

I. Introduction

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

(Sylvia Plath, *Lady Lazarus*)

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) is foremost a poet and next a novelist. She is the poet in love with death and the woman who has perversely made suicide a metaphor for her creativity. Suicide, for her, is committed not for self-destruction but for a renewed life or resurrected life unhindered by patriarchy. Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts on 27th October, 1932. Her parents were Austrian immigrants. She was the only daughter of Otto Plath, and Aurella Plath. Her Father was an immigrant from Poland and was the professor of Biology at Boston University.

Plath's household was patriarchal in nature in the traditional sense. The family lived under Otto Plath's domination until his death. He died when she was eight years old. For Plath, her childhood becomes a sea that is "beautiful, inaccessible, absolute, fine, white, flying" (Malmshemerz 539). Her experiences of the sea are "tied subjectively to her mother, father and grandmother" (540). But when he died, his death became her loss. This was another major turning point in her life which is depicted in *Lady Lazarus*. Her other poems like "Daddy", "The Colossus" present the father-daughter relationship.

She was educated at Smith College and Newnhan College, Cambridge. In 1953 following a month in New York City working as one of a dozen great editors on the fashion magazine- *Mademoiselle*, Plath suffered a bout of depression, attempted suicide and was hospitalized for six months. These events are reflected in her novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963).

Sylvia Plath lived an outwardly exemplary life attending Smith College on scholarship, graduating first in her class and winning a Fulbright grant to Cambridge

University in England. There she met and married a prominent English poet Ted Hughes in 1957. At first, they had a supportive relationship. She returned to Smith College and taught for two years. In Boston, she attended Robert Lowell's poetry classes. There she learned much from Lowell, Sexton, Snodgrass and George Starbuck. But in 1959, her marriage with Ted Hughes began to crumble. They separated and Plath moved to London with her children in the state of despair and hopelessness.

Beneath the fairy-tale success fostered unresolved psychological problems evoked in her highly readable novel *The Bell Jar*. She continued to write about her frustrations, anxieties and her psychological state. Some of these problems were personal, while others arose from repressive attitudes toward women. Among them were the beliefs-enslaved by most women themselves that women should not show anger or ambitiously pursue a career and instead find fulfillment intending their husbands and children, successful women like Plath lived a contradictory life.

Plath's life crumbled when she and Hughes separated and she cared for the two young children in a London apartment during the winter of extreme cold. In London, she was in miserable condition. She was troubled with financial problems and poor health. Later, she started to write more feverishly. Isolated, ill and in despair, Plath worked against the clock to produce a series of stunning poems and a novel that brought her international acclaim before she committed suicide by gassing herself in her kitchen.

During the final three years of her life, Plath abandoned the restraints and conventions that marred much of her early work and wrote with great speed. Like Lowell and Sexton, Plath is generally considered a 'confessional poet' as personal as her poems, however, they succeed. She produced numerous confessional poems of stark revelation challenging her long standing anxiety, confusion and doubt into poetic verses of great power and pathos. Nevertheless at her creative peak, Plath committed suicide in February 1963 in London.

Sylvia Plath is more a poet than a novelist. Plath was really an outstanding student whose first poem was published in the Boston Sunday school magazine when she was just eight years old:

Hear the cricket chirping
In the dewy grass.
Bright Little fire flies
Twinkle as this pass. (535)

Plath began her apprenticeship with this poem. A magazine called *Seventeen* before she graduated from high school had accepted her story. For nearly twenty years, she worked at poetry developing, where her voice is mature.

In terms of her academic career, she remained a model of brilliant success. She received a scholarship at Smith College. While she was in college, she had her first mental breakdown that is reflected in her novel *The Bell Jar*. She continued to write about her frustrations, anxieties and her psychological state. Plath has chronicled all these incidents in this novel. She confesses her psychological fragmentation and inner conflicts in her poetic creation.

Plath was tormented by unhappy childhood and she senses the fear of abandonment in her works. The love and hatred relationship with father figure remains dominant in the life and poetry of Plath. She was hospitalized due to mental illness because of the intolerable frustrations she had to undergo. She created the best of her writing during the treatment of depression. She attempted suicide in order to get rid of the most painful and personal experiences. She explores to confess her unease with femininity through severe and ironical expressions. Plath is known for her aesthetic transcendence. She made many attempts to die and transcend death itself in order to assert her existence as we read in her poetry "Lady Lazarus":

Beware

Beware

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air. (qtd. in Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy 1734)

For Plath, death is a means to assert her identity. She is hopeful and victorious enough to reverse the tendency of marginalization of female world. She envisions the tension created in the victim and wishes for revenge and the fear of frustration. She is more pessimistic and slightly optimistic.

Her expression is so touching and moving that she has been successful enough together up to a large number of criticisms. It has also been described that Plath is one of the most celebrated and controversial of post war poets writing in English. Intensely autobiographical, Plath's poems explore her own mental anguish, her troubled marriage to a fellow poet, Ted Hughes, her unresolved conflicts with her parents and her own vision of herself.

Plath wrote about herself or about the social restrictions on individuals, she stripped away the polite veneer. She let her writing express elemental forces and primeval fears. In doing so she laid bare the contradictions that tore apart appearance and hinted at some of the tensions hovering just beneath the surface of the American way of life in the postwar period. She has thrashed the hyperactive, perpetually accelerated, hurt imagination, throwing off images and phrases with energy of a run away horse or a machine with its throttle stuck wide open. All the violence in her works returns to that violence of imagination, a frenzied brilliance and conviction.

Literary critic Jon Rosenblatt asserts that through the emotional outpouring of self-pity and grief, Plath shows up a dramatic conflict between self and body. Life and death

operate as tangible power in Plath's poetry. She focuses on the dramatic conflict of life and death in the form of ritual and magical means to free her. Her ritual confrontation occurs with death or darkness. But Rosenblatt views that such death at once converges into the origin of life:

By willingly undergoing physical mutilation, symbolic dismemberment and symbolic death, the initiated passage [moves] through death on the way to rebirth and new life. The pattern of death symbolized, through darkness and annihilation, is in dispensation for the beginning of spiritual life. The images of darkness are inevitably connected with germination, with embryology; they already indicate new life in preparation. (22)

Thus, death is not perceived as a suicidal ending but as the path to gain a transformed identity. Her suicidal ending and transformed self help her transcend death. By transcending death as a female, she is trying to assert the space for the women. In the dark face of patriarchy, death and annihilation has transformed her as a new, changed, miraculous, triumphant and fearless self. Her efforts are shooting towards attaining a secure identity.

Plath is actually speaking the voice of the whole women living in a contemporary American society by revealing its repression. Plath cannot see herself as a "knot of nerves, without identity" (Rosenblatt 30). Therefore, she presents herself as a shadow unable to represent herself. Her shadow represents the ghost of creativity. It betokens the imaginative self perhaps the defeated self. In this regard, Axelrod comments:

Plath attributed her difficulties in achieving self-representation to her diminished sense of identity in a male-dominated and belated world, but her representation was also sabotaged by language itself, which contains its own treacherous holes. She was jailed in Nietzsche's 'prison house of language',

which like Emerson's God, has a circumference that is everywhere and a center that is nowhere. (300)

So, the shadow creates the unbridgeable void between the word and the world. Shadow points to her poetic failure or incapacity. She means to state that her social, domestic and economic circumstances, her history and language itself are conspiring against her poetic creativity. In a sense she is trying her best to threaten the male- dominated society by unveiling and mirroring the reality.

Hammer Langdon, in *Plath's Lives* claims that "Plath's education as a writer promised her freedom and self-expression" (60). Her poetry confirms two qualities in her writing: Self-consciousness and intensity. By 'self consciousness', Langdon means "the capacity to contemplate herself as an object with acute awareness" and by 'intensity', it is a "drive to be fully present in her writing to achieve a superior authenticity" (61). It means that Plath wants to answer her identity through her confession of own private turmoil. Her intensity is to search a vivid and memorable language. Langdon says that Plath has chosen to be a writer, "to choose a special way of life [. . .] to be in the process of becoming" aimed through self-realization (67). She does not want to record a self but to bring one into being. Langdon further asserts that Plath wants to be famous to gain public identity as well as immortality:

She is constantly in search of the second 'self' of writing – an improved image of her face and body- with special material qualities [like] glossy, radiant, poreless, white, new. At last in her late work, Plath overcomes this dilemma [. . .] as she represented in self-violence. (67)

Plath's poetry is a tale of her rebellion against the patriarchal constraints that have confined her to be a social Plath not a creative Plath for which she is head over heels.

The materials of Sylvia Plath's only novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) are conspicuously autobiographical as her anecdotal memoirs have revealed. But the book is more than a case history of the attempted suicide and psychiatric treatment of a sensitive girl with literary ambition. It is a highly and originally structured novel which has transmuted its raw materials in a manner consonant with Plath's own comments on the relationship between art and personal experiences. Her personal experiences conjure up the feelings of a woman's struggle against unsupportive society and her will to move away from the society.

Sylvia Plath was an excellent poet but is known to many for this largely autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. It is an autobiographical account of Sylvia Plath's own mental breakdown and suicide attempt. *The Bell Jar* is more than a confessional novel, it is a comic but painful statement of what happens to a woman's aspirations in a society that refuses to take them seriously. A society that expects electroshock to cure the despair of a sensitive, questioning young artist search for identity becomes a terrifying descent toward madness.

A great deal of the novel concerns the expectations that others have for Esther with regards to behaviour and her future, as well as the expectations that Esther has for other. This is most explicit in the societal expectations that Esther feels concerning decisions about a possible career and family. Esther feels that she is pressured to succeed in whatever career she chooses, despite the fact that she cannot yet even decide on which career path she will pursue. In addition, Esther also feels pressured concerning proper codes of behaviour, particularly with regard to sexuality. She is constantly monitored by others, including her mother, who gives her a pamphlet on female sexuality, and even her neighbours, such as Mrs. Ockenden, who spies on her and reports back any indiscretions. Yet Esther does in some sense accept this pressure on her and even judges others' behaviour by similar standards, as when she begins to loathe Buddy Willard for finding to live up to her expectations of him by

having an affair with a waitress. This can also be seen in Esther's attitude toward the sophisticated and mature Doreen, who intimidates Esther by not conforming to the same expectations that Esther follows. The theme of societal pressure even continues into the mental hospital where the greatest concern of Esther's mother and even some of the parents is that they will not be accepted in their particular social circles because of their mental illness.

The Bell Jar is perhaps the most compelling and controlled account of a mental breakdown to have appeared in American fiction. Sylvia Plath subsequently became famous poet, and that autobiographical basis for her own novel is well established; it is a very distinguished American novel in its own right. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, is beset by feelings of detachment and estrangement for reality which make her representative contemporary character. Because of her success in her career, she wins a fashion magazine contest, in the crowded clangorous city, which she does not belong to. She feels like a hole in the ground, like a negative of a person, an absence instead of a presence, a silence instead of a communicant. Her numbness and estrangement from reality bring her to a recognizable sort of paralysis - mapless and motiveless. Outwardly, she has all the conventional earmarks of an individual destined for success – an outstanding college record, contact in the world of fashion writing, and even a conventional boyfriend.

Inwardly, however, she is terrified of the future and of any decision that implies growth toward maturity and the autonomy of becoming one's own parent. One way of avoiding growth is to become imprisoned and neurotic in decision. This is what the narrator suspects when she tells Buddy Willard that she wants to live both in the country and in the city. She states explicitly:

I am neurotic. I could never settle down in either the country or the city
[. . .] if neurotic wants two mutually exclusive things at one and the
same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth

between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days. (76)

This passage reminds us of the mutually exclusive demands of marriage and career, and of the double bind experienced by women today caught between a 'feminine' and a 'feminist' mystique. Like many of us, Plath's autobiographical female protagonist was caught in the squeeze between societal expectations that she herself had incorporated and attempts of self-determination that would have allowed a more authentic self to emerge.

When Esther looks at the features of a face in a photograph melt away, just as the words in a book she reads, she starts to flow past making no impression on the 'glassy surface' of her brain. She finds it difficult to perceive any meaningful pattern in reality, a failure of gestalt which empties perception of significance, reducing vision to mere dots and language to sounds. That glassy surface is really *the bell jar* inside which she sits, through which she perceives the world. The person in *the bell jar* is imprisoned in the airless landscape of her own mind and memory, with no chance of any 'circulating air'. To the person in *the bell jar*, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream. But the stuffy air inside *the bell jar* is the air of self not that of world. So, freedom for Esther consists of getting out the claustrophobic prison of her detached self not just out of the institution, though that may seem to be the most visible but not *the bell jar*.

This novel *The Bell Jar* has received many criticisms and wide-ranging responses since its publication in 1963. Several critics such as Peter B. High, Malcolm Bradbury, Margaret Ferguson, Kate Baldwin and many others have analyzed this novel from different perspectives. Peter B. High states, "In her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, she describes a young woman's fight with mental illness and suicide. The heroine chooses to live in the end but one month after the book was published Sylvia Plath chooses to die" (208). Here, High focuses on the female entrapment within the patriarchal society.

Similarly, Malcolm Bradbury terms the novel as 'Novel of Disintegration' as "the novel captures disintegrative and entropic process in the world" (197). Bradbury comments on the fragmentary nature of the world. Stan Smith takes "*The Bell Jar* as the psychological alienation of heroine, Esther Greenwood to reinforce the aesthetic alienation [. . .] She further goes ahead and terms this alienation as schizophrenic self alienation" (259).

In the same way, Margaret Ferguson views that Sylvia Plath has mixed her autobiography with grief and her repressive mind. She notes, "In *The Bell Jar*, Plath transmutes autobiography into a representative account of agony, setting her personal even generational drama against the backdrops of classical myth, nature and history and turning family members into archetype" (429). Likewise, Kate Baldwin argues the novel "*The Bell Jar's* ostensible emphasis on the cohesion of identity alongside the text's performance of such cohesion as an impossibility offers us an opportunity to query the ways in which isolated attention to selfhood and its inadequate fulfillment is also distraction from the embeddedness of that self in different materials of power" (2). Here, Baldwin talks about the female identity and the coherence of the selfhood. Similarly, Marilyn Yalom in "*The Bell Jar* and Related Poems" considers:

The Bell Jar as the existential dimension of the author – heroine's experiences: the protracted and early death of her father that flooded her with lifelong anxiety; the rite of passage into adulthood necessitating choice and forcing the discovery of her own aging process, and the escape into madness as a reaction to intolerable internal and external stress. (169)

The truth is that her perspective on freedom keeps on altering whenever her experiments over her assumptions fail to be true. First of all, she searches her freedom out of society, then she tries to find it by breaking the socio-moral norms. She finally realizes that the complete freedom is possible only through death because it is better to die rather than to

live merely a conventional way of life. And she chooses not to live surrendering in the world that values herself first as a submissive woman, i.e. mother and wife, only then as a human being.

II. Feminist Emancipation

Historical Background

Feminism is related to feminist movement which seeks equal rights for women for giving them equal status to choose their own life patterns. Different types of restrictions on the fundamental rights of women have existed throughout the history in almost all civilizations. If we view the history chronologically, women were taken as inferior to men by different thinkers. Feminist thinkers regard feminism as somehow different from the mainstream society as innovative, inventive and rebellious. Chris Beasley points out that for the feminist writers, the western thought is "male stream" and thus "its authority needs to be questioned" (3). It means that western civilization is pervasively patriarchal, male-centered and male controlled:

From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophical writings to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference to the male as an "other" or a land of non-man. By her lack of the identifying male organ, of male powers, and of the male character traits, they are marginalized in the patriarchy. (58)

So, women themselves are taught to internalize the patriarchal ideology in the process of socialization.

Feminism is a doctrine redefining women's activities and goals from a women-centered point of view and refusing to accept the cult of masculine chauvinism and superiority that reduces women to a sex object, a second sex, a submissive other. It seeks to eliminate the subordination, oppression, inequalities and injustices. Women suffer because of their sex and defend equal rights for women in a political, economic, social, psychological and aesthetic sense. The feminists think that femininity is their strength, therefore, they take it as the weapon to fight against patriarchy. They put female in the supreme place to show that

women are also bold enough to decide whatever is better for their life. Even though it is difficult to define feminist theory, it was thought that feminism could be divided into liberal, radical and revolutionary phases in the early feminist theorizing; that is into those, who argued for equality as men, those who celebrated women's supposed difference from men and those who wished to deconstruct the system of gender difference. It shows that feminist criticism is not a unified subject. It covers media, literature and civilization as well. Taking feminism as an interdisciplinary field of knowledge Mark Hawkins Dady says:

Feminist critical theory has always been an interdisciplinary subject for those who are primarily engaged in literary criticism; it has always been necessary to look beyond the boundaries of purely textual analysis in order to explore both the factors that contribute to the discriminating treatment of women and those factors that enable women to resist and counter domination. (264)

There is no harmony between men and women in relation to their status in the society. Women are silenced in the patriarchal ideology. Thus, feminists try to break the silence of women. There is inequality shown in the norms created by males where women are destined to follow those values. Feminism is the search for female autonomy. It seeks to achieve greater freedom for women to work and remain economically and psychologically independent of men. Feminists go against prevailing norms of the society which try to read women as an object of sexual desire and seek to burden both women's self-awareness and their opportunism to the point of equality with men.

As a movement with long history, there are three basic positions of feminism from 1400 to 1789.

- (i) A conscious stand is a position to male defamation and mistreatment of women; a dialectical opposition to misogyny.

- (ii) A belief that the sexes are culturally, not just biologically, formed; a belief that women were social group shaped to fit male notion about a defective sex.
- (iii) An outlook that transcends the accepted value system of the time by exposing and opposing the prejudice and narrow desire for a truly general conception of humanity.

M.H. Abrams in his *Glossary of Literary Terms* mentions some issues indicated in feminism: "Western society is pervasively patriarchal, male-centered and controlled so as to subordinate women to men all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic" (89). What is feminine and who is masculine are merely the cultural constructs generated by the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilization. Patriarchal ideology pervades those writings, which have been considered great literature. Most of them are thus male characters: Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Tom Jones, Huck Finn and so on. Female characters are given marginal and subordinating roles, represented as complementary in opposition to masculine desires.

Activists in the feminist movement have manifested how far the imaginative literature has misrepresented women through the ages or contributed to imposing on them a falsely limited notion of their role. Writing is not an area of activity from which women have been excluded or in which they have failed to gain equality with men. Therefore, it is described into two main issues to be included in feministic discourse:

- i. Examination of the stereotyping of female roles in male-produced literature and its bad influence on women readers in imposing traditional roles upon them.
- ii. Problem of woman as writer: Josephine Donavan, a Phillippine born American writer protests that most literature written by men presents women only in relation to male protagonists rather than as seats of consciousness in themselves. The main interest of feminist critics has been to reconstitute all the ways we deal with literature so that we

can do justice to female point of view, concerns and values. They want to identify recurrent images of women.

Aristotle declared that the female is female by virtue of certain lack of qualities and Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is 'imperfect man'. There is a long line of women writers who protested against these inequalities from Christine de Pisan to Mary Woolstonecraft and from Simon de Beauvoir to present day feminist writers. They devise a "Theory" and feminist thought system evolves out of it. The feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization. As a philosophy of life, it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep-seated causes of women's oppression.

Though feminism became a dominant force in the literary studies only late in the 1960s, its origin dates back to the publication of Mary Woolstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which is considered to be the first formal enhancement of feminist writing though many others had tried their hands before her too. Woolstonecraft in her book advocates for the political and social rights of women and argues that society never can retain women only in the role of convenient domestic slaves and alluring mistress by denying their economic independence and encouraging them to be docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of all else. In "A Vindication of the Right of Women" she discusses the pernicious impact of the sentimental novel in the lives of women in the eighteenth century. These novels present the women as passive beauty and lacking intellectual faculty. While the man is presented as active, intellectual, rational and dominant in decision-making, the woman lacks the power of decision making. Therefore, she chooses a rake, luxury and a brave person. She states:

Women are solely employed other to prepare themselves to excite love or actually putting their lessons in practice, they cannot live without love. But when a sense of duty or fear of shame, obliges them to restrain this pampered

desire of pleasing beyond certain length, [females] obstinately determine to love [. . .] they become object woers and fond slaves. (397)

Woolstoncraft bitterly attacks the social construction of prejudiced patriarchy, by projecting women as mere pleasure object which trivializes females.

The feminist revolutionary spirit implanted by Woolstonecraft, however, couldn't accelerate, so speedily for more than coming one century. *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) by Margaret Fuller and *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill were only the two major works on feminism in the whole nineteenth century. Virginia woolf, by writing *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex* (1949) contributed greatly for the worldwide emergence of feminism in the first half of the twentieth century. Woolf focuses on situation of women authors throughout the history and their cultural, economic and educational disabilities within the patriarchal society which had prevented them from realizing their creative possibilities. She has revealed the cultural, economic and educational disabilities within the patriarchal society. The feminist trend of their time was concerned for 'absolute equality' and the 'erasure of differences' between the sexes. But Woolf voiced for radical change as women's freedom and for their suppressed values affecting the concept of power, family and social life that had been shaped by men in the past.

Woolf argues that women do not have a room of their own and a separate space for writing. Though she never adopts a feminist stance, she continually examines the problems faced by women writers. Rejecting a feminist consciousness, she hopes to achieve a balance between "a male self-realization" and female "self-inhalation" (822). She emphasizes that the women feel just as men feel. The women need exercise for faculties as much as their brothers do. According to her, literature is open to everybody. She says that libraries can be locked but

freedom of women's mind cannot be locked. Woolf has imagined a society in which men and women will come together in purpose and desire:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally but women feel just like as men feel; they need exercise for their effort as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged low creature to say that they ought to confine themselves to making pudding and knitting stocking [. . .] it is thoughtless to condemn them or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or to learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for sex.

(822)

Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir insists against "the cultural identification of women as merely the negative object, or 'other' to man as the defining and domination 'subject' who is assumed to represent humanity in general" (qtd. in Abrams 234). She argues that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces the creature which is descended as feminine. She also attacks the patriarchal myths of women presuming the female essence prior to individual existence in the work of many male writers:

To say that woman is a mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not understood, she is there but hidden behind veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances. What is she? Angel demon, one inspired an actress [. . .]. One considers woman in her immanent presence, her inward self, and one can say absolutely nothing about her. She falls short of having any qualification. (998)

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1971) can be regarded as the first major book in this stream. This book is combination of detain analysis of literary works and political argument. In a raw, polemical style, she traces the history of women's symbolic oppression from myth of

Pandora through the prose of Henry Miller. She describes sexual politics as the method by which one sex seeks to maintain and extend its power upon the other subordinate sex. For Millet men enjoy such power to constrain women. The feminist analysis of politics, therefore, arose from the fact that women have been excluded from the exercise of political power. In this book Millet attacks D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Jean Genet for coming sexual politics in literature.

The books of these writers greatly influence what is known as the first phase of feminist writing which focuses attention on women as readers. The next type of feminist criticism deals with women as writers. In this type of criticism the main focus is on women's writing. Elaine Showalter is the originator of the term gyno-criticism and the author of *Literature of their Own* (1977). She has combined gyno-critic re-reading of canonical female authors with an examination of unknown writers in an attempt to revolutionize the accepted canon. By questioning the criteria by which classic novels were defined, Showalter helped to expose the artificiality and subjectivity of the seemingly objective value-judgments that surrounded literary analysis. Showalter's book changed the direction of feminist criticism. She repressed writers that had long been forgotten to thoughtful assessment of their work and contributed to the new appetite for women's literature. She has identified three historical phases of women's literary development:

The "Feminine" phase (1840-80), during which women writers imitated the dominant tradition; the "feminist" phase (1880-1920), during which women advocated minority rights and protested; and the "female" phase (1920-present) during which dependency on opposition-that is, on uncovering misogyny in male texts- is being replaced by a rediscovery of women's texts and women. (qtd. in Guerin et al. 198)

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) is another brilliantly written massive book on historical study of feminism which stresses especially the psychodynamics of women writers in the nineteenth century. It explores the pressure of psycho as an "anxiety of authorship" when they talk about the feminist poetics (1234). Gilbert and Gubar in this book, according to M.H. Abrams, propose:

The 'anxiety of authorship' that resulted from the stereotype that illiteracy creativity is an exclusively male prerogative, effected in women writers a psychological duplicity that projected a monstrous counter figure to the heroine [. . .]; such a figure is usually in some sense the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. (236)

Gilbert and Gubar's main argument is that the artistic creativity of the nineteenth century tradition which is perceived basically as a male quality is in fact patriarchal superimposition upon the women writers who are imprisoned within it. In the image of 'Divine Creature' the male author fathers his text. But taking the same masculine cosmic author as their model women come up copying or identifying with the dominant literary images of femininity which comes out of the phallogentric myth of creativity. They suggest the female writers first to struggle against the effect of socialization that becomes struggle against men's oppressive reading of women. But they further argue that the women can begin such struggle only by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that revolt against patriarchal authority is possible. They also talk about the social anxieties, and physical and mental illness. After that they post the problem of women writers in the patriarchal culture and tradition. Gilbert and Gubar opine:

The woman writer feels herself to be figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternatives [of] her culture and the crippling effects of her conditioning sometimes seem to 'breed' like sentences of death in the bloody shoes inherits

from her literary foremothers. Therefore critics see 'infection in sentence breed'. (1242)

The French Feminist School (Ecriture Feminine) who are concerned with feminine writing from the position of woman accept Lacan's account of language as a masculine order but do not accept his positive affirmation of that masculine order as equivalent to civilization or sociality. They question the assumption that femininity can only be seen from the point of view of phallic culture. For the *écriture féminine* writers, the notion of woman exemplifies the cultural and linguistic principle of rendering inferiority that which does not fit the masculine norm. They believe that femininity offers a possible procedure for subverting the marginalizing mechanisms of power, thereby breaking it up. They focus on Jacques Lacan's notion of Imaginary, a pre-Oedipal stage in which child has not yet differentiated himself or herself from the mother and has accordingly not yet learned language. This Oedipal crisis marks:

The entrance of the child in a world of symbolic order in which everything is separate, including unconscious and conscious, self and other, words and actions. This transition also marks entry into a world ruled by the "law of the father", "isms" or rules that confine us. (qtd. in Guerin 204)

Lacan calls it the phallogocentric universe. The Imaginary is the realm of feminine and is the vital source of language which is tamed and codified by the Laws of the Father. As Helene Cixous' "sisters, write with the white milk of your mothers", marks the importance of women's body not only as a subject of writing but also the energy and the instrument of writing (qtd. in Seldon 151). It is the source to gain access to find a source of immeasurable feminine power. Cixous posits the existence of an incipient "feminine writing" that has its source in the mother. She says that the stage of mother-child relation is the real world before the child acquires the male-centered verbal language. In her view:

The prelinguistic and unconscious potentially manifest itself in those written texts, which undermines the fixed signification [. . .]. These writings subvert the logic and the "closure of our phallogentric language, and open out into a joyous free play of meanings. (qtd. in Abrams 92)

Luce Irigaray posits a 'woman's writing' which evades the male monopoly and the risk of appropriation in the existing system. She tries to establish its generation principle in place of the monolithic phallus.

Similarly, Julia Kristeva describes a mother-centered realm of expression as the semiotic as opposed to the symbolic laws of the father. Like Lacan, "in her mind the prior semiotic realm of the feminine is present in symbolic discourse as absence or contradiction" (Guerin 205). Kristeva opposes phallogentrism with the images derived from women's corporeal experiences. She posits "a chora", or prelinguistic, pre-Oedipal and un-systematized signifying process, centered on the mother, that she labels "semiotic" (205). The father-controlled syntactically ordered and logical language known as symbolic represses the semiotic process. This process can break out in a revolutionary way as a "heterogeneous destructive causality" that disrupts, and disperses the authoritarian "subject". It stressed for the world free of the opposite order and rationality of our standard discourse. It is the product of the "law of the father" that consigns women to a negative and marginal status (qtd. in Abrams 95). Kristeva makes the succinct observations that "a mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh" (94). In fact she characterizes future of feminism as one with a utopian vision where "many voices are always speaking and that each individual can have many voices" (qtd. in Guerin 206).

Several feminist writers have adopted its perspectives and transformed the myth criticism for the purpose of feminist criticism. Feminist myth critics tend to center their discussion on the Great Mother and other female images and goddesses some of them being

Medusa, Cassandra, Arachne and Isis. Feminist myth critics even criticize Northrop Frye for ignoring gender in his classification of myths. These critics reject Greco-Roman myths as male constructed and want to go to the study of pre- Greek myths which have abundant examples of matriarchal norms and values in the societies.

Black Feminist criticism protests the 'massive silence' of feminist criticism about women writer and calls for a black feminist aesthetics that would deal with both racial and gender issues. The major black feminists like Alice Walker, Tony Morrison and Maya Angelou celebrate the black female literary consciousness and believe that they possess rich culture and sexual properties as the blacks and as the females. They try to situate the study of black women's writing in context of black cultural history, and explore its thematic and stylistic correspondence with the literature of black men as well as investigate its special use of language and imagery.

Lesbian feminists devote that attention especially to the literature written by lesbian writers which deals with lesbian relationship in a heterosexual culture. They emphasize powerful bonds between women as significant aspect of all women's writing and prefer the women spending time together and sharing most aspects of their lives with each other. Adrienne Rich defines the terms lesbian as a female energy that gravitates towards strong women, who seek a literature that will express that women must be sexually independent to establish the independence of their bodies because they locate the emergence of domination in female sexuality when it is defined by men.

Post-colonial feminists are concerned with the "double colonization" of third-world women under the imperial conditions. They argue that the third world women become victims of both the imperial ideology and nature and foreign patriarchies. They are ghettoized and secluded from the mainstream culture and suffered with their western siblings as well. As the western feminists pose an inseparable division between them, the non-western women

suffer from a sense of isolation and have hard time to express their identity. They are stuck between two trends of dominations: patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation. The post colonial feminists accuse the mainstream feminists of being 'Eurocentric' in their attitudes towards women in the countries of third world, trying to impose western model of feminism that is not always appropriate to the particular condition of third world countries. They hardly approve them for speaking in favour of women of all ranks and races. They blame them for being more imperialist than feminist and claim that true feminist spirit and sentiment lies in the marginalized non-western society. White Eurocentric feminists are challenged for their essentializing and universalizing theories of women's common oppression.

Patriarchy

The word patriarchy literally refers to the father or "patriarch" and originally it was used to describe or specify a type of "male-dominated family"-- the large household of the patriarch which included women, junior men, children and slaves and domestic servants, all under the rule of this dominant male. Now it is used more generally to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women and, here it is used to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in number of ways.

The subordination that women experience at daily level, regardless of the class, takes various forms: discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, and violence within the family and in the society. Patriarchy is realized in the society in various ways like son preference, discrimination against girls in food distribution, burden of household work on women and young girl, lack of educational opportunities for girls, lack of freedom and mobility, wife battering, male control over female, sexual harassment at work, lack of inheritance or property right for women, male control over sexuality, and women's

bodies, and control over fertility or reproductive rights. These instances can be seen in societies of Asian and European countries.

The feelings and experiences of subordination destroy self-respect, self-esteem and self-confidence and set limits on women's inspiration. In patriarchal society every courageous act that women perform to assert themselves is condemned as unfeminine. Norms and practices which define women as inferior to men, which impose controls on them are present everywhere such as social relations, religions, laws, schools, textbooks, media and so on.

Julliet Mitchell, a feminist psychologist uses the word patriarchy to refer to kinship systems in which men exchange women and to the symbolic power that fathers exercise within these systems. This power, she says, is responsible for the 'inferiorised' psychology of women. It is also a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.

All economic, political, religious, social and cultural institutions are by and large controlled by men. All these things are taken as pillars of patriarchy. This is well knit and deep-rooted in its system which makes it invincible and natural. But it is necessary to abolish this system which marginalizes females. It is necessary to avoid this patriarchy which has always taken female as inferior as any creature.

Seeking for Selfhood

The concept of selfhood and autonomy is closely related and inseparable. This is the concept opposite to objectivity. The concept 'autonomy' expresses the positive goal for feminist movement. The concept of autonomy is the freedom from domination regarding the bodies and lives, emerged as a struggle in the contest of body politics, the area where women's subordination and domination was most intimately and concretely experienced. Maria Mies says, "The feminist claim to autonomy . . . means a rejection of all tendencies to subsume the women's question and the women movement under some other apparently more

general theme or movement" (41). Self-hood and autonomy are associated with persons. We are autonomous to social process which brings us into being as self for ourselves and others.

There are so many concepts about selfhood and autonomy in the feminist movements. The independence, self determination of the individual women' or the right to individual choice. Women have united for their selfhood which is taken as the essential thing for women's development.

Self is the representation of 'I'. Women are in search of this self 'I'. Simone de Beauvoir says, "in sexuality and maternity. Woman as subject can claim autonomy; but to be a "true woman" she must accept herself as the other" (1000). Everyone is free to fulfill all her/his desires and needs that individual freedom is identical with the choice of the self-activity and subjectivity of the person. Maria Mies focuses her views on autonomy and says:

[. . .] [A]utonomy means the preservation of human essence in women [. . .]
[I]t is also a struggle concept which was developed to demonstrate the women wanted to separate from mixed male dominated organizations and to form their autonomous organizations, with their own analysis, programmes and methods. (40-41)

Selfhood is an essence which can be signified through signs of beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles. We take selfhood to be expressed through forms of representation which are organized by ourselves and by others. It is not a collection of characteristic that we belong to. It is something which is abstract; just we can feel it. Selfhood is a struggle to pressure and continue the possession and autonomy.

Suicide and Emancipation

Suicide is the act of intentionally taking one's own life. The act of suicide is condemned, and treated as a criminal act. But the person who commits suicide cannot think it as a thing of condemnation. It could be a form of protest against injustice, mistreatment and

keeping up one's honour rather than prostrating to enemy. Suicide occurs in different form by burning, taking overdose medicine; suicide by bombing, self immolation, hanging, drowning, jumping onto cliff and so on.

Throughout history, suicide has been both condemned and condoned by various societies. It is generally condemned by Islam, Judaism and Christianity and suicidal attempt is punishable by law in many countries. The Brahmans of India, and Nepal however, tolerate suicide; Satee, the theoretically voluntary suicide of Indian and Nepalese widows, was highly praised at one time even if it is now outlawed. In ancient Greece convicted criminals were permitted to take their own lives, but the Roman attitude toward suicide hardened toward the end of the empire. Jews committed suicide rather than submitting themselves to ancient Roman conquerors or to crusading knights. Buddhist monks and nuns have committed suicide by self-immolation as a form of social protest. Japanese custom of Seppuku (also called Hara-Kiri) or self-disablement was long practiced as a ceremonial rite among Samurai. Japan's use of kamikaze suicide bombers during World War-II was a precursor to the suicide bombing that came to be known in the late 20th century as a form of terrorism particularly, blamist, extremists and among secular nationalists such as Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and Heaven's Gate have committed mass suicide.

Permissiveness and the alienation experienced in modern society may be partly responsible for an increase in suicidal acts. Social and cultural pressures on the individual also push individual to commit suicide. Social factors such as bereavement, loneliness mental-depression, alienation and ennui of modern urban life as well as mental disorders and physical illness have been found to be positively correlated with suicide rates.

Emancipation is the consciousness in feeling, attitude and perception that change a person to the state of sublime thought. Interest and eagerness to understand and identify oneself is a fundamental characteristic of emancipation. Activists who fight for female

emancipation point at the injustice embodied in a social system in which women as a whole have to largely depend on men. We live in a world in which women do not have basic control over their body, economic sources, and social and political opportunities. Women are silenced and subordinated in many layers like in social, political, economic and cultural practices. These are specific, legal, cultural or religious practices by which women are systematically discriminated against, excluded from political participation and public life, segregated in their daily lives, reaped in armed conflict, beaten in their homes, denied equal divorce or inheritance rights, killed for sex, forced to marry, assaulted for not conforming to gender norms, and sold into forced labour.

Women need to get rid of such societal bias and discrimination to lead the life of equity and dignity. Only then society can move into progress and prosperity. Men and women should be mutually inclusive to form a society and world above all.

The thread of consciousness is so powerful in Plath's *The Bell Jar* that it turns such an emotional and sensational Esther into a quite active fellow. There are number of events in the novel that illustrate her sudden awareness, which ultimately lead her to commit suicide. The central character Esther in the novel thinks that by committing suicide she will get emancipation.

Esther does not mark maturity in the traditional way of fictional heroines, by marrying and beginning a family but by finding the strength to reject the conventional model of womanhood. She seems more sentimental in her inner wish and wants to live as a free human being. She wants individuality and freedom. She feels suffocated and unhappy in the male-centered world. So, she wants to commit suicide. She takes death as a means of emancipation. Then, as she transcends death, she becomes terrifyingly victorious, bold, defiant, fearless and radical. She seems as if she is going to burn down the entire male

hegemony within a second. She is aggressive towards male subjugation. So, she takes death or suicide as a way of emancipation.

III. Emancipation through Suicide

Esther's Search for Independent Life

In Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, there are adventures of a young woman, the protagonist Esther Greenwood who is an ambitious and promising writer in a male dominated society that will not let her achieve her true potentiality. Plath's alter ego, Esther, is thus driven to a nervous breakdown and attempts suicide numerous times. In many ways, this novel is a feminist text, centered on the struggles of a young woman who cannot achieve her goals in a male dominated society.

People close to Esther do not accept her talents as a poet and writer, but rather try to push her into traditionally more feminine roles. For example, Esther's mother repeatedly tries to convince her to learn shorthand but Esther rebels saying, "When I tried to picture myself in some job, briskly jotting down line after line of shorthand, my mind went blank" (100). Esther, unlike many other women of her time, refuses to be controlled by society's gender-based constraints: "The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself like the coloured arrows from a fourth of July rocket" (66). The phrase "infinite security" and "the place an arrow shoots off from" come from Mrs. Willard's description of the woman's role in society (58). It directly addresses Plath's central purpose in the novel, which is to look at the mental problems that can befall a woman with ambitions that the surrounding culture will not allow her to fulfill. This novel was published in 1963, towards the beginning of the 'feminist movement.' The events chronicled in this book, however, take place in 1953, in a period during which women's rights were not yet widely recognized in our society (208). The passage quoted above, and the emotions which it conveys are typical of a feminist like Esther, but Esther is ahead of her time and is thus unable to express herself to security in the way she wants. In the novel, Plath shows us the ways in which women were discriminated

against, through the eyes of a sensitive young artist. Through this she conveys the important message that actions such as these are morally incorrect and can lead the victims to experience unfortunate fates such as Esther's mental breakdown.

It is important to keep such things as this in mind when reading the novel and this feminist point of view is the central purpose of *The Bell Jar*. This autobiographical novel by Sylvia Plath follows this story of Esther Greenwood, a third year college student who spends her summer at a lady's fashion magazine in Manhattan. But despite her high expectations, Esther becomes bored with her work and uncertain about her own future. She even grows estranged from her traditional-minded boyfriend Buddy Willard, a medical student later diagnosed with TB. After returning to her hometown New England suburb Esther discovers that she was not selected to take a Harvard Summer school fiction course and subsequently starts to slip into depression. Esther is unable to perform her daily works. So, she decides to undergo a few sessions with Dr. Gordon, a psychiatrist and even undergoes treatments of electroshock therapy. As the depression sinks in, Esther becomes obsessive about suicide, and tries to kill herself by crawling into the cellar where she ingests a bottle of sleeping pills. Esther's attempt fails and she is taken to a city hospital and then over to Nolan, and eventually leaves the hospital as a transformed woman.

This transformation, spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation is exactly the kind of happy ending described by Fay Weldon. In *The Bell Jar* Sylvia Plath ends the book with the scene of Esther going to meet the doctors of the mental evaluation board. She is standing outside the room with Dr. Nolan, observing the people around her and making observations about herself.

Although the stigma of Esther's attempted suicide and hospitalization seems to free Esther from this less traditional behaviour. She becomes defiant, rejecting the previous morals and loses her virginity to a man she met on the stairs of Harvard's Winder Library.

These unmistakable threads of feminist thought which are interwoven within Esther's circumstances, clearly intensify Esther's bewilderment, disappointment, paranoia and apprehension. Esther describes herself optimistically for renewed life.

Plath begins with the outward circumstances of Esther's depression, her reactions to New York city, the Rosenberg trial, new acquaintances and her job as a college editor of *Mademoiselle* magazine and then moves inward and backward in time, revealing incidents from the past that are presumably related to Esther's anxiety. This mode of development is exemplified by Esther's progressive recognition of her isolation from other people and in her regression back to the time of her father's death. Her suicide attempt is a further regression; it is depicted as a retreat into the womb and nonentity. Plath begins with Esther's social oppression, the limitations on Esther's future ambitions because she is a woman moving to the specific threats against her creativity by friends and relatives, and finally, the ways in which she victimizes herself.

Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* recounts an adventure of a young woman who lives in a society as astoundingly modern, ambitious and promising person. However her depressed, disappointed, paranoiac and apprehensive life bears a complex character. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of the novel, the alter ego of Sylvia Plath, despite her consistent struggle against societal oppressive machineries which bar to women from pursuing an independent and dignified life, chooses to eliminate herself as way to get rid of male privileged society hoping optimistically to take a rebirth to live a renewed life-free from smell of male domination.

The protagonist of the novel, as it begins, lives her life in fashionable world, after winning a fashion magazine contest by writing essays, stories, poems and fashion blurbs. She gets a job in New York for a month. She works with "other girls with wealthy parents who

wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men could not get at them and deceive them" (3).

Esther would like to live differently as her friends in the fashion magazine. On the one hand, she wants to live a glamorous and glittering city life as Doreen, who is perpetually cynical and bemused and represents a mature and unhindered female sexuality and Betsy, the rather simple minded and wholesome beauty. While on the other hand, Esther seems quite indecisive and bewildered in her career. The intellectual life of the university where Esther ponders writing a thesis on *Finnegan's Wake*, contrasts with the shallow fashion pieces which, Esther is writing for the magazine. Esther is painfully incapable to reconcile conflicting desires, ambitions, and self-concepts. These divisions of the psyche eventually become so unbearable that she, in the final chapter of the novel, chooses the absolute way of committing suicide. She seeks relief, a cessation of the warring dualities that plague her throughout the novel.

Esther seems to be rebellious as she does not like to be confined within conventional social norms and values. She shows her rebellious nature when her mother adviser her to learn sewing, short hand cooking and dancing. Esther has different vision about life. She thinks that her life is not destined to be like that of a typical conventional woman. She says, "I hated the idea of serving men in anyway I waned to dictate my own thrilling letters. Besides, those little short hand symbols in the book my mother showed me seemed just as bad as lets equal time and lets equal the total distance" (79).

She wanted to take up an independent and professional life. Despite her vigorous enthusiasm towards the adoption of professional career, she was in the state of dilemma. Her mind was persistingly struggling to choose her career. She foresaw many careers to be adopted but couldn't decide what to choose. She says:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story from the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor [. . .] above these fig were many more figs I could not quite make out. (80)

The recurring theme of *The Bell Jar* appears in the above lines that the protagonist faces anxiety over her future and problem dealing with her own and others' sexuality. Plath relates Esther's anxieties over her future to more general problems with gender roles in the early fifties' society in which Esther lives; her problem is not that she believes she will be unsuccessful at whatever career she chooses, instead, part of the problem seems to be that she cannot reconcile a successful career that she may choose with the traditional gender roles of her society. Esther worries most that she cannot cook nor can take shorthand, for these are tasks traditionally performed by a wife or a female secretary.

Ironically, Esther worries about not being able to fulfill mundane duties rather than worrying about larger questions of what she does as a successful career woman. In essence, her problem is that she has too many options, but no satisfying option that can perform to what is traditionally expected of her. Thus she appears in the juncture of existential angst. She has fear of the unknown and confusion of what path to take out of the endless possibilities that lay ahead of her. The fear of unknown and confused future leads her to dark depression. She sits paralyzed with indecision and this paves her way to madness and neurotic indecision.

Esther's Struggle to Escape from *The Bell Jar*

A sense of confinement permeates the novel which is represented by *The Bell Jar* that forms the title of the book. *The Bell Jar* is a symbol of suffocation, for the jar intends to

preserve its ornamental contents but instead traps them in stale air. *The Bell Jar* as she said, "[h]ung, Suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air" (227). The symbolic image of *The Bell Jar*, an image of being cut off from the rest of the world, shielded from outside stress but also imprisoned within her own sour air. It is not only metaphor for isolation and psychosis, but also is closely associated with the images of dead babies in the glass jar and hence linked to Esther's infantophobia. A convergence of these two images that of *the bell jar* and that of the dead baby- produces one of the most telling expressions of her anguish: "to the person in *the bell jar*, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself a bad dream" (250). Here Esther is no longer an outsider observing someone else's baby. She herself is the dead baby. She conjures up the dead baby as her personal emblem because "she fears that she too is still-rebirth "stopped" not yet fully born" (251). The revulsion she has felt at babies in bottles and babies in prams and babies with or without teeth is part of revulsion she feels toward herself; maternity presents the most fearful of all threats, not only because of the social implications it has all women, but because she has not yet given birth to herself.

Esther could not be able to cultivate her potentiality into full bloom that the societal phenomena and structure obstruct her way to move ahead with. She needs to finish off the life she's living and take a rebirth-by annihilating herself.

Esther's sense of alienation from the world around her comes from the expectation placed upon her as a young woman living in 1950s America. Esther feels pulled between her desire to write and the pressure she feels to settle down and start a family. While Esther's intellectual talents earn her prizes, scholarship, name and fame, many people around her society assume her to be a wife and give birth to pack of children-being a mother. She is hung between two ends. The girls at her college mock at her studiousness and only show her respect when she begins dating a handsome and well liked boy. Her relationship with Buddy Willard, a medical student who likes her very much, earns her mother's approval and

everyone expects Esther to marry him. Buddy Willard is a product of male-dominated society and of conventional type, who assumes that Esther will drop her poetic ambitions as soon as she becomes a mother. Esther also assumes that she cannot be both mother and poet. Esther longs to live beyond societal expectation that society denies her. The society is plagued with conventional modes and mores which belittle women's dignity and status.

In the very society being female and being fully human are mutually exclusive things. The very core meaning we can find in Plath's journals as "Being born woman is my awful tragedy" (qtd. in Yalom 30). Esther is living in the same way there. She longs to have adventures, particularly sexual adventures that society denies her. She decides to reject Buddy when she realizes that he represents a sexual double standard. He has an affair with a waitress while dating Esther but expects her to remain virgin until she marries him. Esther takes her first sexual experience as a crucial step toward independence and adulthood, but she seeks this experience not for her own pleasure but rather to relieve herself of her burdensome virginity. Esther feels anxiety about her future because she can see only mutually exclusive choice: virgin or whore, submissive married woman or successful but a lonely career woman. She dreams of a larger life, but the stress even of dream worsens her madness.

Esther observes gap between what society says she should experience and what she does experience and this gap intensifies her madness. Society expects woman of Esther's age as a station to act cheerful, flexible and confident which Esther feels she must express as her natural gloom, cynicism and dark humour. She feels she cannot discuss or think about the dark spots in life that plague her: personal failure, suffering and death. She knows that the world of fashion she inhabits in New York should make her feel glamorous and happy but she finds it filled with poison, drunkenness and violence. Women are supposed to be romantic and meaningful but they are marked by misunderstanding, distrust and brutality. Esther almost continuously feels that her reactions are way or that she is the only one to view

the world as she does and eventually she begins to feel a sense of unreality. This sense of unreality grows until it becomes unbearable and attempted suicide following madness. Her struggles and triumphs seem more heroic than conventional achievements. Her desire to die rather than live a false life can be interpreted as dignified and noble deed.

Esther's relationship with other characters or any of the various predicaments she undergoes indulges her self in moral concern. A chief character who resorts Esther to be revengeful and subsequent mental breakdown is Buddy Willard. He occupies a significant place in Esther's life. He is a symbol of deflated expectations. Esther's disappointment is motivated first by hypocrisy of a social double standard that gives him the privilege of pre-marital sex but denies women the same freedom of sexual expression. Secondly, her disappointment born of an idealistic treatment of Buddy as she considers him as "the most wonderful boy" she has ever seen. She is provoked to vengeance by Buddy's frequent threats to her creativity. He dismisses the more artistic and literary mind of Esther and degrades a poem as "a piece of dust" (58). Esther could not bear the embarrassing remark of Buddy about her poetic creation. She refutes it hard as she says:

So are the cadavers you cut up so are the people you think you're curing.
They're dust as dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together [. . .]. People were made of nothing so much as dust, and I couldn't see that doctoring all that dust was a bit better than writing poems people would remember and repeat to themselves when they were unhappy or sick and couldn't sleep. (59)

He is an effect of repression that Esther faces. Thus, Plath presents Esther's depressions as a result of the inequities of the double standard and male usurpation and abuse of female creative powers. Plath seems to have gained a new and what we might call feminist awareness of how her life has been shaped under male domination.

She compares her friendship with Buddy as fairytale and thinks of her relationship only in terms of a single kiss. This repression additionally relates to the sense of confinement that Esther feels. Plath focuses on Esther's view on sexuality which she approaches from this very divergent perspective. The perspective is a clinical and medical view of sexuality shown by Esther's visit with Buddy to the hospital ward. The second is more idealistic and more sense of sexuality as demonstrated by her reaction to Buddy's disclosure that he had an affair with the waitress. Plath uses intense medical imagery often grotesque to portray this first perspective on sexuality. She perceives this in terms of precaution that ends in either painful agonizing childbirth in the macabre still births that she sees in bottles at the hospital. This also confirms Esther's view on sexuality as related to violence and pain earlier established during the incident with Doreen and Lenny. This perspective on sexuality comes from Buddy Willard himself. He seems more and more responsible for Esther's dissatisfaction with the world. He treats her as childish and foolish. His teaching to Esther about the male body is both offensive and presumptuous. He places himself as superior to her because he believes that Esther will certainly be his wife someday. This behaviour depresses her too much time and again. It is not only thought of Buddy but the males in general, who think themselves superior and mete out violence upon females. Esther thinks Buddy living a double life.

Esther has understood that marriage and children constitute for some women, like herself, the ultimate entrapment. Esther has obsessive fear to maternal life-which leads her to both as a symptom of mental illness and a reasonable reaction to the genuine threat that motherhood entails for creative women. She considers that women who embrace maternity are dupes of male treachery, unaware of what they have abandoned in the process. Esther is acutely aware of the danger that motherhood presents to her creative self. Her boy friend's naïve comment that after she becomes a mother she "would not want to write poems any where" leads her to reflect that having children "was like being brainwashed, and afterward

you went about numb as a slave in private, totalitarian state" (69). An example can be drawn from her maternal mindlessness in the figure of Dodo Conway, the mother of six, on the verge of a seventh, who parades her baby carriage up and down the street before Esther's home. Esther's reactions to Dodo are highly revealing "Dodo interested me inspite of myself [. . .] I watched Dodo wheel the youngest Conway up and down. She seemed to be doing it for my benefit children make one sick" (123).

On the one hand, Dodo incarnates the bovine immanence of woman as flesh, acquiescing to the dictum that biology is destiny. She embodies those patriarchal values with which most women collude in becoming mothers. On the other hand, Esther has stood alone in her determination not to become brainwashed like her female contemporaries. She flatly rejects their conception inherited from patriarchal social traditions and norms. Certainly this sense of being different even if the difference is consciously assumed, contributes to Esther's increasing state of alienation. She lives in an era and culture that delimits the roles that a woman is expected and allowed to assure. She is despaired of becoming someone's wife and mother only to peace within the suffocating isolation of a bell jar, her brain and her career aspiration. In this regard the following lines best illustrate the society that she lives and its expectation towards women:

I tried to imagine what it would be like if Constantin were my husband. It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about my nightgown and curlers after he'd left for work to wash up the dirty plates make the bed, [. . .]. This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A 's, but I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself. (88)

The situation she symbolically calls a bell jar in which she is living. It is emblematic of her feeling that she envisioned of such an existence would be nothing less than a life sentence of cruel and unusual punishment.

In the same way, inhuman and shocking treatment of Esther in hospital is responsible for her depression, madness and suicide respectively. The first breakdown occurs to Esther because of her established indecision concerning her career. She attempts to kill herself by skiing, using sleeping pills, drowning, hanging but she cannot get success, and unnoticedly she is led to the hospital for electroshock treatment. In course of her treatment instead of dealing with Esther's problems calmly Dr. Gordon merely prescribes shock therapy for her, shifting her to another doctor. This may be seen as additional evidence of the misogyny that Esther faces. At that time Esther considers suicide attempt as more explicit and imminent. Esther tries various methods to make an attempt, thus implying that the actual attempt will occur quite soon. Esther faces the dehumanizing aspect of the hospital where the patients are described in entirely inhuman terms.

Esther's obsession with their case is linked to the shock treatment she is given, which she does not see as a therapy but as a punishment for some terrible, unknown crime:

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 a split plant. I
wondered what terrible it was that I had done. (151)

It is as if God, bent down to smite her, Esther wants to confess to a priest, to be cleansed of her sins, and at one point, even thinks of entering a nunnery; but she has no idea what her 'sins' are. Later she tells her nervous unitarian minister, who has come to call on her in the mental asylum, that she believes in hell. Dr. Godron gives poor treatment to Esther because

of her gender. He, furthermore, shifts her to another doctor for treatment. Esther loathes Dr. Gordon's treatment and his indifference and carelessness. He barely speaks to her. He once asks her which college she attends. And only after twenty one days' treatment in the hospital, she receives there neither love nor compassion. She feels all treatment and behaviour of doctors and people dehumanizing. Esther describes the patients there in entirely inhuman terms. Although first believing them to be inanimate, then she compares them to birds and finally mannequins; there is the omnipresent sense that Esther has entered a strange and horrific world foreign to her.

Plath develops the parallels between the mental hospital and Esther's normal society. Esther's hospital ward essentially replicates the social order of the outside world. Even in an asylum, Esther cannot escape this fashionable society in which catty gossip and trends reign; these women do not have any concrete concerns, but rather manifest greater interest in their image in society as when Mrs. Savage panics over jeopardizing her daughters' debutante status. While on the other hand the torturous and suffocating environment in her society resembles with dark, dreary nauseating environment of mental hospital. Esther is troubled by the arrogance of the doctor and their lack of sympathy. Doctors in the mental hospital are self-satisfied, unsympathetic and deaf to the pain and suffering of patients. Rather they prescribe traumatic and unhelpful shock therapy treatment. The rude and excruciating treatment that the doctors adopt towards Esther brings her to the brink of death. Esther tries to commit suicide at the hospital for several times but fails.

At the end of the novel, Esther is rejuvenated but her problems get unresolved and they are as usual. She may commit suicide at any time which is already set in her mind. She believes in life after death which will be free from all repression and bondage. So she thinks she will get freedom after death and challenges the whole society.

Esther, leaving Dr Gordon's hospital, is shifted to another hospital under the surveillance of Dr. Nolan, who seems sympathetic to her and does not recommend electrotherapy initially. But later, Esther finds her indifference and carelessness to her. Esther feels incredibly betrayed. She calls it the "barefaced treachery" of Dr. Nolan. Later on, Dr. Nolan gives Esther over to miss Huey, a very tall woman who prepares her for the treatment, Esther does not differentiate between the two doctors to who she has been entrusted for her treatment. She says, "I thought the doctors must be in it together, and that somewhere in this hospital, in a hidden corner, there reposed a machine exactly like Doctor Gordon's ready to jolt me out of my skin" (200). The behaviour of Dr. Nolan, the nurse and other fellow patients depress her and she is traumatized.

She is unable to bear further traumatic behaviour and tortures and again slips away from hospital to take a long walk. On the way, she receives awful and ugly picture in newspaper with humiliating words about her saying, "SCHOLARSHIP GIRL MISSING MOTHER WORRIED", "SLEEPING PILLS FEARED MISSING WITH GIRL", "GIRL FOUND ALIVE!"(211). These newspaper clips further bring her to suicide meditation. She says, "Oh I thought it would be easier to kill myself in New York" (211). She cultivates bitter resentment to doctors, nurses and people around her. She does not even spare to her mother too. She says:

My mother was worst. She never scolded me, but kept begging me, with sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong. She said she was sure that the doctors thought she had something because they asked her a lot of questions about my toilet training and I had been perfectly trained at a very early age and given her no trouble whatever. (215)

Esther even rejects mother's rose to soothe to her at St. Valentine day, and also her birth day and retorts her mother to save the rose for her funeral. Then she dumps the roses in the waste basket.

Esther's treatment does not end with Dr. Nolan. She is again transferred to Belsize. Despite Esther's unwillingness, she goes there. She is confided that she would get more privileges and freedom for reading, walking, shopping and so on. She goes there and meets her friend Joan Gilling, a former girlfriend of Buddy Willard and Esther's friend. Both of them suffer with psychic problems and attempt to commit suicide earlier. A few days later, Joan commits suicide by hanging. This event shocks Esther severely. Esther too is invited to attend funeral procession. She wonders and foresees her death is coming and says that "during the simple funeral service I wondered that what I thought I was burying" (256). Esther meditates that she, too, soon will meet the same fate. She finds her heart beating and believes that she would be following the same path. "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (256).

She further envisions that the death would be nearing and she has made up her mind to commit suicide as she becomes utterly hopeless and despaired in the world. She foresees that she will be rejuvenated in the next birth like a phoenix. Her self destructive impulse becomes active when she thinks herself powerless; internally she is frail and erratic and externally she could not fight against male-dominated society and can not triumph over and punish perpetrators. In the final scene,-she says, "But I was not getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (257).

Esther's Achievement of Emancipation

The society and social aspects like religion, laws and other social institutions favor the male where females are taken as servile creatures. In such society, revolution by a single

woman is an impossible thing. Here in case of Plath, they do not take seriously enough her fundamental bitterness and rage against a life situation in which she finds that being female and being fully human were mutually exclusive. This is the core meaning of the statement found in her journals that "being born a woman is my awful tragedy" (qtd. in Yalom 30). Her novel *The Bell Jar* considers the existential dimensions of the author-heroine's experiences. The protracted and early death of her father that flooded her with lifelong anxiety; the rite of passage into adulthood necessitating choice and forcing the discovery of her own aging process, and the escape into madness and a reaction to intolerable internal and external stress leads her to the bitter predicament that she reflects in Esther.

The main character Esther Greenwood, a third year college student, becomes bored with her work and uncertain about her own future despite her high expectations. She even grows estranged from her traditional minded boyfriend Buddy Willard, a medical student later diagnosed with TB. After returning to her home town New England suburb, Esther discovers that she was not selected to take a Harvard Summer School fiction course and subsequently starts to slip into depression. She finds herself unable to concentrate and perform daily tasks. She becomes obsessive about suicide and tries to kill herself by crawling into cellar where she subsequently ingests a bottle of sleeping pills. She thinks that committing suicide is the prelude to a rediscovery of self expedited electric-shock treatment in an institution. In her mental-illness she always thinks about suicide or death wish. All the imagery of the book suggests that Esther envisages that death would provide an opportunity for rebirth or emancipation from this world. When she plays skiing she plunges down the great slope with reckless delight, "People and trees receded on either hand like the dark side of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still white point at the end of it [. . .] the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly" (102). When she does try to commit suicide the action is also experienced as a return to a dark, comfortable womblike retreat- in fact she does creep into a

hidden hole in a cellar and takes sleeping pills. The subsequent experience echoes the precipitous feeling of her skiing: "I was being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel in the earth" (103). In Esther's case she does finally come out at that white point at the end of the tunnel so that the almost- death is turned into a kind of second birth.

Esther Greenwood is painfully incapable of reconciling conflicting desires, ambitions and self concepts. These divisions of the psyche eventually become so unbearable that Esther chooses the suicidal attempt in the hope of freedom. She feels suffocation and does not see any hope for living life. She cannot achieve her goal in spite of her potentiality in the male-dominated society and is driven to nervous breakdown. She is unable to choose career path whether to be a submissive woman or a successful but a lonely career woman. People around her-- even her mother and friend-- try to push her into mere feminine role and both roles are incompatible for her and slips in depression which leads her to commit suicide. Still Esther is hopeful for new life after death. For her death is not perceived as suicidal ending but as the path to gain a transformed identity. Her suicidal ending and transformed self help her transcend death. Her suicidal urge reflects the reaches of her personal turmoil. She seems to reach the fusion of death and rebirth. She accepts suicidal course, yet she is able to transcend death itself and get rebirth. This pattern of self annihilation transcendence - rebirth boldly presents, firstly, the transcendence of the old, confining order that marginalizes the women's freedom and existence; secondly the creation of a new free self and a new world of femininity. Therefore, *The Bell Jar* is a document of extremity of the woman's pain and her aspiration for a free world. This aspiration for a free world also can be seen in her poem 'Ariel'. Plath has written a great deal of poetry which presents the author in the midst of what proved to be her final and finally successful suicide attempt.

Thus, Esther Greenwood is an androgynous woman for whom all men appear as devil. Her only aim is to eliminate all men from the world and to achieve the emancipation from

traditional patriarchal chain. She is certainly a distorted woman, nevertheless, autonomous, free and self-dependent one. Her agony and pain are so torturous that her death is nothing dearer at all but a means that frees her from suffering. She is more vigorous and seems hurtling to gain a new sunrise after death. She thinks death will bring change and freedom because she is quite revengeful at patriarchy.

IV. Conclusion

There are many ideas to interpret the literary texts. The critics analyze the same text from many stand points. The interpretation of the text depends upon the eyes of the critics. Because of this, Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* has also analyzed and observed in various stand points from autobiography to female confinement, a woman's lonesome struggle for madness and her existence to sexuality and violence and madness, and suicide meditation to women emancipation. Above all, it is a representative feminist text revealing a woman- - career woman, who contradicts societal hypocrisy, conventions and mores - - her self-absorbed expectation to be a professional writer and her inability to fight in tooth and nail against the patriarchal world. As a result, she chooses death for emancipation.

Esther, Plath's protagonist, struggles hard to establish her own identity and authority for the creation of a new free self and a new world of femininity. Esther considers struggles and triumphs seem more heroic than conventional achievements. The society in which Esther lives is patriarchal where women have internalized their stereotypical roles that mark their own marginalization. They are complacent with their submissive roles, motherliness and domesticated, having dull as well as nullified existence. They comply with what patriarchy wishes them to do. They are oblivious to their social, economic, cultural and conceptual injustices. The characters like Mrs. Willard, Dodo Conway, Mrs. Savage, Jay Cee, Jody, Mrs. Ockenden can be seen as such type of women. All male characters who seem to be villains are products of the society. They regard women as petty creatures and subordinate class, a sex object, having a puppet-like existence, a thing to be exploited. Buddy Willard, Dr. Gordon, Lenny shepherd, Mr. Manzi, Mr. Marco and others are the representatives of patriarchy trying to hold sway over the female characters.

Esther, unlike many women of her time, refuses to be controlled by society's gender-based constraints; she performs contradictions. Despite mother's advice to learn shorthand, embroidery and homely jobs, she chooses to be a writer. She every time shows her revolutionary thoughts and behaviours, flatly refuting what her society assumes her to be. She finds sea of hurdles to persue her career as an independent woman. She grows frustration that resorts to madness. Her madness appears as metaphor for the absurdity of life, absurdity brought to light in felt contradiction and frustration. Her madness is the product of victimization, uncertainty, powerlessness of woman as self. The madness is chosen as a revolt against normality when normality can no longer support a life that includes joy, freedom and imagination.

Plath seems strongly haunted by age-old repression and discrimination of patriarchy. She chooses her destiny as death. From the remains of her death she rejuvenates her life, freedom and individuality. She leads her heroine, her alter ego; Esther, to the path of freedom. Her idea of self-natured, self-annihilation, self-destruction and self immolation comes as the devastation of the patriarchal construction. Her death as a form of self-consciously committed suicide, does not annihilate life, rather it functions to rejuvenate herself as phoenix, a mythic semiotic that death brings rejuvenation and new life creation. By destroying the body she acts as a metamorphosis—a transcendence of death. She believes that her death is a nullification of patriarchy and male hegemony. It is the right solution for the beginning of beautiful world of the nullified for the beginning of beautiful world of the nullified women – a feminine world free from masculine prejudices and discrimination. Esther, though distorted, depressed and alienated, she is autonomous, free and self-dependent. Her agony and pain are so torturous that she attempts to commit suicide a dozen of times but cannot get success. For her death is nothing dearer at all but a means that frees her from suffering, recreates her history and remakes herself.

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