, there is no protection is available to Esther against the ever tightening grip of The Bell Jar. Esther decides to commit suicide then; if she can not break the unbreakable glass wall around her, she would rather break herself. She steals the bottle containing sleeping pills, crawls inside the unused cellar of the house, and gulps about fifty pills one by one till she becomes senseless. But the residual life force within her which had betrayed her in her earlier suicide attempts, tricks her now as well. Her involuntary moans are heard and she is rescued after a frantic effort. She is hospitalized, and when she is cured of her physical bruises, the cure for the mental scar, the hanging jar of her mind begins.

Esther Greenwood's first psychiatrist, Doctor Gordon, unsympathetic and unimaginative, does not understand her real problem, he fails to extricate her from The Bell Jar. Instead of assurance, Esther feels that there is a sinister air around his private hospital. Even the nurse is 'wall eyed' and her body, instead of providing motherly warmth, emits 'medicinal stench'. To top it all,

when the real ordeal of electro-convulsive therapy begins, Esther, severely jolted, takes this treatment as an obnoxious punishment; 'I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done'.

Now, Doctor Gordon's apathetic attitude inadvertently lets the jar's lid fall tightly in place. Esther is now removed from Doctor Gordon's care to a better hospital. But Esther is unable to trust anything now; she feels herself to be incurable "because whenever I sat", Esther Greenwood says, "I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own air."⁸ She, therefore, always smells fetid air of The Bell Jar wadding round her. She also knows that if this last treatment failed, she would be imprisoned in a big cage in the basement of a state asylum.

But the skillful handling of her case by Doctor Nolan in Belsize - the new private mental hospital - begins to slowly work on her. Doctor allows Esther free vent of her anger, puts her initially on insulin therapy, and accompanies her with assuring compassion to the shock-therapy chamber when the need for the same arises. She even encourages and allows her to be fitted with a diaphragm because Esther's virginity has been weighing like a millstone around her neck since Buddy's dalliance with another woman, and she has longed for freedom from fear of ending up with a baby. Her sexual initiations is complete with her encounter with Irwin which results in a massive haemorrhage, still she smiles, for blood is her answer to entering a new world

of freedom from The Bell Jar. It is an essential ritualistic sacrifices. All these things combined together produce a positive result on Esther who now responds quickly to shock therapy. All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The Bell Jar hung suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air.

In this novel there is another evidence which shows that, fear controls The Bell Jar also. The same stages of dealing with fear, like regression and aggression, are evident in the novel. The regressive desire of Esther is obvious at several places in The Bell Jar. When Doreen and Lenny are lost in their frenzied dance, Esther feels shrinking to a small black dot and considers herself like an insignificant 'hole in the ground'. Her attempt at drowning herself in the sea is also an attempt at regressing back to the primal womb with the possibility of rebirth. Once in a bizarre comparison, she equates herself with babies in the jars for the same reason. Some of those babies in the jars that Buddy Willard showed me had gills, he said, they went through a stage where they were just like a fish. Similarly, another suicide attempt is, at a symbolic level, regressing back to the earlier stage of life. When Esther tries to hang herself with the cord of her mother's yellow bath-robe, it is in fact, an attempt on her part to unite again to the umbilical cord.

Another obvious example of the relationship between suicide and regression is Esther's crawling back to the cellar of her house. The entire

episode is full of suggestions for a strong desire for running from the outside world—running from fear to a protective cover. She crouches at the mouth of the dark cellar, and the protective darkness is seen by her thick as velvet. Cobwebs touch her face with the softness of moths and the effect of gulping pills after pills is like a sweeping tide rushing her to sleep. She feels like being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel into the earth. And when she regains consciousness, the first word that she utters is mother as if she has been born a baby again. This sense of regressing back to infancy persists till her treatment at Belsize. When Mrs. Bannister the hospital nurse, offers her hot milk out on her tongue as it went down, tasting it luxuriously, the way a baby tastes its mother.

Regression is only one response of the protagonist to fear in The Bell Jar, the other is a raging sense of aggression against all characters responsible for and contributing to the descend of The Bell Jar on her. There is much bitter rancour in portraying some of the characters. The Bell Jar, therefore, looks like, a profile done in thick charcoal. And a study in the “basest ingratitude.”⁹ During the initial days of her insomnia, Esther even conjures up a strong desire to strangle her snoring mother in sleep. Esther says like the piggish noise irritated me, and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands.

Another important target of Esther's aggression is Mrs. Willard and her son Buddy Willard. Mrs. Willard, an alter ego of her mother, is equally oppressive to her. There are scathing comments in the novel at maternal platitudes of Mrs. Willard, and her undue hold on her son and husband. Esther thinks that Buddy Willard would never grow to be an independent man and would ever remain his mama's boy. To some extent, she rejects Buddy because of his mother. Finally, in anger, Esther serves all connections with Buddy Willard for she does not want to give her children a hypocrite for a father.

Thus The Bell Jar with fear as its controlling emotion theme, is an extension of Plath's poetry. The face that haunts the reader at each fearful flare in poetry is transformed here into a terrified, 'baby in the bell jar.' Not only in theme, but in its tight structure as well, The Bell Jar, is a "poet's novel, a case book almost in stanzas, each episode brief, brittle, encapsulated."¹⁰ The novel's progress from one episode to another is "poetic too, less in time than in image. Plath herself was not confident of the artistic beauty of the novel and called it merely "an autobiographical apprentice work."¹¹ In the novel the fear of The Bell Jar is simply 'suspended', Esther is patched and retreated. Thus the lingering fear remains in Esther till the very end of the novel :

“But I was not sure. I was not sure at all. How did I know that somebody- at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere- the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, would not descend again?”¹²

This study has attempted to analyse Plath’s work thematically to point up a consistent pattern of fear in her work from the earliest published juvenilia to her last poems and The Bell Jar. The analysis supports the contention that the first phase of Plath’s creativity is marked by a sense of frightening doom brought on by the immense but indifferent cosmic order, the dread of death triggered off by the untimely death of father, and many feminine and existential fears. The poems of this phase are the work of an aspiring but self-conscious neophyte. As the mind grows, the poet, the novelist realizes that mere artistry is not sufficient to control the surging fear inside. In this way when we read all the works of Sylvia Plath, at that time we know that her work proves that to tag her a feminist is critically lazy. It is important to make a distinction that though her themes are appropriately feminine, she does not have any consistent feministic stance, nor does she use her feminine material to a feministic mission. Her bitterest poems against the psychic dominance of father, husband, and the institution of marriage, are far from any feministic propaganda. She denounces these for being agents of terror their being male is only an accident. Thus she denounces with equal vehemence mother and other women also. These are keys to our understanding that Plath does not

artistically divide her emotional world into man and woman. what further sets her apart from the feminist libbers is her unflinching interest in wanting to bear children. For Plath, biological creativity is supplementary to artistic creativity. Her sense of vulnerability, her concern for children, her fear for barrenness and widowhood, seem to make her more a writer with a unique 'feminine' sensibility than a feminist.

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