

## Identity Crisis and Quest for Self-Autonomy in *The Bell Jar*

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**Abstract:** *Identity crisis has been a long-discussed topic in English literature and it is vastly connected with the notion of self-autonomy. Most of the works of Sylvia Plath—regarded as one of the dynamic and controversial poets of the twentieth century—centre around the themes of identity crisis and self-autonomy that are intricately woven into the fabric of twentieth-century English literature. Through the character of Esther Greenwood in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar (1963), this paper investigates how identity crisis takes its origin in the psyche of Plath's heroine, a middle-class woman coming of age in 1950s America. Moreover, this paper equally shows what role the ideology of cultural containment of 1950s America has played in fracturing Esther's self-esteem and sense of individuality. The researcher has reasoned that Esther's individual suffering transcends the immediate vicinity of her personal space and resonates with the struggles that the female population of that time went through, thus making it a generic experience which has become a predominant issue of discussion in the modern era. Finally, the researcher demonstrates the ways via which Esther is able to win back her personalized identity and autonomy, though not fully but partially.*

**Keywords:** *Identity crisis, Self-autonomy, Mental illness*

### Introduction

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, centres around a meritorious yet psychologically disturbed nineteen-year-old undergraduate student Esther Greenwood who struggles to climb the social ladder and find her identity in the 1950s America. During that time, Esther's immediate social scenarios had primarily been dominated by

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patriarchal values and the ideology of cultural confinement. And such invisible but constantly present social and cultural barriers force Esther to adopt camouflaging to fit in and find her standing or identity in society and eventually, causing her to slip into the pit hole of depression. Thus, camouflaging and mental illness go hand in hand in *The Bell Jar* and consequently, Esther loses control over herself—her body and mind remain misaligned and she sees the world through a distorted lens.

Esther seems to be a humorous, straightforward and perhaps, slightly neurotic adolescent. She suffers from the pangs of inadequacy and mental derangement and disregards all her prizes and scholarships. Slowly and gradually, she lets herself slide into the abyss of suicidal thoughts and eventually, loses authority over her original identity and autonomy.

She is tossed between the thoughts of marriage, children and becoming a famous poet, but does not know what to do or what is wrong with her and so feels very still and very empty and depressed by her own silence. And gradually, Esther develops a morbid fascination to “kill something” inside her that stays concealed somewhere else, deeper, more hidden and a whole harder to get at. Maybe her grim and chilling desire to kill herself takes its roots in the glamorous city of New York when she arrives there to work as a guest editor at a fashion magazine called *Ladies' Day* and comes into fruition in her hometown Boston, but Esther has been a psychologically disturbed person all along and she has been further broken down by conservative social conventions. She has even been ill-treated by the healthcare system of that time.

*The Bell Jar* depicts the horrific tale of its protagonist's dropping down into schizophrenic hell and her initial steps towards psychological healing. The narrator begins the novel as “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they executed the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions” (Plath, 1963, p.1). A pessimistic and gloomy tone is strung in the first few sentences of this novel and from this narration it can be assumed that Esther feels like an outsider and criminal from the beginning of this novel. She further states, “The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, I could not help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves” (Plath, 1963, pp.1-2). The execution of

Rosenbergs has been a political issue in America as they were accused of being spies for the Soviet Union and stealing American atomic secrets. And it is assumed that Rosenbergs' supposed crime is vastly questionable and they have received harsh and inhuman punishment.

It is evident that Esther does not see 1950s America as a reasonable or a caring place, but rather as a façade hiding darkness, discrimination and suffering such as the approaching execution of the Rosenbergs. Moreover, Esther's self-harming and morbid inner thoughts at the beginning of the novel prove her to be a psychologically disturbed individual and her unhealthy obsession with Rosenbergs directly reflects her inner disturbance. However, despite appearing lost and purposeless and occasionally, adopting camouflaging or fake identities to hide her true self, Esther has been well-aware of the hollowness of cultural confinement and the irrationality of patriarchal norms. It has been one of the key reasons why she has been able to redeem her identity, fight back against patriarchal norms and values and take the road to self-recovery.

#### Problem Statement and Research Question

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a novel that explores the themes of identity crisis and the quest for self-autonomy. The novel tells the story of Esther Greenwood, a young woman who is struggling with her identity and her place in the world. Through Esther's journey, Plath explores the themes of mental illness, gender roles, and the search for individuality. The concept of identity crisis is central to the novel. She is uncertain about her future and her role in society. Esther feels disconnected from the world around her and is unsure of who she is or what she wants. She is plagued by feelings of emptiness and confusion, and she is searching for meaning in her life. This search for identity is a common theme in literature, and Plath explores it in a unique and compelling way. In addition to identity crisis, the novel also explores the theme of the quest for self-autonomy. Esther is a young woman who desires to assert herself and find her own voice. She is constantly surrounded by people, from her mother to the doctors, who try to control her. Esther is determined to break free from these constraints and find her own path in life. Her quest for self-autonomy is a powerful and inspiring theme that resonates with readers of all ages.

Esther's struggles with mental illness are a central part of the novel, and Plath's depiction of this illness is both honest and compassionate. Plath's own struggles with mental illness are well documented, and she brings a personal and intimate perspective to the topic. Through Esther's experiences, Plath explores the stigma and shame that are often associated with mental illness, as well as the difficulties of receiving appropriate treatment and support. Gender roles are also a prominent theme in the novel. Esther is living in a time when women were expected to conform to traditional roles and expectations. She is constantly battling against these expectations, both in her personal life and in her professional ambitions. Plath's portrayal of Esther's struggles highlights the limitations and frustrations that women of her time faced, as well as the courage and determination required to break free from these constraints.

Throughout the novel, Plath explores the search for individuality and the need to find meaning in life. Esther's experiences are a reflection of the human condition, and her struggles are universal. Through her journey, readers are reminded of the importance of staying true to oneself and pursuing one's passions, even in the face of obstacles and adversity.

This paper deals with the core problem of mental illness emanating from social malady as depicted in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. It has made an attempt to analyse the psychology of the protagonist in order to bring to light the identity crisis that she was suffering from and her efforts to achieve self-autonomy in an adverse atmosphere. The research questions may be put forth in the following terms:

- What kind of mental disturbance was the protagonist suffering from?
- How was the protagonist searching for self-autonomy to overcome her identity crisis?

### Literature Review

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* has been the subject of much critical analysis and scholarly discussion. Many scholars have examined the novel's themes, symbolism, and narrative structure, as well as its place within the larger context of modernist literature. In his book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997) Harold Bloom argues that Plath's work, including *The Bell Jar* is an example of strong misreading of the work of earlier poets, including T.S. Eliot and

W.B. Yeats. He argues that Plath's work is characterized by a poetics of excess that challenges traditional literary conventions. Elaine Showalter in her book *The Female Malady analyzes The Bell Jar* as a representation of the cultural and social pressures faced by women in the 1950s. She argues that Esther's struggles with mental illness are a reflection of the constraints and limitations placed on women during this time (Showalter, 1987). Anne Sexton, a poet friend of Plath, in a letter to Plath, praised *The Bell Jar* calling it "a great piece of work, a haunting and honest book, and one that will be read for a long time to come." Sexton's admiration for Plath's work is indicative of the influence that Plath has had on later writers Sexton (2004).

In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose, a literary critic and feminist theorist, examines the ways in which Plath's work reflects the cultural and psychological anxieties of the postwar era. She argues that *The Bell Jar* is a deeply personal and autobiographical work that speaks to the universal experiences of alienation and despair (Rose, 2014). In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, feminist literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine the ways in which women writers have been marginalized and excluded from the literary canon. They argue that *The Bell Jar* is a significant work because it challenges traditional notions of femininity and explores the psychological complexities of women's experiences (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000).

The 1950s America was considered to be a very rigid and conservative place, especially for the female writers who wanted to project their artistic capabilities without any restriction or hesitation. Such a fearless and talented writer was Sylvia Plath, who was born to Otto and Aurelia Plath in the year 1932 and spent her childhood days in the humble seaport town of Winthrop, Massachusetts. She lost her father at the age of eight and moved to Wellesley, Boston with her mother and maternal grandparents. Sylvia Plath had been a brilliant student since her childhood and attained a scholarship to study at the prestigious Smith College. As a testimony to her excellence, she was invited to serve as a guest editor for a women's magazine named *Mademoiselle* in New York, and soon after returning from there to Wellesley to spend the rest of the summer with her family, she suffered a nervous breakdown and attempted suicide. Thus, *The Bell Jar*, set in 1953, mirrors a close resemblance with the unfortunate events that had transpired in the life of its author.

Published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas on January 14, 1963, the novel in its first phase of publication garnered few positive reviews. Plath used a pen-name to protect the identities of the individuals portrayed in this novel, which contains many palpable autobiographical elements and so. It has been considered a semi-autobiographical novel. Sadly, a few weeks after the novel appeared, Sylvia Plath committed suicide on February 12, 1963, at the age of thirty-one—gassing herself to death and drawing an unfortunate conclusion to her life.

Sylvia Plath has been regarded as a very enigmatic writer and her first and only published novel *The Bell Jar* offers an intimate view into her prolific yet psychologically disturbed mind and mostly into her creative persona. Author Edward Butscher writes, "*The Bell Jar is more than personal vendetta. It is a solid masterpiece of sardonic satire and sincere protest, an authentic American novel about the disintegration of America*" (Butscher, 1975). The novel is modern in style and sarcastic and pessimistic in tone, but it establishes Plath as an unyielding force via her heroine Esther Greenwood who displays remarkable commitment to become an intellectual, puts up a solid resistance to marriage and motherhood and bravely desires to morph into a refined poet.

Identity crisis and self-autonomy are two different concepts but they are very intricately related and these two concepts persist throughout *The Bell Jar*. Identity crisis leads Esther to see her surroundings in an imbalanced, apathetic manner—eventually, leading her to build a false façade and formulate multiple personae to fit in. She can be called an "other-directed" person according to the analysis that sociologist David Riesman has provided in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). Riesman writes, "the other-directed person wants to be loved rather than esteemed" (Riesman, 1950). And the other-directed person is determinedly in search of the recognition of others regarding what they have achieved, earned, owned, consumed, and believed in. Hence, their unique and original autonomy is negatively compromised.

The identity crisis poisons an individual's mind with feelings of frustration, of being stuck and lacking a meaningful progression. An identity crisis can be defined as a "personal psychosocial conflict." And especially, during the adolescent years; in such a phase or limbo (an uncertain period) an individual suffers from confusion and delusion regarding his/her social role and often a

sense of loss of continuity to one's personality is also involved with this state of confusion. According to psychologist Erik Erikson (1902-1994), an identity crisis is a certain period (particularly during the adolescent years) of concentrated analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself (expansion of self-concept).

The concepts of identity crisis and self-autonomy vastly influence an individual's psychological dimension. The term self-autonomy or personal autonomy is defined as "a person's sense of self-determination, of being able to make choices regarding the direction of his or her actions, including the freedom to pursue those actions" (Personal Autonomy, Encyclopedia.com, 2022). Self-autonomy is essential for healthy and adequate interpersonal and intrapersonal functioning and it guarantees an individual's sense of self-worth. According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: "Individual autonomy is an idea that is generally understood to refer to the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces, to be in this way independent" (Christman, 2020). The concept of individual/personal/self-autonomy has remained a central theme of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. It is an interesting but relatively unexplored area which demands serious investigation.

#### Objectives of the Research

The general objective of the research is to shed light on the nature of identity crisis that the protagonist was facing in her personal life, which drove her to make a frantic search for self-autonomy that might make her life appear meaningful. The study has two specific objectives:

- (a) to focus on the defining characteristics of identity crisis and self-autonomy, and
- (b) to explain how the stated psychological traits were manifested in the life of the protagonist.

### Rationale of the Study

The study is significant for having intention and inspiration to generate knowledge of the extreme mechanization of American society and the problems the citizens face there. A mechanical system often proves unfavourable for life, putting people in tremendous mental stress. The novel is remarkable for its address of psychological problems typically arising in urbanized structure. Written in the first-person point of view, *The Bell Jar* shows us how mentally ill and emotionally alienated individuals are forced to see the world through the slanted and inverted glass of *the bell jar* and feel suffocated and choked in their imaginative airless jar. The novel tells the tale of Esther's progressive self-fragmentation and mental breakdown and her partial recovery at the end of the novel. She, despite all her hardships, hears the old brag of her heart I am, I am, I am—considering herself to have been born twice and patched, trampled and approved for the road. Very few research has been found on Sylvia Plath's identity crisis and quest for self-autonomy, so the theme needs to be deeply explored, which justifies the current study.

### Methodology of the Study

The study is qualitative in nature using interpretative, descriptive and explanatory methodology. A qualitative method accommodates a number of first-hand experiential materials. It explores both the objective nature and subjective interpretations of individual attitude, behaviour, impulses and reaction to phenomenon, events or situations. Following these imperatives, this research uses mainly text and content analysis approaches for data collection and analyses. Exhaustive descriptions followed by critical discussion in light of the existing principles or theories in the related areas have been pursued. The text of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath has been the primary source and all books, articles and websites, used in the research, have been considered secondary sources of information.

### Identity Crisis and Quest for Self-Autonomy

The title of the novel, *The Bell Jar*, “is a symbol of society's limitations and confused messages that trapped Sylvia Plath's heroine, Esther Greenwood,



inside a home, isolating her from the rest of the society” (Orestes J, 2015). Esther never completely develops a strong sense of identity and she later rushes into comparing herself with the people (mostly women) around her. She states, “I feel very still and empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo” (Plath, 1963, p.3). Her witty and a little absurd usage of diction and metaphors displays her emotional emptiness and how disoriented and alienated she feels.

This period is crucial for an individual because during this time every person goes through the process of self-discovery and identity formation. However, the existing paradigms—to have a successful career, to become a wife and mother and to explore beyond and above—weigh too heavy on Esther’s psychological balance and she is compelled to split into pieces like a silver mercury ball, only to be pushed into one whole piece again.

Esther comes to New York as an aspirational young woman, a conformist whose principal intention is to “have the time of her life,” but as her time in New York comes to an end, she discovers a contrary truth: to become an autonomous person and find her true self. However, ironically, she sees her life branching out before her like the green fig tree, and sitting at the crotch of the fig tree, Esther imagines starving herself to death as she cannot decide which of the figs to choose from, and then, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one they plop to the ground at her feet.

“This inner division ultimately leads to the fissuring of her identity, a diversion from normal functioning to mental derangement” (Axelrod, 2010). Due to such psychological conflict and in an attempt to escape from her reality, she generates a false name or identity Elly Higginbottom that appears more real to Esther than her own true name.

Esther is accustomed to winning prizes, grants and good marks; however, eventually out of her disappointments and frustration she says, “After nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race” (Plath, 1963, p.27). Hence, the novel emphasizes that due to the pressure of conforming to social conventions, she slowly starts to lose sense of herself and is unable to recognize her own feature in the mirror as she notices that “a big,

smudgy-eyed Chinese woman” (Plath, 1963, p.27) is staring into her face. She additionally invents false identities by posing as Elly Higginbottom in front of her friend Doreen and her boyfriend Lenny Shepard, a disc jockey.

Esther’s split identity is signified by the motif of the fig tree occurring in *The Bell Jar*. In the Bible, the fig symbolises prosperity and fulfilment. However, here, this fig-free becomes a symbol of torment for Esther. She says, “I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet” (Plath, 1963, p. 73). She knows that each fig represents a different life and life choices and eventually, they all are doomed to fall.

According to critic Diane S. Bonds, “Plath’s novel dramatizes the collusion between the notion of a separate and separative self (or unbounded, autonomous subject) and the cultural forces that have oppressed women” (Bonds, 1990). During the 1950s the ideology of cultural confinement had been ingrained in the social milieu of America, especially in American suburban areas where women were expected and taught to take up the role of ideal homemakers and mothers. Particular expectations and restrictions such as the traditional ideals of chastity and purity and the pressure to embrace the life of a suburban homemaker rather than aspiring to have their own careers were equally placed on women.

Esther feels repulsed, flabbergasted and rebellious against the double standards of social expectations and cultural conventions. Firstly, the question of purity and impurity haunts Esther like the skeleton in the closet—young women are supposed to remain virgins whilst young men can get involved in sexual experimentation without tarnishing their characters. Therefore, Esther becomes furious after discovering the hypocrisy of her boyfriend Buddy Willard, who has had an affair with a waitress while pretending to be pure when he has been in fact impure. She states, “I couldn’t stand the idea of a woman having to live a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not” (Plath, 1963, p.77).

To Esther, the world is divided into two markedly different sides—the people who have had sex and the people who did not have sex, and this question of sexual purity becomes an obsession for Esther. From her earliest years, Esther has witnessed such hypocritical standards around her and such restrictive norms echo through her mind like an annoying drum causing her to feel more depressed.

The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) writes in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), “The passivity that essentially characterises the ‘feminine’ woman is a trait that develops in her from her earliest years. But it is false to claim that therein lies a biological given; in fact, it is a destiny imposed on her by her teachers and by society” (Beauvoir, 1949). Hence, this passivity—to preserve purity/virginity and not to embrace sexual freedom—is a learned behaviour that has been taught to women by society.

Simone de Beauvoir additionally points out, “She is taught that to please, she must try to please, must make herself object,” meaning a female child is trained in presenting herself as a pleasing and desirable object from her early years. Throughout the entire novel, most of Esther’s reflections revolve around sex and career, and so, *The Bell Jar* provides an in-depth meditation on womanhood and the question of sexual freedom. When Buddy Willard’s mother, Mrs Willard compares a woman’s role as “the place an arrow shoots off from” and each man as “an arrow shooting off into the future”, Esther challenges this idea and resolutely comments, “That’s one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. 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” (Plath, 1963, p.79).

However, she never feels at ease in her body and mind and sees married women as, “slave, numb and brainwashed” (Plath, 1963, p.81). Esther’s misalignment in identity formation can be assessed by Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity. According to Butler, “gender is performative” (Butler, 2006) meaning gender is socially constructed and gendered acts breed gender identity. In *The Bell Jar*, three different women embody three different feminine identities for Esther.

Betsy, the Pollyanna Cowgirl, is the epitome of domestic femininity according to the cultural norms that used to persist during the 1950s. She has the Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi who can cheerfully talk about the male and female corn in Kansa and pose for “P.Q.’s wife wears B.H. Wragge’s ads.” Eventually, she becomes a photographic model and is considered a perfect image of ideal femininity as Esther thinks, “Deep down, it was Betsy I resembled at heart” (*The Bell Jar*, 21). However, another strikingly contrastive feminine image to Betsy is Doreen who is sexually adventurous and nonconformist. Esther admires Doreen but cannot fully imitate her and Esther says, “Everything, she [Doreen] said was like a secret voice speaking straight out my own bones.” (Plath, 1963, p.7)

Such virgin/non-virgin contradiction further contributed to the blurring of Esther’s identity, leaving her more confused and clueless. Furthermore, Butler writes, “Identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 2006). And Joan Gilling, Esther’s companion in the mental hospital, reflects female homosexuality with whom Esther feels an affinity. Joan has the “tenderness” that a man does not have as Esther says, “Joan fascinated me” (Plath, 1963, p.209). Thus, such division of identities creates a selection of false selves for Esther and consequently, Esther feels hollow, having no sense of her real self at all. Such performances and levels—the ideal female, the sexually adventurous ‘nonvirgin’, the lesbian—dictated by society make Esther unable to recognize her unique identity and individual personality and contribute to further fracturing of her own existing identity and mental sanity. Author Iris Jamahl Dunkle writes, “The narrative is infused with wit, dark humour and truth, offering a haunting realistic representation of a female artist’s conflicts and subsequent breakdown and recovery” (Dunkle, 2012). Esther’s condition further deteriorates under the flawed mental health care system existing in 1950s America. Esther’s personal narratives delineate the state of 1950s psychiatry; she bristles and worsens under the crudely restrictive mental health services that have been provided to her.

Despite disliking Dr Gordon, Esther has been compelled to receive treatment from him. She goes through a wrongly and excruciatingly performed shock therapy under the supervision of Dr Gordon. After the brutal shock therapy, Esther’s psychological state degrades and she tries to commit suicide right

after receiving such intolerable treatment. Leonard Roy Frank states, “Brain damage is the most important effect of electroshock therapy or electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)” (Frank, 2002).

In spite of being unsympathetic and incompetent, Dr Gordon has been allowed to perform the stated therapy and Esther completely resents her sessions with Dr Gordon. Esther is left feeling traumatized and repulsed after this torturous session as she says, “With each flash, a great jolt drubbed 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” (Plath, 1963, p.138). However, in truth, she has done nothing wrong to deserve this; she has merely been placed under the wrong psychiatric care. Esther furthermore wilts like a flower in the coarse conditions of the psychiatric ward at a city hospital, and then, thrives like a blooming plant in the supportive, open environment of a private asylum, under the care of Dr Nolan.

Dr Nolan functions as a kind and motherly figure for Esther and most importantly, she helps Esther to regain her own true identity and autonomy. In fact, it is the feminine image of Dr Nolan that aids Esther in finding her standing in society and breaking the distorted glass of the bell jar that persistently hangs over her head. Dr Nolan “hugs her like a mother” (*The Bell Jar*, 203) and gains Esther’s trust which her [Esther’s] own mother has failed to gain. Consequently, Esther is able to form a loving relationship with her psychiatrist, which psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) has termed a “transference relationship.” With the help of this relationship, Esther transfers her feelings to Dr Nolan that she would generally have for her mother and thus, she begins the process of healing.

The cause of Esther’s perception of blurred self-concept or self-image lies in her childhood. Esther was perfectly happy till she was nine years old—until her father was alive and she came face to face with the hypocritical society that surrounded her. And above all, Esther suppresses the pain and grief that she felt when she lost her father as she says, “I couldn’t understand why I was crying so hard. Then I remembered that I had never cried for my father’s death” (Plath, 1963, p.161).

Self-concept tends to be more delicate when we are younger, especially when we are going through the process of self-discovery (during our adolescent years). Humanist psychologist Carl Rogers (1902-1987) has linked self-concept with self-actualization. He states, "The organism has one basic tendency and striving - to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing organism" (Rogers, 1951). Every person is capable of attaining their wishes and goals if s/he receives the proper love, care and validation from their loved ones and grows up under the nurturing shelter of healthy relationships. According to Carl Rogers, humans have one fundamental goal: The tendency to self-actualize (to satisfy one's highest potential) and achieve the highest level of "human-beingness" (to connect with others and have healthy relationships).

Rogers states that the main determinant regarding whether we will become self-actualized or not is our childhood experience. However, Esther is not blessed with a healthy childhood as her father died when she was young and she does not have a good rapport with her mother. Moreover, Rogers believes that when our self-concept is aligned with reality, it is "congruent" meaning we have a healthy self-image, but if there is any mismatch between how we see ourselves (our self-image) and how we desire to be (our ideal self) our self-concept will become incongruent and it negatively impacts our self-esteem.

When a child does not have a loving relationship with its parents and the parents only provide conditioned love to the child (expressing love if the child has "earned it", or placing inconsiderate expectations), the child begins to develop a distorted self-image or self-concept and the feelings of unworthiness begin to cloud its mind. And thus, a smile curls up on Dr Nolan's face when Esther says, "I hate her [her mother]" (Plath, 1963, p.195).

As Esther enters into a supportive but expensive private mental hospital, she gradually starts to identify the root cause of her blurred self-concept and identity crisis and Dr Nolan has been a powerful and to some extent revolutionary persona for her. She recognizes the fact that she still bears the scars from her childhood trauma; And, she realizes that she is a non-conformist and will not submit to the conservative standards created by society—hence, takes charge of her own body and autonomy by arranging

contraception (getting fitted for a diaphragm) and valiantly orchestrating the loss of virginity to a twenty-six years old professor of mathematics named Irwin.

Though Esther's perception or understanding of herself and the surroundings around her have been plagued by psychological imbalance, at end of the novel, she has been able to redeem her mental wellness, individual autonomy and the courage to begin again and listens to the old brag of her heart, "I am, I am, I am" (Plath, 1963, p.233). However, she is aware that the demon of mental illness still has not left the inner chambers of her mind as she says, "The bell jar hung suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air" (Plath, 1963, p.206).

Esther successfully crosses the difficult path of juvenile subordination to adult autonomy; however, deep down, at the back of her mind she can sense that though the ominous bell jar has lifted, "somewhere, anywhere", it still hovers over her head, waiting to drop at any moment to suffocate her with its distorted shape and compel her to lose her true self again.

### Conclusion

The path to self-discovery and freedom from mental illness has been a very arduous and straining journey for Esther; barred by cultural confinement and patriarchal norms, Esther feels completely alienated from herself and her surrounding—never for once, feels at ease in her own body and her inner world shifts and eventually, falls apart. Still, after many perils and maltreatments, Esther manages to break free from the imprisonment of her mental disorder that keeps her subdued and is partially able to embrace a renewed version of herself and find a new standing, a new identity. Esther's minutely-evoked disintegration has been the product of a conservative and conformist setting that barred her freedom and promoted the role of domesticity for the women of the 1950s. Yet, Esther has been a defiant character throughout this novel and her strong will to fight back against the misogyny and patriarchy that plagued the society of that time has aided her to saunter towards recovery and self-empowerment.

The autobiographical narrative that Esther Greenwood constructs is poignantly similar to Plath's own, but it still cannot be determined for sure if Sylvia Plath has crafted her first and only novel based on the account of her own life or not. The pangs of psychological distress, confusion and crisis that Esther feels set *The Bell Jar* in motion and the literary elements are very clear and comprehensible, but her journey to recovery and redeeming her self-autonomy remains tentative and elusive. Thus, it can be concluded that the formation of this novel took place under the cultural restrictions and patriarchal ideologies of 1950s America and these restrictions and barriers are detailed in the narrative of this novel. Though Esther can finally recover from the mental illness that she has been suffering, her true self appears to be irrevocably fractured and distorted and she knows deep down that "somewhere anywhere, the bell jar may descend again" (Plath, 1963, p.230).

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