

**Tribhuvan University**

**Fictionalizing Self: Reading Plath's *The Bell Jar* as an Autobiography**

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**Letter of Approval**

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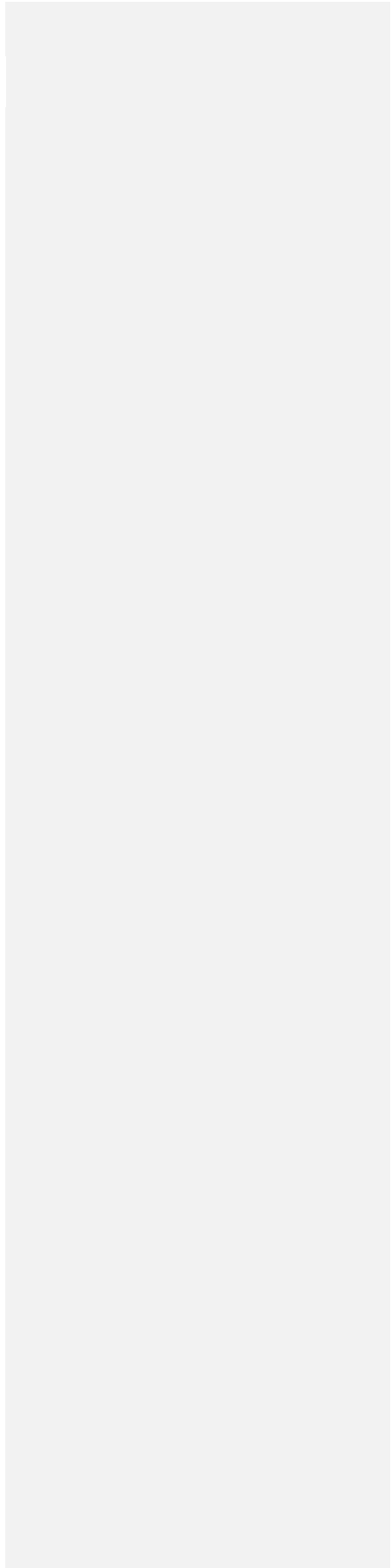
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## Abstract

Fictionalizing Self: Reading Plath's *The Bell Jar* as an Autobiography

*This research paper explores the process of fictionalizing self in Plath's The Bell Jar. It intends to fulfill its aim by applying insights from Linda Anderson's concept of Autobiography. The novel examines the protagonist Esther's quest for identity, to be herself rather than what society expects her to be. But Esther feels that she is a prisoner to domestic responsibilities and fears losing herself. Consequently, she even attempts suicide with a hope to escape from that 'state of imprisonment'. The title The Bell Jar itself is symbolic in the sense that it evokes the notion of trap. That is why, Esther is struggling for identity and attempting to learn and discover philosophy of life and art of living as the author Plath herself did. Plath, as does Esther in the novel, struggled in the world and rejected of the conformist ideas for a female in the 1950s. The novel can be read as an autobiography gives the reader the reflection of the author's own life as Plath fought with her own clinical depression and mental breakdown. The novel gives the biographical descriptions of Plath's life, gives an weird feeling to the readers that whatever thought, emotions and feeling Plath speaks through Esther are actually of her own. In short, the protagonist's descent into mental illness parallels Plath's own experiences of life. This research does not read The Bell Jar simply as a fiction, but as the author's biography as well. Moreover, Plath has written it blending factual and fictional incidents, making the novel a fictionalized autobiography.*

Key-words: fictionalizing autobiography, identity, mental illness, suicide, fact, fiction, autobiography, authenticity

This research aims to explore the process of fictionalizing self in Plath's *The Bell Jar*. *The Bell Jar* is the one and only novel written by Plath which was published under the fictional name "Victoria Lucas" just a month before she committed suicide in 1963. Plath shares her own traumatic experiences and events of life at her twentieth year, about what struggles she made, how she tried to die and finally how she overcame it. The novel is semi-autobiographical with the names of places and people changed but the events really did happen to her. In fact, the novelist has recorded much of her personal experience, very lightly veiled as fiction. The researcher focuses primarily on autobiographical connections from Plath to the protagonist. The book contains many references to real people and events in Plath's life. Plath's real-life magazine scholarship was at *Mademoiselle* magazine beginning in 1953. As Linda Wagner in her book, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* asserts, the character Philomena Guinea is based on Plath's own sponsor, author Olive Higgins Prouty, who funded Plath's scholarship to study at Smith College. Plath was also rejected from a Harvard course taught by Frank O'Connor. Similarly, Dr. Nolan is thought to be based on Plath's own therapist, Ruth Beuscher, whom she continued to visit after her release from the hospital. Plath was a patient at McLean Hospital. Therefore, she deliberately presents her protagonist, Esther Greenwood's hospitalization procedures as of her own.

The story of *The Bell Jar* parallels Plath's own journey in which she intends to overcome from her problems as a college student. So, it is the most influential novel of twentieth century that gives a reader a glimpse of tragedy of insanity and the struggle to overcome it. It is sad and tragic novel, which ultimately foreshadows her suicidal death. Most significantly, it is the representation of the novelist herself in tough circumstances. The main character, Esther can be taken as a spoken person of

Plath. Both Plath and Esther share the same ambition of leading an artist's life being as a well- established writer. As Esther is expected to become a loyal housewife with children, satisfying male's sexual desire. Plath wants to be an independent female with a career and her family and society want her married and with children and to give up the idea of being a poet. That would be enough to lead some people into madness, and Plath was one of those victimized people.

This novel is written in the first person narration and it is characterized by strong autobiographical features. The protagonist of the novel Esther tells a story of the events that happened before and after her suicide attempt that correspondence to the one Plath made in 1950. Behind a veil of fiction, Plath deals with the early identity problems that took her to the mental hospital where she experienced electroshock therapy. Esther is bewildered young woman on a scholarship to a woman's college. She is a bright, beautiful and ambitious student at Smith College who begins to experience a mental breakdown while interning for a fashion magazine in New York. In the novel, Esther describes her depression as a feeling of being trapped under a glass bell jar struggling for breath. She envies the freedom that men have especially in sexual affairs because women have to worry about becoming pregnant and do not have the same freedom as men have. But, her psychiatrist helps her to feel free from previous pressures to get married and pregnant, specifically to the wrong man. For this, various life changing events help her to recover.

The novel begins with Esther in New York City as guest editor of a women's magazine. Esther lives with many other girls in the lap of luxury surroundings. Instead of finding herself cheerful, happy and confident, she finds herself disoriented and upset. Interestingly, Plath uses flashbacks narrative technique in order to show her troubled relationship with a medical student named Buddy, whom she dated. At first,

he appears to be charming, but his flaws slowly begin to reveal over the course of their relationship. He is a chauvinist, who fulfills all the negative stereotypes of the conventional values of the 1950s. He does not hesitate to admit a long-term affair with a waitress in front of Esther. This makes Esther impatient and rejects his marriage proposal. She struggles to find the strength to reject the conventional model of womanhood in the 1950s. She realizes there is a gap between what society says she should experience and what she does experience and this gap increases her madness. She imagines her relationships with men to be romantic and meaningful, but she experiences misunderstandings, distrust and brutality from them.

The first half of the novel largely deals with the experience of an educated woman's fights in the 1950s. Like Esther, many other women of the time, feels like marriage would restrict her because a married woman's job is to take care of her husband, give birth to babies instead of having a career of her own. She wants to be boss of her own and she "hated the idea of serving men in any way" (40). She believes that marriage limits female creativity by giving the man complete authority. Esther, exactly like Plath, struggles with how to decide between her own wishes and the burdens placed upon her by the so-called patriarchal society. The depression and despair caused by such conservative social norms generate a gap between Esther's self and society, body and soul. Esther has got strong desire to write poetry, but she feels excessive pressure to settle down and start a family. In the same manner, Esther longs to have sexual relations that society denies women, but allows men. She believes that her first sexual experience is a vital step toward independence, and finally to the adulthood. In fact, she regards virginity as a burden and wants to get rid of it rather than having pleasure. She wants to lose her virginity without losing her dignity because for her it is simply a measure of feminist rebellion against the double sexual

standards for men and women in society. So, she repeatedly attempts to lose her virginity in order to attain the level of freedom which the male members of the society enjoy freely. Moreover, by doing so, she wants to change the social hypocrisy and conventions.

Similarly, the second half of the story has a very different plot. After she returns from New York, she finds out that she's been rejected from a summer writing class. Esther feels great anxiety about her future. She cannot sleep, write, or even read. Her mother takes her to an unsympathetic psychiatrist. He suggests her to give a traumatic round of electric shock therapy. This makes her feel more unstable and sick than ever. In great anxiety, she tries to kill herself by taking a full bottle of sleeping pills. She awakes in a hospital and is transferred to the top private mental hospital after her condition does not improve where Dr. Nolan encourages her to live a life. Finally, she starts to recover. The book ends on an optimistic way, with Esther preparing to be discharged and to return to college life.

*The Bell Jar* narrates the cautionary tale about the problems in mental healthcare in the 1950s. It describes the stereotypes and fear regarding mental illness. Most importantly, the novelist uses the Esther experiences of terrible treatment of electroshock at the hands of her first psychiatrist. Similarly, the book uses the metaphor of the bell jar to portray the experience of mental illness. Esther says that a bell jar, a glass roof used in therapy, traps her. She believes that she is inside the airless jar and feels suffocation. She is "stewing in own sour air" (85), that she is unable to perceive the outside world clearly and the jar prevents her from connecting with the people around her. Actually, the symbolism of the bell jar is that of Esther's insanity. Slowly, as she recovers, the jar lifts. At the end of the novel, however, Esther asks, "how did I know that Someday at College, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—



the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (241).

Unfortunately, for Plath, the bell jar returned; she committed suicide in 1963, a month after the publication of *The Bell Jar*. *The Bell Jar* might be her response to many years of electroshock treatment and the scars it left because Plath believes in power of self-healing through written words.

Numerous critics have examined *The Bell Jar* from various perspectives. Among them, few of them are taken for review. Many scholars describe *The Bell Jar* as a Bildungsroman. Professor Linda Wagner-Martin, a famous Plath scholar in her "*The Bell Jar* as a Female Bildungsroman" argues:

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is in structure and intent a highly conventional bildungsroman. Concerned almost entirely with the education and maturation of Esther Greenwood, Plath's novel uses a chronological and necessarily episodic structure to keep Esther at the center of all action. Other characters are fragmentary, subordinate to Esther and her developing consciousness, and are shown only through their effects on her as central character. No incident is included which does not influence her maturation, and the most important formative incidents occur in the city, New York. (60)

She argues that as a characteristic of Bildungsroman, the story centers around Esther Greenwood's maturation that each character and scene is added only to contribute to her development. Moreover, the book discusses themes like identity and sexuality, which are prevalent in the bildungsroman genre. She further remarks that *The Bell Jar* is "plotted to establish two primary themes that of Greenwood's developing identity, or lack of it; and that of her battle against submission to the authority of both older

people and more pertinently, of men" (55). Like male character, Esther tries to make sense of the world as well as sense of self.

Another critic Caroline J. Smith in his "The Feeding of Young Woman: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, *Mademoiselle Magazine*, and the Domestic Ideal" admits that Plath expresses Esther's anxiety through food moments.

The first half of Plath's novel, which chronicles Esther's experiences in New York, is peppered with food moments- moments that continue to emphasize Esther's anxiety concerning her ability to fit in with the normative world around her, the normative world, that is, which abides by the more conservative images constructed by women's magazines. At the Ladies' Day banquet that Esther attends in New York during her internship, she reveals her extreme anxiety about her performance in social settings, particularly when that performance involves food. (13)

Throughout this chapter, we see Esther contradicting herself, presenting herself as acceptable in the eyes of *Mademoiselle*. Readers however reveals that she sometimes strays from the prescriptions of the magazine. Esther proudly declares at the start of this chapter, "No matter how much I eat, I never put on weight. With one exception I've been the same weight for ten years" (20). Esther is at once claiming she never gains weight yet also offering the reader information contrary to that fact. Here, not only her statement is contradictory, but her declaration also seems to reinforce to her reader that she does not stray from the ideal body type exhibited in advertisements that fill *Mademoiselle*.

Similarly, E. Miller Budick in *The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar* states that Plath's feminist criticism on the 1950s American society is of an unconventional nature in her novel. Budick argues:

Plath does more than construct her novel out of uniquely female experiences concerning specifically female themes. She creates a literary form that simultaneously reflects the inherent femininity of a woman's experiences and then transforms that reflection from a static, potentially suffocating presentation of archetypes or traditional images of femaleness into a dynamic process of feminist discourse. (873)

Most of the women writers adopt an aggressive attitude in their writings, however, Plath introduces her comment through thematic growth in her work. She presents a female protagonist hitting at the walls of her contemporary jar-like society, with a desire to be released. Her self-destructive attitude is the feminist response to the social confinements which is not meant to remove from the imprisonment of life but to rebuild the social norms. Moreover, Budick 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. The language of these subjects is of a masculine nature. 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" (875). Here, Plath uses language as a powerful weapon for female discourse.

In the same manner, Yoko Sakane analyses the novel under the topic, "The Mother, the self and the other: The search for Identity in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* in" which critic opines, "As Virginia Woolf claims, women must kill "the angel in the house" in order to write. It means the act of writing is associated with masculine activities, not with female creativity, that is why both Plath and Esther, the protagonist

seems to believe that the power of creativity can be attained only after abandoning womanhood. Sakane further states:

Plath seems to have struggled to establish her identity by assimilating herself into the masculine world, rather than by finding her own identity as women. Displaying a hatred of femininity, she even tried to dissociate herself from the female and to transform woman into the other. In *The Bell Jar*, daughters express anger and frustration toward mother figures who do not enable her to escape from femininity. (31)

In *The Bell Jar*, a daughter becomes more and more hostile toward her mother as she struggles through her own life. Esther expresses her discomfort in being a woman by displacing herself from other women. She consciously or unconsciously refuses to identify with any woman she encounters because she fails to see women as her role models, yet she is desperate to find the ideal person with whom she can willingly identify.

Likewise another critic Marjorie G. Perloff studies *The Bell Jar* from different perspective. He studies it under "A Ritual for being Born Twice: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*" focuses on Laingian terms on *The Bell Jar's* "attempt to heal the fracture between inner self and false self . . . so that a real and viable identity can come into existence" (102). According Perloff, Esther having passed through death, she learns with the help of Dr. Nolan "to forge a new identity"(521). Dr. Nolan, the only wholly admirable woman in the novel, is also the only woman whom Esther never longs to imitate or to resemble. The point is that Dr. Nolan serves not as a model but as an anti-model: she is the instrument where-by Esther learns to be, not some other woman but herself.

E. Butscher examines *The Bell Jar* from feminist perspective. He claims that

*The Bell Jar* can be best interpreted from the feminist approach. He further states:

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.” (310)

Feminism is dominant to Plath's entire literary production. So far as *The Bell Jar* is concerned, it narrates the story of a sensitive girl who captures a feminine sense and who strongly desire to be liberated from stereotypes and social-suppression. Most importantly, her sense of social-suppression has developed a psychological space between her own inner and outer selves.

This is how, regarding *The Bell Jar*, different critics have shed lights on various aspects. And these frameworks certainly help to pave way to conduct the research in politics of autobiography. Plath fictionalizes her experiences of mental breakdown. She confesses her own story through her spokesperson Esther. Yet, her personal confession implicitly suggests some politics in her writing of autobiography. The reason behind writing this novel is to portray the female dilemma of the 1950s. In this regard, Wagner mentions:

Plath wanted to do more than write autobiographical fiction. She wanted her novel to speak for the lives of countless women she had known - women caught in conflicting social codes who were able to laugh about their plight. A central image of the book, the fig tree

bearing ripe figs, depicts the female dilemma of the 1950s. No woman can have it all, but choosing is also difficult. (144)

Wagner further remarks that Esther is not ashamed of her descent into madness, rather wants to confess it for two important reasons. Firstly, to rid herself of memories and secondly to help other women who faced the same cultural pressure like her.

Therefore, this research explores how personal writings are used to fulfill certain beliefs and intentions of the autobiographer that definitely adds new perspective to approach *The Bell Jar*.

The research focuses mainly on the implication of writing Plath's real experiences as a work of fiction. To do so, it deeply investigates *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* written by Wagner. Therefore, the research takes into consideration only those issues that highlights politics of the autobiography.

Anderson in her book *Autobiography* argues, "Autobiography is the set of questions with unsolvable answers" (77). As autobiography is considered to be personal writing in which subject reflects upon his or her own self. There are lots of questions and quires that can be raised in such types of writing but it is difficult to answer because it is exclusively a personal writing. She further argues that "Confession is fuel for autobiography and autobiography itself is the result of unconsciousness" (77). Confession is one of the essential elements of the retrospective writing of person that reveals our sin or guilt. So far as *The Bell Jar* is concerned, it is also a fine piece of confessional writing where she makes confession about how she was sexually abused by the hand of woman hater and how she tried and lost her virginity. Wagner also mentions, "Sylvia found herself paired with a violent woman-hater, a man who tried to rape her amid a torrent of verbal abuse" (79). Similarly, "Sylvia became involved in a sexual relationship with the physics professor

. . . The relationship with the physics professor had an unexpected repercussion when Sylvia suffered a vaginal tear and lost a substantial amount of blood before the tear was stitched in a hospital emergency room" (91).

Plath has fictionalized these incidents in her writing.

In *The Bell Jar*, the reader is taken through Plath's journey of increased mental instability through Esther, the novel's protagonist. The reader is taken through her suicide attempts. The reader experiences her psychological treatment, such as psychotherapy and electroshock therapy. The novel ends with Esther being released from her mental treatment leaving reader with hope that Esther will continue her study and career to full recovery. But in reality, we know that was not the case for Plath. She never did recover from her mental illness. Thus, for her autobiography contains the issues of personal, they not only remain as personal, they end in political.

In this regard, Anderson says:

The critical principal of autobiography based on the ideals of autonomy, self-realization, authenticity and transcendence which reflected their cultural values. Realizing the self and representing the self and autobiography gets drawn seamlessly into the supporting beliefs and values of an essentialist or Romantic notion of selfhood.

(33)

So, Anderson insists that personal feelings are the subject matter of thought and beliefs. Either they could or could not be expressed in writing. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath expresses her psychological responses to the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s. Whatever realization comes on her expressed in the text, "It seems that there is little apparent difference between realizing the self and representing the self" (4).

Importantly, one of the reasons for writing her own story could be a kind of rebirth

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through a written form and a deeper realization of Plath's complicated self. Actually she wanted to discover the genuine essence of one's self. ,

Plath has fictionalized some of the events that definitely signify her motif behind deviation. Hence, the personal writings are always guided by some political impulses because it demands detail information as Rousseau suggests that “responsibility as auto-biographer was to give all the evidence that was available all, therefore, that the reader should need in order to arrive at the correct judgment” (qtd. in Anderson 45-46). Authenticity of the autobiography depends on the details and objectivity of the incidents associated to the self, which slightly lacks in *The Bell Jar*.

However, *The Bell Jar* recounts, in slightly fictionalized form. She fictionalizes the events of the summer and autumn after Plath's junior year. In *The Bell Jar*, She narrates, "We were stuck in the theatre-hour rush. Our cab sat wedged in back of Betsy's cab and in front of a cab with four of the other girls, and nothing moved" (6). She fictionalizes some events of making friends, having party, and going for date while she was invited to serve as guest editor for a woman's magazine *Mademoiselle* in New York.

Likewise, Plath dramatizes her romance with her former boyfriend that she writes, "Even when we went to the beach in the summer he never lay down to drowse in the sun the way I did. He ran back and forth or played ball or did a little series of rapid pushes to use the time" (46). Importantly, some of the plot includes fiction for dramatic effect. As we know, autobiography is self-reflexive writing that reflects auto-biographer's beliefs and ideologies. So, it cannot be objective writing about the self. As Derrida in Anderson's *Autobiography* argues “that life and the work become difficult to separate. . . .” (80). In this way, it is politically oriented writing that



implicitly promotes the writers meaning making through personal writing. We can read this novel with the autobiographical context.

Roy Pascal, an early critic of the genre asserts, autobiography depends on "seriousness of the author, the seriousness of his personality and his intention in writing" (qtd. in Anderson 3). So far as *The Bell Jar* is concerned, it seems somehow, serious work of Plath. The novel has numerous parallels to the life of its author. Both Sylvia Plath and her fictional counterpart Esther Greenwood lost their father at early ages. Like her protagonist Esther Greenwood, Plath came from Boston. Like Esther, Plath won an internship on a glamorous New York magazine in 1953, *Mademoiselle*. Professor Wagner also claims that Joan Didion and Ann Beattie had both previously been on the *Mademoiselle* scheme that Plath frequently mentions in the novel giving fictional name. Plath has given fictional name to all most all characters in novel that she encountered in her real life. Similarly, like Esther, Plath also failed to get onto a creative writing course later that same summer. As Wagner claims:

She arrived home to bad news. Her mother told her that she had not been accepted into the Harvard summer school fiction course taught by Frank O'Connor. Added to Abele's criticisms of her and her writing, this rejection was shattering. Sylvia felt that she was a complete failure. All the prizes she had won scarcely a month before were forgotten as she continued her steady slide into depression. (74)

She too left her mother a note saying she had gone "for a long walk" and then tried to kill herself by taking sleeping pills and hiding in her basement crawlspace. Late August 1953, was Plath's first medically documented suicide attempt. She was found by her mother three days later. The "missing girl" articles were all front page news in the newspapers of the day which Plath vividly mentions in *The Bell Jar*, "A dark,

midnight picture of about a dozen moon-faced people in a wood. I thought the people at the end of the row looked queer and unusually short until I realized they were not people, but dogs. Bloodhounds used in search for missing girl. Police Sgt. Bill Mindly says: "It doesn't look good" (105). Esther becomes more unstable than ever. In desperation she tries to kill herself by taking a full bottle of sleeping pills. She awakes in a hospital and is transferred to a top-of-the-line private mental hospital after her condition does not improve. Finally, she starts to recover

*The Bell Jar* is self-reflective writing which deals with the experiences of Plath's suffering of mental illness. This novel is far closer to its author's life than many so-called autobiographies. The biggest work of fiction is initially written under "Victoria Lucas", a precaution she took because she did not want her mother to know it was about her. Sylvia and Esther are both poets who are well-known for winning prizes and scholarships; although the college which Esther attends is not stated explicitly in *The Bell Jar*, it is a prestigious women's college that could easily be Plath's Alma mater, Smith College. In the same way, the most important events of the novel are almost strictly drawn from Sylvia Plath's biography. Sylvia underwent electroshock therapy and disappeared after a suicide attempt, after which she was hospitalized for psychotherapy. Plath spent the next six months in psychiatric care at McLean Hospital in Boston, receiving electric shock treatments, insulin shock treatments, and psychoanalytic talk. Her stay at the private hospital was also paid by Olive Higgins Prouty, a writer, due to which Sylvia felt great pressure to maintain the reputation she had with her patron.

Plath's novel criticizes the jar-like contemporary society for its double standards, male-dominance and hypocrisy. Esther's childhood friend, Buddy Willard, is the representation of male hypocrisy of double standard which Esther narrates,

"What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time had been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face" (75). In reality also, Plath was betrayed by her home town boy, Dick Norton. In fact, she had idealized their relationship. As Wagner states, "What she saw as Norton's betrayal colored his every word and action. She was so angry about the double standard behavior-that he could simply confess his intimacy and expect to be forgiven-that she had sleepless nights" (47). Later on, Plath expressed her anger in *The Bell Jar* giving fictional name of Buddy to Norton. Therefore it is retrospective writing about the self. The narrator is reflecting her own self through Esther. This is why, Boswell, an autobiographical critic also considers that "there was perhaps more pleasure in reflecting than living" (35). Reflection is an easy assignment in which one can explain own self in own way. While reflecting, one can have better knowledge about own self and judges previous life critically.

As Boswell views that in the act of self-realization, one has better understanding about own self. Judging own self while living life seems impossible. Therefore, certain gap offers us different perspective about own self. And while taking *The Bell Jar* into the consideration, it was written almost ten years after the events happened to her in 1961. In this context, one can argue that Plath's *The Bell Jar* reflects the concept of Boswell of self-acknowledging about the weird feelings and traumatic experiences which she encountered in her young age. Self-reflective gives insight and ideas to struggle. As Wagner views, "In *The Bell Jar*, Esther is a survivor: she has a sense of humour, a cool if cynical view of life that colours the grim comedy of her descriptions. She is also - at the time she writes the story - a mother, a practical woman who has made the best of her life, and who tries to learn from it" (145). As Plath was still struggling in her life. As Boswell has argued the notion of reflection is

pleasurable than living because the subject possess an alternative and freedom of choice. The events and experiences are beyond explanations. Therefore, Plath describes it from her present day knowledge. This self-reflection gives insight, ideas to handle such traumatic situations.

Moreover, being an autobiographical theorist, Anderson asserts “autobiography was less an attempt to remember the past to memorialize the life he led, than to make others recognize inner truths about himself that he already knows through the unique access he has to his own feelings . . .” (45). Anderson believes that autobiography is not just an account of the past life of subject. Its purpose is to make other realize the truth and feeling which subject perceived in reality. Plath does not want to highlight her traumatic sufferings in conventional social values rather wants other to perceive truth and learn from it like her. So, Plath in this writing focuses on demonstration of her feelings, insights, rather than remembering her past life of traumatic situation. She has done it intentionally.:-

Plath's writing revolves around her mental illness, struggle and suicide attempts. Most significantly, she reflects the pain and fear she got in electroshock treatment through Esther. In *The Bell Jar* that she narrates,

Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal plates on either side of my head. He buckled them into place with a strap that dented my forehead, and gave me a wire to bite. I shut my eyes. There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath. Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it 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 sap fly out of

me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done. (75-76):

In above lines, Plath expresses her horror of electroshock on the same way she experienced in her own life. Similarly, in the hospital, Esther found Dr. Nolan who helped her to achieve new identity. For this, Wagner also mentions, "Most important for Sylvia, her treatment was taken over by Ruth Beuscher, an attractive young psychiatrist who Plath thought resembled Myrna Loy. Beuscher became both counselor and role model for Sylvia" (84). Beuscher tried to teach Sylvia "to learn to trust herself, rely on herself, to expect only reasonable successes and to see her relationship with her parents-her dead father as well as her mother-was crucial.

Nevertheless, the autobiographical elements can be further defined, due to the fact that like many other post-modern writers, Plath is best known for her confessional writing. Those readers who have studied and analysed her works often focused on her "self" and her use of it in her writing. Throughout the years of her writing career, she was known to write to express the situations and feelings she experienced, or to rid herself of negative feelings following some traumatizing events. Wagner also adds, "Writing *The Bell Jar* was a liberating experience for Sylvia" (145-). However, her writing is different from the other confessional writings due to the fact that here she employed another style and tone to confess her feelings and experiences that she decided to categorize the novel under the pseudonym. In addition to this, Plath did not make herself the central character of the novel to confess rather brought spokesperson for her.

In her only novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath depicted Esther Greenwood and her life defining summer, which in fact, is the portrait of herself and her personal breakdown during the summer of 1953. Like Esther, "Sylvia was a serious, intelligent student,

interested in achievement and recognition, dutiful about working hard" (Wagner 31). Like Esther, she used to spend much of her time reading books and writing poems, articles, journals etc. From her early childhood, both Esther and Plath had internalized that their parent's love depends on their success and achievements. Therefore, both them laboured hard to achieve their dream of being a renowned poet. Like Esther, Plath "didn't like surprises; anything unexpected unnerved her. Sylvia liked life to be predictable. When it wasn't, she became involved in work, or depressed, or ill" (Wagner 39). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther becomes quite nervous almost all the time that she worries about her grades, her publishing abilities, the writing qualities and most importantly, her potentiality to succeed in the literary work.

Anderson claims that auto-biographers reflect their past self with innocent feelings. But the feelings of innocence they portray are the source of hidden desire. And their very desire justifies their interest and beliefs. Anderson further states:

The re-staging within writing of a scene of public exposure, where the performance of innocent feelings- or feelings of innocence- is also real source of desire. Rousseau makes a drama out of his previously hidden emotions, justifying the interest and importance he, as auto-biographer, is, claiming for himself. (50)

It seems the same is applicable to *The Bell Jar* that Plath confesses her economic problems she faced. Esther narrates:

But I hadn't enough money for an umbrella. What with bus fare in and out of Boston and peanuts and newspapers and abnormal-psychology books and trips to my old home town by the sea, my New York fund was almost exhausted. I had decided that when there was no more

money in my bank account I would do it, and that morning I'd spent the last of it on the black raincoat. (88)

In real life too, Plath was born in a middle class family and had faced economic crisis as Wagner remarks, "Part of Sylvia's anxiety stemmed from financial worries" (30). Her admission in Smith had increased financial worry for both Sylvia and her mother. Therefore, after the death of her father, she felt insecure about her position in the world and about her mother's ability to care for her. She even felt that her mother was responsible for the death of her father. She has portrayed her mother as devastating elements in her life through the figure of Mrs Greenwood.

Though, the death of father may have "struck like a hurricane, but the efforts of her extended family helped her young, promising life" which later on Plath mentioned in *The Bell Jar* (Wagner 24). Wagner further insists, "Sylvia showed great anger toward Aurelia, accusing her of having felt no grief at Otto's death. There is, in fact, some suggestion that Sylvia was disoriented enough by her father's death, or the circumstances surrounding it, that she wished to die herself\_or so she later told friends" (22). Plath vividly expresses her repressed bitter feelings towards mother in *The Bell Jar* that Esther narrates:

Then I remembered that I had never cried for my father's death. My mother hadn't cried either. She had just smiled and said what a merciful thing it was for him he had died, because if he had lived he would have been crippled and an invalid for life, and he couldn't have stood that, he would rather have died than had that happen. I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain. (88)

In fact, Plath and her brother, Warren were not allowed to attend the funeral of their father which made her a mother hater. And those things parallels in Esther's life too.

Wagner further adds:

Esther's mother is cast as the chief villain. While she sleeps in the room she shares with her daughter, Esther considers strangling her mother, mostly because she can sleep while Esther cannot. In her depression, Esther cannot tolerate her mother's love for her. She experiences a second birth at the end of *The Bell Jar*, just as in effect she replaced her natural mother with her psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan. (148)

So, Plath's attitude towards women is ambivalent. In fact, her depiction of her mother and female characters may trouble the reader who knows her biography. Therefore, she has transformed real people into fiction in *The Bell Jar*. She does not want them to hurt.

Most significantly, Plath took literature as a healing balm for her wounds, pain and suffering of life. As, Mahrukh Barg in his research article, "Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as A Psychological Space" asserts:

Ted Hughes 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 one of her created characters reflected some part of Plath's own personality. (3)



For Plath, literature was a means to resist against the suppression of the then time. Through writing, she wanted to establish her new self. Barg further insists, "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" (3). This is how, one can interpret that how autobiographers demonstrate their true self in their writing. Moreover Barg adds, "Edward Butscher says that Plath intends to explore her inherent dilemma of "evil double" (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.

Plath in the novel has portrayed her central character, Esther as a survival that she recovers and once again come back to fight against social code. But in reality, that wasn't the case. Rather, Sylvia went through lots of pressure which she couldn't bear and finally killed herself at the age of thirty. Therefore, Boswell argues that "the private reflection may not fit the public gaze" (qtd. in Anderson 36). In the similar sense, Anderson argues that auto biographers have unique access of their self and write about it. It also shows their authority over their own self. Anderson further argues that auto-biographers try to establish their "self" deducting some of the facts and adding fictional events to establish their ideologies with others that portrays their authority over their own self. In her words:

What has been established at the same time, however, is the elision of conformity with nonconformity; this model binds a belief in individual as a free agent with unique access to his own inner self to practice, which has more to do with the establishment of an ideological and social cohesiveness, of scrutinizing and regulating the self. (33)

Auto biographer finds himself free to practice his inner self in his narration. So, he tries to present himself to be unique.

Moreover, in *The Bell Jar*, Plath presents Mrs Greenwood, mother of Esther to be submissive female figure internalizing male power which hinders mother daughter relationship. And the non-supportive mother figure causes negative impact on Esther's own perceptions on maternity, and she claims "What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb. A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line" (116). Somehow this confession of Plath seems contradictory because if Plath remained as independent and strong-minded person, she would be able to deeply analyse various aspects connected with men and marriage. Jeffrey A Kottler in "Divine madness: ten stories of creative struggle" reveals that "In spite of her efforts to maintain her own separate identity and writing career, over time Plath grew more and more dependent on her husband" ( 22). Kottler further opinions, "Sylvia Plath was a complicated person, living during a transitional time for women. As much as she wanted a career, she also wanted to find love with the right man. She had been told all her life that it was OK to have poetry as a hobby, but her real purpose was to settle down, raise a family, and make a good home for her husband" (19). Most importantly, she would probably never committed suicide. But in contrast to this, Plath slowly drowned into the state of being submissive and needy house wife and could not imagine her world without her husband.

Anderson views that auto-biographers show themselves real, trustworthy and others as unreal. Anderson asserts, "The external and other world and other people are untrustworthy and have proved to be duplicitous, if not downright vindictive, he is above all, innocent, and his autobiography is as much his "alibi" as it is his

confession" (46-47). Even in *The Bell Jar*, Plath glorifies her purity and chastity through Esther and accuses other for being impure. Esther narrates:

I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath. Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter anymore. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure.  
(12)

Plath's this attitude makes her confession a bit contradictory on which readers can't completely rely.

Likewise, in an autobiography, it becomes the responsibility of the auto-biographer to give every detail about his or her life. It helps its readers to give exact judgment about the auto-biographer which creates sense of credibility. In this regard in Anderson's *Autobiography* Rousseau argues:

The task of the auto-biographer was to tell or confess all and make himself. . . . His responsibility as auto-biographer was to give the reader all the evidence that was available all, therefore, that the reader should need in order to arrive at the correct judgment. . . . It is not enough for my story to be truthful; it must be detailed as well. (45-46)

But, Plath seems little bit irresponsible in her writing. She does not confess about her flirt with many other guys. During her last two years in high school, Plath dated or at least flirted with "nearly forty boys" (38). Wagner remarks, ". . . and one of the ambition of her high school year was to date as much - and with as many different boys - as possible" (34). In fact, she went on blind dates with many boys. But she has

remained silent about this. In *The Bell Jar* Esther goes for dates with few guys but doesn't go for blind dates with so many guys. Plath narrates her dates but in fictional way. Anderson in this context suggest about the truth of autobiography. To establish the truth of personal writing there should be transparency. She states, "Truth requires fairness and moderation, an elastic and largely ideological construct which excludes both feminine fancy and contradictory facts" (*Autobiography* 44). So, the description given in the text does n<sup>o</sup>t necessarily figure out the truth of Plath's life.

In Anderson's *Autobiography*, Derrida asserts that "there is always "an inclusion and exclusion with regard to genre in general and that no text can actually fulfil its own generic designation" (9). And while, analysing *The Bell Jar* same is the case that Plath adds some more events for dramatic effect. Esther experiments with various ways of ending her life like she tries to slit her wrists, but can only bring herself to slash her calf. She tries to hang herself, but cannot find a place to tie the rope in her low-ceilinged house. At the beach with friends, she attempts to drown herself, but she keeps floating to the surface of the water. Finally, she hides in a basement crawl space and takes a large quantity of sleeping pills. But in reality, Plath tried to kill herself taking sleeping pills.

In conclusion, in *The Bell Jar* Plath shares her traumatic experiences of her mental breakdown electroshock treatment and her good recovery with the same intention. Just like Anderson who believes no autobiography is completely accurate and authentic and also argues that the auto biographers very creatively omit the facts about themselves that may hinder their personality and add imaginary incidents with the intention of manipulating the validity regarding their personality, Plath has written *The Bell Jar* blending factual and fictional events for the dramatic effect and produced it under "Victoria Lucas" to hide the writing from her mother, who is not portrayed

kindly. Alive, Plath could never exhibit the painful feelings humiliating her mother. In this writing piece, she portrays her quest for identity of being "self" in the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s. In the act of establishing her identity, Plath represents herself as an ambitious independent high minded young woman who doesn't want to identify with any other woman even with mother. Though Plath has added fictional events hiding some of the truth about herself, most of the incidents Esther narrates are really happened to Plath. *The Bell Jar* is also interpreted to be a life narrative that the readers are supposed to feel more connected with the main characters of the story. Readers do actually feel more close to Plath while consciously reading her novel, due to the fact that we have strong proofs that the author mirrored her own emotions. Because of the similarities which can be traced between Esther and Plath has made the novel nothing more but autobiographical fiction. leaving the reader with hope that Esther (and therefore Plath, as well) will continue on a road to full recovery. In reality, however, we know that was not the case for Plath, as she never did recover from her mental illnesses. What is known is that many of these experiences are true to

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