

AN ANALYSIS OF SYLVIA PLATH'S THE BELL JAR IN FOUCAULDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Man is born free but everywhere he is found in chains. He is fettered by different social, economic and political factors – Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, psychologist, nonfiction writer, and editor gives the kaleidoscopic view of the man's condition. In the modern world man is subjected to various kinds of forces. Today's man has lost his individuality. He is conditioned in such a way that he has even lost his own way of thinking. All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically situated.

In my research paper I have tried to depict how the individual's entity is at stake, as mirrored by Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar*. Her main character, Esther Greenwood is subjected to the dominant discourses of society but she tries to resist and subvert it in her own way. *The Bell Jar* unveils the power relations working at different levels and it shows how an individual tries to oppose this power to save his individuality. *The Bell Jar* reflects opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways the people live. Everyone has to fight his own little battle everyday in order to survive in this cruel world.

Sylvia Plath knew the art of transferring her pain and agony to the words which she wrote. Her poems made her appear as a meteor on the American literary scene of 1960's. Her only published novel, *The Bell Jar*, (1963) under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas remains a classic of American Literature. *The Bell Jar* portrays the dilemma of an American woman of sixties whose identity is at stake due to various social forces. Its theme stands true even to our contemporary society. The modern man is expected to be institutionalized, to become a cog in the machine, to become a zombie drifting here and there with the masses. He is expected to lose his identity and individuality and to become a dot, a black spot without name. According to Diane S. Bonds "The Bell Jar offers a brilliant evocation of the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and the soul-destroying effect this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high - minded young women like Plath."¹ According to Linda W. Wagner "... The Bell Jar is in structure and intent a highly conventional bildungsroman. Concerned almost entirely with the education and maturation of Esther Greenwood, Plath's novel uses a chronological and necessarily episodic structure to keep Esther at the center of all action."²

Suman Aggarwal opines, "The Bell Jar is, if anything, about an inward struggle to come to grips with depression and regaining an interest in life."³ Diane S. Bonds opines "Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* dramatizes the collusion between the notion of a separate and separative self (or bounded, autonomous subject) and the cultural forces that have oppressed women."⁴ According to Tony Tanner, "Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar* is perhaps the most compelling and controlled account of a mental breakdown to have appeared in American fiction."⁵ *The Bell Jar* mirrors the realities of the American way of life and an attempt of an individual to escape the forces that try to imprison him. Gilbert echoes Foucault when she writes regarding *The Bell Jar*, "The story told is invariably a story of being trapped, by society or by the self of an agent of society, and then somehow escaping or trying to escape."⁶ According to Foucault "The political interests and social implications of any discourse will not be realized without the agency of individuals who are subjectively motivated to reproduce or transform social practices and the social power which underpins them."⁷

The Bell Jar, the title itself means to confine, to circumscribe oneself to the traps of the society. The society wants Esther to be a good girl, 'a golden girl', an A grader, a good wife and a good mother, but what does Esther want? She wants to be totally free and does not want any kind of tag. She simply wants to remain what she is. She time and again listens to the old brag of her heart, "I am, I am, I am."⁸

Esther struggles to save herself, to save her integrity from the defiling forces of the society. The novel starts with the heroine trying to find her identity in the big city of New York where the glamour world expected the girls to wear skimpy clothes to pose for covers of magazines. Where girls are considered commodity to promote consumerism. "Beauty Editor persuaded Betsy to cut her hair and made cover girl out of her." (6) "The magazine photograph showed a girl in a strapless evening dress of fuzzy white stuff, grinning fit to split with a whole lot of boys bending in around her." (199)

Esther talks about the dehumanized, boring life led by New Yorkers. "Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus." (2) Esther feels that in New York day by day the world is becoming one-dimensional, flat surface, people are becoming automata mannequins. "Hilda moved like a mannequin the whole way" (95) In that glamorous world the

women were always expected to wear mask with a smile pasted on it. The photographer asked Esther, “‘give us a smile.’ ” “‘At last, obediently, like the mouth of a ventriloquist’s dummy, my own mouth started to quirk up.’ ” (97) The wickedness of New York is acknowledged by its resident Jay Cee, who warns Esther, “‘Don’t let the wicked city get you down.’ ” (36) Joan Gilling thought that New York drove people crazy and she went to New York for killing herself. “‘Oh, I thought it would be easier to kill myself in New York.’ ” (192)

Esther wants to experience and explore the life of New York. She agrees to step out of the cab when someone invited Doreen and her to accompany him. Esther says, “‘I’d taken this gift of a chance to see something of New York besides what the people on the magazine had planned out for us so carefully.’ ” (8) Esther’s quest for knowledge opened her eyes to the animalism which she witnessed between Doreen and Lenny Shepherd.

... Doreen’s breasts had popped out of her dress and were swinging out slightly like full brown melons as she circled belly-down on Lenny’s shoulder, thrashing her legs in the air and screeching, and then they both started to laugh and slow up, and Lenny was trying to bite Doreen’s hip through her skirt when I let myself out of the door before anything more could happen and managed to get downstairs by leaning with both hands on the banister and half sliding the whole way. (16)

She gets so much disgusted by looking at what went on between Doreen and Lenny that she thought of purging herself by taking hot water bath. “‘I said to myself: ‘Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don’t know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure.’ ” (19)

David Howarth while interpreting Foucault, opines, “‘However, while, Foucault’s ‘ethics of the self’ or an ‘aesthetics of existence’ places more emphasis on the practices human subjects engage in as agents, ‘these practices are ... not something that the individual invents by himself.’ Rather, ‘ they are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group.’ ”⁹

So, Esther becomes the subject of society which teaches her to remain pure. Her mother once sent her an article called “‘In Defence of Chastity’ ” written by some lawyer. “‘It gave all the reasons a girl shouldn’t sleep with anybody but her husband and that only after they were married.’ ” (76)

Esther internalizes the ideologies of her society and this makes her feel guilty when she sees the display of lust. “‘... Doreen’s body lying there in the pool of vomit like an ugly, concrete testimony to my own dirty nature.’ ” (21) She even feels alienated. “‘... I noticed a big, smudgy eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked.’ ” (17)

She tries to fit herself in the frame made by the society for her. The society expected her to conform to the rules and regulations and to give in to the demands of the society. She is expected to be a good girl, a good caretaker, a good wife and a good mother. William Buddy, the so called lover of Esther expects her to take care of him while he was at the TB Sanatorium. “‘Buddy’s mother had even arranged for me to be given a job of a waitress at the TB Sanatorium that summer so Buddy wouldn’t be lonely.’ ” (18)

Esther confronts the reality that in society which is dominated by males, she is expected to have her identity not on her own but by associating herself with some man. According to Laurie F. Leach "... working women's options were similarly narrow, giving only an illusion of access to the professional world. The working women who reside at the hotel are 'secretaries to executive and ... Simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other.'"¹⁰

Even Esther's mother wants that she should cut short the branch of her career and learn something practical which would help her raise her demand in the matrimonial market. "My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But English major who knew shorthand was something else again. Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter." (72)

This reflects the truth of American Society of 1950's in which being privileged to have a man interested implied value, perhaps the only value society recognized for its women. Being subjected to the dominant discourse of the society Esther too tries her hand at some boys by going on blind dates. "I hated coming downstairs sweaty-handed and curious every Saturday night and having some senior introduce me to her aunt's best friend's son and finding some pale, mushroomy fellow with protruding ears or buck teeth or a bad leg. I didn't think I deserved it. After all, I wasn't crippled in any way, I just studied too hard, I didn't know when to stop." (54)

Esther's encounter with Marco is also the result of Esther trying to conform to the social ideologies. Marco tries to rape Esther and calls her 'slut'. For him all women are 'sluts'. This was a bitter realization which dawned upon Esther. She decides to raise cudgles against the identity given to her by the glamorous world of New York by shedding that identity. "Piece by piece, I fed my ward robe to the night wind, and fluttering like a loved one's ashes, the gray scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York." (107) According to Linda W. Wagner "Throwing out her clothes is tantamount to rejecting the traditional image of pretty, smart girl, object for man's acquisition."¹¹

Esther does not smudge the blood marks made by Marco on her cheeks. This symbolizes that she is a fighter. Esther, withdrawing from the world of fashion, exhibits guts enough to challenge and fight her oppressor. Where power operates, resistance is bound to be there. So Esther shows her resistance by rejecting the life of New York for which so many girls aspired.

Esther wanted to carve her own destiny. She has a strong desire to lead a life of her own but the demands and pressures of the society tears her apart. According to Linda Wagner, "Esther lodges a protest against her image of women "as the willed product of her culture" and wants to exert herself as the person she truly is."¹²

Esther does not want to be benumbed by the roles which society has planned for her. "I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket." (79) Esther wants to live life to the fullest and at the same time she wants so many things.

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 a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa

and South America, and another fig was Constantine and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off – beat professions, and another fig was Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. (73)

Then how this girl with so many options and roles ends up in a mental asylum? The society exerts power and does not allow her to accomplish, to attain her professional ambitions. Gayle Whittier opines, “According to her society’s standards, an intellectual woman is herself a cultural contradiction in terms, a disharmonious combination of biology and intelligence.”¹³ Esther’s intellect is not digested by her lover Buddy Willard.

“Do you know what a poem is, Esther?”

‘No, What?’ I said

‘A piece of dust’ ” (52)

Esther’s response “I guess so?” (52) also shows the scale of power leaning towards Buddy Willard.

According to Barry Smart “Foucault’s conception addresses the presence of power relations in the threshold of the social order; indeed, its limit point might be considered to be equivalence of power relations with sociality itself.”¹⁴ So power works even in relations. Buddy Willard exerts his power because he has knowledge and is more experienced than Esther. Esther admits, “He was a couple of years older than I was and very scientific, so he could always prove things.” (53) Esther thinks that Buddy could have been a teacher the way he tries to exert his power upon her because he possesses knowledge. “...I think Buddy could have been a teacher as well, he was always trying to explain things to me and introduce me to new knowledge. (64) Foucault argues that “power and knowledge directly imply one another ... [such] that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relation.”¹⁵

The scene of childbirth testifies the power of doctors over the woman’s body. The doctor who has knowledge completely controls the act of childbirth by inducing such sedatives so that the woman forgets the pain and the painful experience of childbirth. So that she again gets ready to plan the second issue. Esther witnesses the process of childbirth and thinks, “Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn’t groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again.” (62)

Esther gets scared after witnessing the childbirth and does not want to become a mother. According to Laurie F. Leach, “ Her horror over a possible loss of self in motherhood is symbolized in the scene where she watches a woman give birth and observes the woman’s face obscured by her enormous stomach.”¹⁶

Buddy introduces Esther to the knowledge and power of his male body by unzipping his pants. “Then he just stood therein front of me and I kept on staring at him. The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed.” (64) Before introducing her to the knowledge of his body, Buddy does ask her and as usual Esther’s response was ‘I guess so’. Her passive response shows how spell bound she is with the power which Buddy exercise over her.

Though Buddy himself has never skied but he exercises his power over Esther by teaching her skiing. “Buddy had never skied before either, but he said that the elementary principles were quite simple, and as he’d often watched the ski instructor and their pupils he could teach me all I’d need to know.” (91) Buddy not only wants to circumscribe the options open to Esther, he even wants Esther to remain physically confined to a single place. When Esther falls down while skiing and tries to get up and do again, Buddy says, “‘No, you’re not.’ A queer, satisfied expression came over Buddy’s face. ‘No, you’re not,’ he repeated with a final smile. ‘Your leg’s broken in two places. You’ll be stuck in a cast for months.’” (94) Buddy represents the American males of 1950’s who wanted to cast woman in the mould of wife and then mother.

Esther has saved herself for one man and that is Buddy Willard. Esther never has sex because she is advised by her mother to remain virgin till she marries. “My mother and my grand-mother had started hinting around to me a lot lately about what a fine, clean boy Buddy Willard was, coming from such a fine, clean family, and how everybody at Church thought he was a model person ... he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for.” (64)

On enquiring whether Buddy had sex? Esther gets the answer in positive and Esther gets the biggest shock not because Buddy is not virgin but because he has been pretending and telling lies to Esther.

Actually, it wasn’t the idea of Buddy sleeping with somebody that bothered me. I mean I’d read about all sorts of people sleeping with each other, and if it had been any other boy I would merely have asked him the most interesting details, and may be gone out and slept with somebody myself just to even things up, and then thought no more about it. What I couldn’t stand was Buddy’s pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he’d been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face. (67)

From this moment after capturing the truth, the power tilts to her side. She gains power to fight and to retaliate; she is no more an indecisive girl to say ‘I guess so’. According to Foucault, “Truth is linked in a circular relation with system of power...”¹⁷ According to Dreyfus, “In History of Sexuality, Foucault argues against the repressive hypothesis: the view that truth is intrinsically opposed to power and therefore inevitably plays a liberating role.”¹⁸ Esther after having hold on truth retaliates and tries to liberate herself from the power which Buddy Willard uses on her. She becomes more assertive.

The America of 50’s laid a great stress on the pureness. Esther’s mother always guided her to save Esther from any kind of traps laid by the males. “My mother had always told me never under any circumstances to go with a man to a man’s room after an evening out, it could mean only the one thing.” (76) Even Mrs. Willard had the same views regarding purity. Esther says, “I knew Mrs. Willard was a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both.” (67) America being a capitalist society practiced the repressive hypothesis. “Stated broadly, the repressive hypothesis holds that through European history we have moved from a period of relative openness about our bodies and our speech to an ever-increasing repression and hypocrisy.”¹⁹ According to Foucault, “Sex was repressed because it was incompatible with the work ethic demanded by the capitalist order. All energies had to be harnessed to production.”²⁰ So a lot of importance was attached to virginity by the society. The society by propagating such issues in the form of discursive practices made the people internalize the dominant discourse of

the society. Esther says, “When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue. Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another.” (77)

Esther feels that she will be pickled and benumbed by the dreary routine of married life and put into the bell jar of marriage. Esther tells Buddy Willard, “I’m never going to get married.” “You’re crazy”. Buddy brightened. ‘You’ll change your mind.’ ‘No. My mind’s made up.’ ” (89)

Buddy’s reaction of “you’re crazy” reflects the mentality of the males of that era. Society assumes a woman will marry. Society propagates the myth that the be-all and end-all of a woman’s existence is a husband, a house, and a handful of kids. After Esther’s release from the mental hospital, Buddy’s final words to her are: “I wonder who you’ll marry now ... you’ve been here.” (163) Esther fears that her career will be curtailed by marriage and she will be expected to play a second fiddle to her husband who will expect her to do odd jobs round the clock. According to Esther marriage would mean, “getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my night gown and curlers after he’d left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he’d expect a big dinner, and I’d spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted.” (80)

Esther visualizes her future and she finds it quite dark. “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.”(80) Esther is aware of the fact that males use trap of romantic candle light dinners and gifts to lure women into the mesh of marriage, where she is used and made to lose her identity. “And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard’s kitchen mat.” (80) Esther fears that her talent of writing poems will go waste as she will not get time to pursue that talent. “I also remember Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn’t want to write poems any more. So I began to think may be it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.” (81)

Esther’s refusal of getting married is an attempt to sustain her identity which she wants to make in her career. She assesses the female role models available to her: her own mother who urges her to learn shorthand; the older writer Philomena Guinea and Jay Cee. All these women tried to exert power on Esther to make her like them.

Esther’s mother kept harping that she should learn some practical skill because she herself had taught shorthand and typing to support her family after her husband died. Esther says, “She was always on to me to learn shorthand after college, so I’d have a practical skill as well as a college degree.” (36) Her mother holds the opinion that by doing so, “She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter.” (72)

Esther had planned something different for her future. “The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters.” (72) Her mother tries to control her life but Esther’s views are different from her mother. She says, “My own mother wasn’t much help.” (36) “I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I’d know what to do.” (36) Esther does not want to step into the shoes of her mother and lead a kind of life which she was leading.

At seven I had heard my mother get up, slip into her clothes and tiptoe out of the room. Then the buzz of the orange squeezer sounded from downstairs, and the smell of coffee and bacon filtered under my door. Then the sink water ran from the tap and dishes clinked as my mother dried and put them back in the cupboard. Then the front door opened and shut. Then the car door opened and shut, and the motor went broom – broom and, edging off with a crunch of gravel, faded into the distance. (111)

Esther’s mother does not allow Esther to lead a life on her own, she tries to control and direct her life. Esther finds her mother to be a threat to her individuality and deep inside has a desire to kill her. When she found her mother snoring she entertains the wish of killing her. “The piggish noise irritated me, and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands.” (119)

Esther has a grudge against her mother that she and her brother were not allowed to attend the funeral of their father. “My mother hadn’t let us come to his funeral because we were only children then, and he had died in hospital, so the graveyard and even his death, had always seemed unreal to me.” (159) Esther shows her hate for her mother by dumping the bouquet of roses in the waste basket which she brought for her on her birthday. Esther tells Doctor Nolan that she hates her mother. Because she always tried to have control on her. She is always keen to correct, to reprove and to improve her. Her mother asks her to get grades and to devote time to studies. Esther’s mother encourages her to acquire secretarial skills which she begins only for the sake of her mother.

But then she refuses to learn shorthand because she knows that it symbolizes her death as a writer. Esther further thinks that her suicide would be a sweet martyrdom, if she could save her mother and brother from ignominy and bankruptcy on her account. She thinks so because she found that her mother hated her father, “she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money” (36) So, in order to evade the clutches of her mother she plans to commit suicide.

Esther has big dreams, “What I always thought I had in mind was getting some big scholarship to graduate school or a grant to study all over Europe, and then I thought I’d be a professor and write books of poems and be an editor of some sort.” (30) All her dreams shatter when she returns to Boston and her mother tells her, “You didn’t make that writing course’.” (110) She felt disheartened and from this point she is seen withdrawing into her shell, the bell jar. Her sense of self alienation increases when she becomes aware of the contradiction between her desire to conform to a cultural ideal of feminine passivity and her ambition to be a creative writer.

When she sees Dodo Conway, who has six children and ready to give birth to the seventh, she feels sick. Esther says, “Children made me sick.” (113) She visualizes her future to be like Dodo Conway. She even tells Doctor Nolan that a baby is a curb on woman’s freedom.

“I had told Doctor Nolan. ‘A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.’ ” (212)

Society uses its power over Esther, who is torn apart by the two opposing forces. If she conforms to the roles set by the society, she loses her identity and if she does not then society is there to punish her. If Esther fails to conform she will be looked down upon as monstrous, as abnormal, as insane.

According to Foucault, “Power produces nothing but “limit and lack.” It lays down the law and the juridical discourse that limits and circumscribes. Punishment for disobedience is always close at hand. Power is everywhere the same. All it can do is forbid, and all it can command is obedience. Power, ultimately, is repression; repression, ultimately, is the imposition of the law; the law, ultimately demands submission.”²¹ Society wanted her to give up her career and give in to the roles, decided by the society to play. “This is an inherently negative conception in which power has been depicted as disruptive and limiting, as circumscribing the development of individual creativity or potential.”²² Esther’s repression of creative instinct by the society makes her land up in a mental asylum. Yalom opines that maternity and motherhood in our society form a springboard towards madness. The biological given that female bodies are fashioned to carry other human bodies produces multiple layers of anxiety deep into the girl-child’s psyche when she confronts the social pressures to produce and that too, under circumstances that are detrimental to her career and very being. *Bell Jar* symbolizes her isolation from the outside world and also her being imprisoned in her own “sour air”. She feels herself to be “dead baby” having no life or possibility of any growth.

“The symbol of madness will henceforth be that mirror which, without reflecting anything real, will secretly offer the man who observes himself in it the dream of his own presumption. Madness deals not so much with truth and the world, as with man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive.”²³ This sense of alienation also creeps in Esther and it is reflected in the mirror, “I noticed a big, smudgy -eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked.” (17) She feels that she is aging and there is constant pressure on her to prove herself otherwise the world will smother her identity with the stereotyped roles she will be expected to play. She is always haunted by the words of Jay Cee “ ‘ You’ll never get anywhere like that.’ ” (30) The same words keep running to her mind at the later stage, “Doesn’t your work interest you, Esther? You know, Esther, you’ve got the perfect set-up of a true neurotic. You’ll never get anywhere like that, you’ll never get anywhere like that, you’ll never get anywhere like that.” (141) She is not able to recognize herself when she sees herself in mirror in the hospital. “You couldn’t tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken – feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person’s face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person’s mouth was pale brown, with a rose – coloured sore at either corner.” (168)

Esther started crawling into her own shell when she could not get congenial environment for her intellectual growth. She says, “The silence depressed me. It wasn’t the silence of silence. It was my own silence.” (17) She imagines that the world, the people stare hard at her. She is too conscious about the gaze of others. “I crawled back into bed and pulled the sheet over my head. But even that didn’t shut out the light, so I buried my head under the darkness of the pillow and

pretended it was night. I couldn't see the pint of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to.” (113)

Esther stopped cleaning herself, stopped washing. She shows resistance by doing so to the world which expected her to be a prized possession or a show piece. “I was still wearing Betsy's white blouse and dirndl skirt. They drooped a bit now, as I hadn't washed them in my three weeks at home... I hadn't washed my hair for three weeks, either. (122)

Esther is fed up with the life she has led and the way she is expected to lead. She wants to get into a new world where no body would know her. She loves her freedom and just wants to be what she really is. “I thought if I ever did get to Chicago, I might change my name to Elly Higginbottom for good. Then nobody would know I had thrown up a scholarship at a big eastern women's college and mucked up a month in New York and refused a perfectly solid medical student for a husband who would one day be a member of the A.M.A and earn pots of money. In Chicago, people would take me for what I was.” (127)

The Bell Jar not only exposes the dilemma of an intellectual woman, it also puts a question mark on the American psychiatry system based upon text – books, machines, institutions and training programmes. When Esther is not able to sleep or eat she is referred to Doctor Gordon, a psychiatrist. Doctor Gordon is a representative of commercial capitalist America whose aim is to just mint money. When Esther talked about her problem, he didn't speak anything and in the end he asked, “Where did you say you went to college?” Baffled, I told him. I didn't see where college fitted in ... I thought he was going to tell me his diagnosis, and that perhaps I had judged him too hastily and too unkindly. But he only said, ‘I remember your college well. I was up there, during the war. They had a WAC station, didn't they? Or was it WAVES?’ I said I didn't know. ‘Yes, a WAC station, I remember now. I was doctor for the lot, before I was sent overseas. My, they were a pretty bunch of girls.’ ” (126) Then he got up and asked Esther to come next week. He did not diagnose anything not even talked about the condition of Esther and charged her twenty – five dollars for an hour. In the name of curing the mentally sick, he was making money. Without giving any treatment he expected her to improve and when she sees him next week, he recommends to her mother that Esther should be given shock treatment at his private hospital in Walton.

The aim of bio-power was to make the people toe the line of dominant social discourse. They were to be produced as objects, as robots to carry out the orders of the capitalistic society. Drefus while interpreting Foucault opines, “The repressive hypothesis – the lynchpin of bio – power – rests on this assumption of externality and difference. The conditions of the rise of the objectifying human sciences were such that it seems that the only logical way to achieve a fully objective science of human beings would be with the totally successful production of human beings as objects.”²⁴ Esther observes that inmates at the mental asylum of Doctor Gordon “weren't people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life.” (136)

Doctor Gordon started with the shock – treatment without telling about the proper diagnosis of the ailment. The name of shock therapy scared her to death. “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 blur light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done.” (138) Esther feels as if the shock treatment was a kind of a punishment.

Esther has the power of knowledge. She studies books on abnormal psychology and matches her symptoms with the cases given. She is well aware of the power of a Doctor. She fears that she would be locked up in mental asylum and would be given shock therapy. “Once I was locked up they could use that on me all the time. And I thought of how my mother and brother and friends would visit me, day after day, hoping I would be better. Then their visits would slacken off, and they would give up hope. They would grow old. They would forget me.” (153)

Esther comments upon the economic diversity. Those who can afford to go to private doctors they are taken care of but the government hospitals are in deplorable state. The patients are not taken care of and nobody bothers about them. Foucault in his book *Madness and Civilization* talks about the bad condition of mental asylums. “But these were the dungeons and cells long reserved for the most dangerous and most violent of the insane.”²⁵ Esther fears, “They would want me to have the best of care at first, so they would sink all their money in a private hospital like Doctor Gordon’s. Finally, when the money was used up, I would be moved to a state hospital, with hundreds of people like me, in a big cage in the basement. The more hopeless you were, the further they hid you.” (154)

There is power in insanity. “The work of the unconscious endeavours to ensure that the fantasy of subjugation is transformed into one of revolutionary potential for a “subject–group.” ... immanent ‘schio-law’ which loosens what has been made rigid, erases the marks, and discovers what has been left undefined.”²⁶ This power is there in Esther who tries to subvert the authority of the society by killing herself. She shows resistance to the power with a number of attempts to end her life. According to Foucault, “The very existence of power relations presupposes forms of resistance, not as an external effect or consequence of the exercise of power, but as an inherent feature of the power relation. If we accept the view that where there is power there is resistance, then it follows that just as power is present everywhere in the social network so is resistance.”²⁷ Esther does not want to lead a life the way society has planned for her so she shows her resistance by rejecting life itself. She tries to kill herself many a times. “It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at.” (142)

“I thought drowning must be the kindest way to die, and burning the worst.” (151) “That morning I had tried to hang myself. I had taken the silk cord of my mother’s yellow bathrobe as soon as she left for work, and, in the amber shade of the bedroom, fashioned it into a knot that slipped up and down on itself.” (152) “Then I took the glass of water and the bottle of pills and went down into the cellar... The dark felt thick as velvet. I reached for the glass and bottle, and carefully, on my knees, with bent head, crawled to the farthest wall.” (163) She crawls back into the womb like a foetus with a bent head looking for repose and solace in the womb of death. Esther echoes Foucault when she says, “It must take a lot of courage to die like that.” (133) Even Foucault who attempted suicide believes that to end one’s life is the most courageous act.

According to Roy Boyne, “Foucault does not specify the model against which we measure our faults. But it is surely no coincidence that the symbol of the confessional is at its most powerful within the Catholic Church, an institution which epitomizes the patriarchal values of power, hierarchy, obedience, functionality and arrogant, God-given self-confidence.”²⁸ Esther says, “Lately I had considered going into the Catholic Church myself. I knew that Catholic thought killing yourself was an awful sin. But perhaps, if this was so they might have a good way to persuade me out of it. Of course, I didn’t believe in life after death or the virgin birth or

Inquisition or the infallibility of that little monkey-faced Pope or anything ... I could just concentrate on my sin, and he would help me repent it.” (158) Thus Church kept the people in line by propagating life after death, so that the people should be more concerned about the next birth and take care of the one they are leading. It also made people confess their sins. This also adds to the power of the Church because it gets knowledge about the unconscious.

After an attempt to commit suicide, the society tries to curb Esther’s resistance by sending her to Doctor Gordon’s hospital. There she breaks a mirror when she could not digest what she looked like and got the punishment of getting shifted to a special ward, at some government hospital.

“ ‘They want you to be in a special ward,’ my mother said.

‘They don’t have that sort of ward at our hospital.’

‘I liked it where I was.’

My mother’s mouth tightened. ‘You should have behaved better, then.’

‘What?’

“ ‘You shouldn’t have broken that mirror’ ”

“The application of punishment was once again inscribed on the body, but its aim was no longer to crush, dismember, and overpower it. Rather, the body was to be trained, exercised, and supervised. The production of a new apparatus of control was necessary, one which would carry out this program of discipline. It was to be an apparatus of total, continuous, and efficient surveillance.” (152) Valerie, another inmate of mental asylum who showed anger had to go through lobotomy as punishment. “ ‘Fine I’m not angry any more. Before, I was always angry. I was in Wymark, before, and now I’m in Caplan. I can go to town, now, or shopping or to movie, along with a nurse. ‘What will you do when you get out?’

‘Oh, I’m not leaving, Valerie laughed.

‘I like it here’ ” (185)

In the asylum discipline was taught to the inmates. In the state hospital Esther says to nurse, “ ‘Why can’t I get up?

I’m not sick.’

‘Ward rounds’, the nurse said. ‘You can get up after ward rounds.’ ” (169)

According to Foucault in *Discipline & Punish*, “Discipline produces ...docile bodies [It produces] an increased aptitude and an increased domination.”²⁹

The subject is trapped at every step with the power politics; let it be home or hospital. Foucault gives the concept of Bio – power in which the power is exercised upon individual with the help of different techniques. “... bio-power spread its net down to the smallest twitches of the body and the most minute stirrings of the soul. It did this through the construction of a specific technology: the confession of the individual subject, either in self-reflection or in speech.”³⁰ This confessional technology is used in mental asylums. Even Esther has to undergo it. Esther’s mother says, “ ‘Oh, Esther, I wish you would co-operate. They say you don’t co-operate. They say you won’t talk to any of the doctors or make anything in Occupational Therapy’ ” (173) Joan Gilling another inmate and friend of Esther talks of the group therapy recommend to her by the doctor. Joan says, “ ‘that’s what he said can you imagine me wanting to kill myself, and coming round to chat about it with a whole pack of strangers, and most of them no better than myself’ ” (190)

Foucault talks about the power of doctor in *Madness and Civilization*.

As positivism imposes itself upon medicine and psychiatry, this practice becomes more and more obscure, the psychiatrist's power more and more miraculous, and the doctor – patient couple sinks deeper into a strange world. In the patient's eyes the doctor becomes a thaumaturgy; the authority he has borrowed from order; morality and the family now seems to derive from himself; it is because he is a doctor that he is believed to possess these powers³¹

Esther puts a lot of faith in her psychiatrist Doctor Nolan and listens to her. She agrees to take shock treatment when told by Doctor Nolan, “ ‘It was like I told you it would be, wasn't it?’ said Doctor Nolan, as we walked back to Belsize together through the crunch of brown leaves.

‘Yes’

‘Well it will always be like that,’ she said firmly. ‘You will be having shock treatment three times a week – Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.’ I gulped in a long draught of air.

‘For how long?’

‘That depends,’ Doctor Nolan said, ‘on you and me.’ ” (206)

Esther finds that most of the women on the ward were driven to that state by execution of power on them in one form or the other. As Foucault puts it, “Power as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability.”³² The Italian woman, the roommate of Esther was driven crazy because her mother-in-law exerted power on her. “ ‘I'm here on account of my French – Canadian mother-in-law.’ She giggled again. ‘ My husband knows I can't stand her, and still he said she could come and visit us, and when she came, my tongue stuck out of my head, I couldn't stop it.’ ” (170) Joan Gilling's boss makes her land up in mental asylum. There is so much work – pressure and stress on her that it leads to her mental –breakdown. Joan confides in Esther “... ‘ my boss kept buzzing me in every other minute, and each time I moved, my feet hurt like the devil, but the second and he'd have something else he wanted to get off his chest....’ ” (189) Foucault opines “Control must not be applied sporadically or even at regular intervals. Standardization of operation, efficiency, and the reduction of signification necessities a constant and regular application.”³³ Joan has nervous breakdown by the perpetual and constant use of power by her boss. In case of Dee Dee her husband left her and started living with some mistress and this turned her sour. So all the inmates are the victim of the world outside. They are not free. It has been rightly said by Rousseau that Man is born free but everywhere he is found in chains.

The society expected the individuals to have heterosexual relations which were accepted but the deviant behaviour was looked down upon. Still some women like Joan showed resistance to the power of dominant discourse by having homosexual relations. Joan is a lesbian and she says to Esther “ ‘I like you,’

Joan was saying. ‘I like you better than Buddy.’ ” (210)

There has been a reference of women loving women. Esther wonders, “If all women did with other women was lie and hug.” (210)

“Of course, the famous woman poet at my college lived with another woman ... And when I had told the poet I might well get married and have a pack of children some day, she stared at me in horror. ‘But what about your career?’ she had cried.” (210-211) Deviant sexual behaviour meant resistance, it means that the dominant discourse is challenged and subverted. So many women were in a way raising their voice against repression by living together rather than with males.

“... opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights.”³⁴ Esther also raises cudgels against the dominant discourse of the society by getting deflowered by Irwin. She has been demanded by society to remain virgin but she says, “Ever since I’d learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck. It had been of such enormous importance to me for so long that my habit was to defend it at all costs. I had been defending it for five years and I was sick of it.” (218)

Esther wanted freedom from all kinds of fears. By getting the fitting she feels free, “I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because what they did, they would do anyway, regardless” (213)

“I was my own woman.” (213) Esther just wanted a space of her own and a chance to lead life on her own terms.

Esther Greenwood decides to be an integrated whole ready to face the world. The symbol of mercury can be used for her personality. “... the silver globe cupped in my palm. If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself, and if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again.” (176) Esther gets rid of all kind of fears and is sure of her own self. She knows what she wants from her life and she is ready to assert her individuality. She is all set to subvert the dominant discourse. She is not ready to give in at any cost to the technologies of power used by the American society to conform the individuals.

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