

Insanity, Depression and Suicidal Tendency in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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Abstract— Sylvia Plath was a twentieth century American poet and novelist. She is best known for her semi autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* that confirms closely to the events of her own life. It is a vivid combination of her vision and nightmare. It clearly interprets her rejection of certain kinds of femininity as well as the restricted role of women in 1950s America. She has secured a great place among the modern writers writing in a new genre. She has employed the stream of consciousness technique her only in the development of the plot and story of her only novel *The Bell Jar*. The novel places her among the greatest novelists of the twentieth century American fiction.

Keywords— *Sylvia, Depression, Suicidal tendency, literature etc.*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is true that *The Bell Jar* is considered as a major work of feminist fiction, based on the sexism, materialism and complacency of American society. But it made such a splash because it was such a personal look at one young woman's struggle with suicidal depression.

The central character of the novel Esther Greenwood supposed to be the replica of Sylvia Plath herself. Like Esther, Plath was born in a conventional surroundings, lost her father at a young age, enjoyed a glittering academic career at Smith college and interns at a New York fashion magazine. She was suffering with a nervous breakdown and attempted suicide. Plath is known for her suicidal tendencies. She finds in life nothing meaningful. Life is full of horrors, terrors, frustration and worries for her. She saw life as a prison with golden bars. Her married life was not a happy one and all this caused a deep sense of depression in her mind. She lost faith in everything and had to undergo psychiatric treatment. She attempted suicide twice but was escaped. In the third attempt, she succeeded and died. She has skillfully explained all this through the central character Esther Greenwood in her novel *The Bell Jar*.

The novel interprets a typical story of Esther Greenwood. Instead of undergoing a positive, progressive education in the ways of the world, culminating in a graduation into adulthood. Esther learns from madness and graduates not from college but from a mental institution. She behaves unconventionally in reaction to the society in which she lives. Society expects Esther to be constantly cheerful and peppy, but her dark, gloomy and depressive nature resists perkiness. Society expects Esther to remain a virgin until her marriage to a handsome guy, but she sees the hypocrisy of this rule and

decides that like Buddy, she will lose her virginity before marriage. She embarks on a loveless sexual encounter because society does not provide her with an outlet for healthy sexual experimentation. The unconventional behavior of Esther leads her to madness. Social norms also disturb her. Madness descends on her and this decrease was unpreventable and as destructive as cancer. She behaves in a very selfish manner. She never thought that suicidal attempt will deeply affect her mother or her friends.

A number of factors were responsible for Esther's mental illness. She lost her father in her early childhood. Her mother never tried to understand the psychology of Esther's mind. She belongs to a poor family and feels great and crushing pressure to achieve success in life. The surroundings were also not favorable for her. As a young, vibrant and talented woman in 1950s America, she is encouraged to be independent and self sufficient, but is always expected to become a submissive wife and mother, along with identifying marriage and motherhood which supposed to be a sign of achievement. Infact, society also defines female success by physical attractiveness and a home filled with precious possessions. Esther feels a sense of emptiness of the fashion magazine world she inhabits in New York. Both the individual difficulties and the problems of being an intelligent, sensitive woman plague Esther and fan the flames of her mental illness and depression.

Esther's relationship with her mother is a formal one in the novel. There is nothing like mother daughter relationship between them. Esther hates her mother. She was closer to her father. The memory of her dead father haunts her. She was a child when he died. She usually visited her father's grave. Esther finds her mother struggled to look after her children as her father died without leaving any insurance money. However, she gains Esther's scorn as she did not pay attention towards her daughter and very often pass unpleasant comments on her. All these things created havoc in Esther's life and lead her to mental illness and depression. When Esther was passing through with Electroshock psychiatric and insulin treatment, Dr. Nolan tells her that she will have no more visitors. Esther dislikes the visits she receives from old teachers and employers, who get nervous to say her depression is imaginary. "I hated these visits because I kept feeling the visitors measuring my fat and springy hair against. What I had been and what they wanted me to be"[170]. She especially dislikes visits from her mother because her mother begs to know what she did wrong. When her mother visits on her birthday, she brings a dozen long stemmed roses which Esther throws, and said "save them for my funeral"[170].

The major concern of the novel is the mental health of Esther Greenwood and her progression into a deep depression

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and eventual recovery. The roots of Esther's mental illness have been shown in the very beginning of the novel. Although Plath does not mention one specific cause of Esther's condition but presents the cause of Esther's dissatisfaction in the first chapter. One of the most significant causes of this depression is certainly the high pressure environment where Esther lives. As the novelist already informed that Esther is an achiever, a scholarship winner and a bright student who consistently wins the prizes and contests for her academic abilities. Plath describes that the other girls who are working for this magazine internship are from wealthy backgrounds while Esther comes from a modest family. This disparity also brings dissatisfaction in the life of Esther. The next prominent cause of her anxiety is Esther's view on sexuality. The society of early fifties in which the story takes place is noted for its sexual repression. Plath introduces the theme of sexuality partially through the contrast between the characters of Doreen and Betsy. Esther tries to coordinate between the two. She chooses to associate with Doreen, but admits that Doreen causes major trouble for her. The information regarding Rosenbergs also brings in Esther's preoccupation with death, a character trait that foreshadows the suicide attempt that is the central event of the novel.

The regular physical fights, screamings and shameless sexual efforts of Doreen and Lenny makes Esther depressed, lonely and continues a slow progression of her descending mental health. The most significant event demonstrating this decline is Esther's acute reaction to the silence around her. "There was not a soul in the hall. I let myself into my room. The silence depressed me. It was not the silence of silence. It was my own silence[15].

Esther meets Buddy Willard and considers him the most wonderful boy she had ever seen. Infact, Buddy occupies a significant place in Esther's life. For her Buddy is a symbol of her doomed expectations. Buddy dismisses the artistic and literary mind of Esther and finds her poem as a 'piece of dust'. He tells that her poems are like dust and her passion for poetry will change as soon as she becomes a mother. She imagines her relationship with Buddy like a fairy tale and thinks that it can be maintained even on a single kiss. She finds Buddy as an ideal hero or a man of heroic actions. But Buddy is responsible for Esther's dissatisfaction with the world. He treats her as a foolish child. His sexual teaching, baby born episode and description of male body parts were very offensive and inhuman. Buddy has created many problems in the life of Esther regarding her anxiety over her future as well as her idea of sexuality. In order to take revenge with Buddy, Esther decides to seduce herself through Constantine. This decision may represent an assertion of her independence in the face of societal repression around her but ultimately increases her mental illness.

After few months, Esther again meets Buddy and wishes to go with him on skiing. She considers the possibility that she may die while skiing, yet even after she breaks her leg so she wishes to make this eventual suicide attempt again. Esther is unable to maintain a balance between her body and mind. All the time she is proceeding towards despair and depression. Infact, Esther suffers from the stifling intellectual atmosphere that Buddy has created for her, in which her ideas and

emotions are diagnosed as mere neuroses instead of her good choices and decision.

Esther meets Marco who is described in the novel as a "woman hater". Marco offers a diamond pin to Esther which is a symbol of marriage. But he too wants her independence, sexuality and other things in exchange. He physically threatens Esther and attempts a rape but could not succeed. "Marco set his teeth to the strap 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".[90] Marco's actions were more violent, aggressive and gender biased in comparison to Buddy who is subtle and passive. Marco's violent actions once again proceeds Esther towards her suicide attempt. She has grown mental illness including insomnia and listlessness. This time her depression has become clear enough that her doctor recommends psychiatric treatment again.

Esther's mental illness becomes more severe so she visits Dr. Gordon for shock therapy. But Dr. Gordon appears to be indifferent to her problems and unwilling to learn anything significant regarding her illness. He merely prescribes shock therapy for her and refers to Dr. Nolan for further treatment. During the treatment, Esther reminds the time when she accidentally electrocuted herself with her father's lamp. Afterward, she claims that she feels all right despite loathing the treatment.

Esther diagnoses her problem as sitting under a bell jar. It relates the societal pressure that Esther faces. The bell jar is intended to preserve Esther as an ornament and suffocates her. This implies that her problems are due to the societal pressure but she herself discards the charge and accepts some of the blame for her own problems. This is an important step for Esther, as she assumes responsibility for her own actions even if she is not ready to repair her life. But her conflicts and frustrations are quite real. She has a pessimistic personality. Her encounter with Buddy reflects the dehumanizing aspect of the modern world. She is betrayed by the patriarchal structure of society. This leads her pessimistic approach and she gets alienated and dejected from the rest of the world around her.

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