

# Minimalism as Protest: Gender, Alienation, and Voice in Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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## **Abstract**

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) remains one of the most compelling explorations of female subjectivity, mental illness, and the constraints of patriarchal society in mid-twentieth-century America. The novel offers a semi-autobiographical account of Esther Greenwood's descent into psychological crisis, reflecting both the social pressures of gender conformity and the alienation of the modern individual. This paper examines how Plath employs the metaphor of the bell jar to articulate suffocation under cultural expectations, the silencing of female desire, and the stigmatization of mental health struggles. It also considers the intersections between gender, class, and identity within the novel, situating Plath's work in dialogue with feminist literary criticism and existentialist thought. Ultimately, the paper argues that *The Bell Jar* functions not only as a narrative of personal breakdown but also as a critique of systemic structures that pathologize women's resistance and enforce conformity under the guise of normalcy.

**Keywords:** Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Feminist criticism, Mental health and literature, Patriarchy and gender roles, Autobiographical fiction, Existential alienation, Women's writing

## **1. Introduction**

*The Bell Jar*, a palpably autobiographical work written by Sylvia Plath depicts an artist's suffering. It is a book that needs to be suffered and felt in order to understand firsthand, the degree and intensity of suffering, a creative and a sensitive mind undergoes – a mind that is lucid and acutely and painfully conscious of its being and the implications of 'being' as a continually painful and traumatic action in progress. It demonstrates insane sanity or sane insanity. On the surface level, it seems to be the story of a small-town girl, Esther Greenwood, with a literary bent of mind who has ambitions and aspirations of making a name for herself in the world of literature and academics. Esther is a promising budding writer who is beginning to showcase her talents. The narrative traces her rapid deceleration into a near schizophrenic state as Esther finds herself increasingly alienated from the rest of the world and her social milieu. This paper is particularly focused on the use of language and linguistic elements in *The Bell Jar* which mirrors Esther's alienated state.

As the novel progresses, the narrative uses less and less of descriptive language and becomes increasingly cryptic. The tone seems to suggest the inefficacy of language as a medium of expression for experiences and endurances that spring from the darkest recesses of the mind and question the deepest anxieties of being a woman. The narrative seems to be both the outcome and a reflection of this painful struggle which the narrator undergoes that numbs her senses and leaves her lacklustre.

The tone of the narrative and the nature of the language used also suggest one more thing – that language which has an embedded gender bias, is and will always be an alien tongue for women who are forced to use it with its already established and accepted meanings, associations, connotations and implications. It will therefore tend to get repetitive, monotonous and exasperating at times, because there is only so much a woman writer with a female narrator on the brink of insanity can do. It is war that is constantly waging with language, an ongoing tussle that will subside only when women find a tongue of their own, a space of their own to express.

**Deliberate choice and arrangement of words to create the effect of the absurd:**

Language helps keep the unfamiliar at bay. At the same time it can offer no real respite. It can't keep emptiness at bay. The language of TBJ is restrained throughout. Statements are shorn of embellishments and extremely cryptic. Repetition of particular words or phrases which reflect the vortex and cyclic nature of things abound in the narrative.

Repetitions serve different functions or imply different things in the narrative. Both Esther's mother and grandmother insist on the importance of finding a 'fine' and 'clean' boy for Esther:

*My mother and my grandmother had started hinting around a lot lately to me 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, so kind to his parents and to older people, as well as so athletic and so handsome and so intelligent.*

*All I'd heard about, really, was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for. (64)*

The descriptors 'fine, clean' have been repeated four times, the first two times by Esther's mother and grandmother to describe Buddy who are slyly suggesting an alliance with Buddy, the second time by Esther to reinforce the association of 'fine' and 'clean' with Buddy and the third time for herself, the need to be 'fine' and 'clean' for someone like Buddy. The repetition seems to suggest that 'fine' and 'clean' apparently are the only two prerequisites and qualities a girl and a boy would require in each other and will take care of every kind of compatibility. It also shows how Esther and Buddy throughout follow a normative prescriptive format to get close to each other subscribing to external and societal standards of approval. The repetition of the words 'fine' and 'clean' suggests the reductionist attitude of language and the role language has to play in conditioning minds and reinforcing notions.

Language is used with craftsmanship to present a certain pattern that will convey or reinforce an important idea or a theme. Esther describes her childhood laden with activities:

*After that – in spite of the Girls Scouts and the piano lessons and the water-colour lessons and the dancing lessons and the sailing camp, all of which my mother scrimped to give me, and college, with crewing in the mist before breakfast and blackbottom pies and the little new firecrackers of ideas going off everyday - I had never been really happy again. (71).*

The narration of this part gives an indirect glimpse of Esther's childhood. There's too much of clutter amounting to nothing. Activity after activity is mentioned conjoined with the conjunction 'and' repeated

seven times to connect the number of engagements crowding the pages as also her childhood somehow intending to fill up the empty space left in her by her father's death but falling short even as she confesses that all of this despite her mother's best efforts had not made her really happy.

At another point in the novel, when Esther is waiting at the hospital, words like 'sly' and 'leaking' are used to describe water:

*After a while I became aware of a sly, leaking noise. For a minute I thought the walls had begun to discharge the moisture that must saturate them, but then I saw the noise came from a small fountain in one corner of the room.*

*The fountain spurted a few inches into the air from a rough length of pipe, threw up its hands, collapsed and drowned its ragged dribble in a stone basin of yellowing water. (85)*

This contributes to the general atmosphere of mistrust and cynicism. The description of the fountain throwing up its hands in the air for a moment summons the picture of a someone drowning, someone in distress sending an SOS surfacing and calling out for help and then drowning again, in a way mirrors Esther's emotional and psychological state.

*The soprano scream of carriage wheels punished my ear. Sun, seeping through the blinds, filled the bedroom with a sulphurous light. I didn't know how long I had slept but I felt one big twitch of exhaustion.*

*The twin bed next to mine was empty and unmade.*

*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 them 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)*

In the above excerpt, action is juxtaposed against inaction. The briskness and productivity of the mother is juxtaposed against the passivity of the daughter. The action verbs used to describe the mother show her busy day and her will at work juxtaposing Esther's initial stillness followed by an almost snail-like movement which shows Esther's inertia and unwillingness to move. Nonetheless the mother's actions that are described have an undertone of monotony and drudgery accentuated by sentences with similar syntactic arrangement and the use of the linker 'then'. The choice of words, their arrangement and combination and a studied silence at times all adds to create this effect.

**Mind body dichotomy**

There are already two selves in Esther. One self wishes something but is not strong enough to will it and subsequently the other self does something else. Language is used to bring out the fragmentation in the mind and the body and show the divided self. Esther's hand behaves contrary to her wishes.

*I reached for the receiver.*

*My hand advanced a few inches, then retreated and fell limp. I forced it towards the receiver again, but again it stopped short, as if it had collided with a pane of glass. (114)*

Esther is divorced from the hollow voice which speaks into the receiver:

*I dialed the Admissions Office and listened to the zombie voice leave a message that Miss Esther Greenwood was canceling all arrangements to come to summer school. (115)*

**Humour in the spirit of the Absurd**

Humour is created in the narrative in the tradition of the absurd genre of plays through language by exposing a discrepancy in expectation and statement. Expectations are far from normative. Eric calls Esther cynical yet kind saying she reminds him of his sister which in itself is a subversion of factors that determine or lead to a romantic alliance between two people.

The narrative has numerous instances of dry humour – Constantin has what no American man has – 'intuition'. Through this observation, Esther is obviously hinting at the air of complacency and superiority surrounding American men. She mentions their deceptive good looks and utter insensitivity in the same breath:

*Of course, Constantin was much too short, but in his own way he was handsome, with light brown hair and dark blue eyes and a lively, challenging expression. He could almost have been an American, he was so tan and had such good teeth, but I could tell straight away that he wasn't. He had what no American man I've ever met has had, and that's intuition. (70)*

**Multiple realities, multiple contexts**

On many occasions, language is used to conceal rather than reveal and create an alternate reality which is accommodating in nature. When Buddy enthusiastically makes Esther read his poem, she finds it difficult to give an honest response. Esther cannot be truthful to Buddy:

*'Not bad.' I thought it was dreadful. (87)*

More caustic humour is generated which results out of the total disharmony between what Esther thinks and what Buddy thinks she feels about their relationship:

*Buddy sat down beside me. He put his arm around my waist and brushed the hair from my ear. I didn't move. Then I heard him whisper, 'How would you like to be Mrs. Buddy Willard?'*

*I had an awful impulse to laugh. (88)*

He thinks this is what Esther has been waiting to hear which exposes the extent of discrepancy or how out of synch the two are and lays bare the deadness of the relationship and failure of language to enable people to understand each other. The result of course is humorous to the reader.

Buddy does not have even an inkling of how absurd he sounds. Language has this uniqueness about it. It creates multiple contexts, multiple truths, multiple realities and functions at different layers and levels. So at one level language helps maintain equilibrium, a façade; at another level it creates and acquaints one with different realities. After all, how would realities be different if not for language or linguistic representation?

How the same word can be inferred differently and two people can come up with two different interpretations, contexts and inferences drawn from the same word is again evidence that language is inadequate to convey true emotions and meaning. An interesting instance is the way Hilda and Esther use the word 'awful':

*The silence between us was so profound I thought part of it must be my fault.*

*So I said, 'Isn't it awful about the Rosenbergs?'*

*The Rosenbergs were to be electrocuted late that night.*

*'Yes!' Hilda said, and at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat's cradle of her heart...*

*'It's awful such people should be alive.'*

*She yawned then, and her pale orange mouth opened on a large darkness. (96)*

When Esther uses 'awful' to talk about the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, she is expressing her revulsion at the act of electrocution and her sympathies are with the Rosenbergs; When Hilda uses the word 'awful', she uses it to describe the Rosenberg couple. The yawn also shows that Hilda doesn't really care what happens to the Rosenbergs.

### **Language as a political tool of patriarchy**

Buddy's language is the language of coercion, of being completely in his comfort zone and using language to his advantage to get things done. Interestingly, Esther is unable to verbalise what she feels or wants. For instance, when Buddy insists that Esther should learn to ski and he will teach her, there is no mention in the narrative which tells the reader if she even likes skiing or is just giving in because Buddy likes it. Women exist in a cultural and a linguistic space where they scarcely have scope to articulate their needs, wants and desires, because they are not normally expected to have any. Buddy's linguistic verbosity, doesn't allow any space to Esther to articulate.

And even when she does articulate her state or her stand, for instance her stand on marriage, Buddy ridicules her and fails to take her seriously. In fact he speaks patronizingly to her and infantilizes her which proves that there is no way language can empower Esther or help her to articulate what she really wants to convey. Language cannot really ensure that what she wants to convey or communicate to Buddy will reach him because Buddy's conditioning will not allow him to understand Esther:

*'I think I should tell you something Buddy.'*

*'I know,' Buddy said stiffly. 'You've met someone.'*

*'No, it's not that.'*

*'What is it, then?'*

*'I'm never going to get married.'*

*'You're crazy.' Buddy brightened. 'You'll change your mind.'*

*'No. My mind's made up.'*

*But Buddy just went on looking cheerful. (89)*

In the same conversation, Esther lashes out at Buddy for labeling her a 'neurotic':

*'Well, you were right. I am neurotic. I could never settle down in either the country or the city.'*

*'You could live between them,' Buddy suggested helpfully. 'Then you could go to the city sometimes and the country sometimes.'*

*'Well, what's so neurotic about that?'*

*Buddy didn't answer. (89)*

This exchange just goes on to show man or patriarchy's reductionist attitude towards a woman's words or all that she says. If her aspirations are unmentioned, and out of the box there is no provision in language to describe or appropriately represent them. She is a confirmed neurotic. Buddy also misses the entire point about Esther's inability to settle down and his response exposes the unbridgeable gap between their sensibilities.

Buddy seems to be in a habit of indulging in his ability for glib talk. His ability to talk people into doing things is a symbol of his assertion of his power and superiority. Buddy prides himself in using language with almost everyone for manipulative ends:

*...at medical school Buddy had won a prize for persuading the most relatives of dead people to have their dead ones cut up, whether they needed it or not, in the interests of science. (91)*

### **Language as an impasse**

The narrative shows the ability of language to clog meaning and disable understanding instead of facilitating it. One such instance is when Mr. Willard pats Esther and tells her: *'There, there... I think we understand each other.'* (84)

Nothing can be farther from the truth. Despite claiming closeness with Esther and calling her a daughter, Mr. Willard is unable to read her mind which shows how sometimes even family and the people who are socially closest fail to understand a person. A summary statement or a misconstrued remark like that shows



the deep gulf or divide that can make people impossible to understand each other. In fact there could even be an attempt to understand or at least an effort if not for language which glosses over everything. Through language issues that ought to be addressed are left unaddressed. Language makes people presumptuous and through it one asserts one's status and power. The hegemony of language undermines and invisibilises the real state of things. Language is the key feature of representational politics and enables to uphold traditions and a predictable and conventional way of life without so much as allowing anyone to deviate or digress from it. It provides no scope for an alternative. Thus Esther is tongue-tied; she cannot say anything because language does not empower her the way it empowers Mr. Willard.

This tendency of language to clog meaning instead of letting it flow freely is seen again when Esther starts writing her novel:

*From another distanced mind, I saw myself sitting on the breezeway, surrounded by two white clapboard walls, a mock orange bush and a clump of birches and a box-hedge, small as a doll in a doll's house.*

*A feeling of tenderness filled my heart. My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. Elaine. I counted the letters on my fingers. There were six letters in Esther, too. It seemed a lucky thing.*

*Elaine sat on the breezeway in an old yellow nightgown of her mother's waiting for something to happen. It was a sweltering morning in July, and drops of sweat crawled down her back, one by one, like slow insects.*

(116)

Esther looks at herself from a distance; she wants to be the heroine of the book. At one level, no one could develop a heroine on her lines better than she herself because no one knows her better than she herself. On the other hand she is at a disadvantage of knowing the subject too closely and may lack the perspective.

Consequently, she suffers a writer's block and is unable to come up either with a plot or even as much as make a beginning. This inaction represents Esther's inability to verbalise her state which is owing to the overriding feeling of ambivalence and linguistic alienation she experiences. There are several unanswered questions in her mind which has driven her into a state of passivity. She knows herself too well, too closely and therefore perhaps is wanting of a perspective.

This is structurally visible in the narrative as much goes unexplained because of the overlapping of personas of Plath and Esther. Plath in essaying Esther is too close to her to have an independent and removed perspective. Plath seems to be confessing this through Esther's inability to create Elaine. Elaine's posture conveys hollowness, a depletedness combined with a faint hint of hope. The mother's shadow or influence over Elaine's personality is established through the nightgown. Beads of sweat are crawling down her back but they don't result in any reaction from Elaine.

The character does not grow beyond this point and Esther does not get to write anything more about her; consequently, the reader does not get anything more to read about Elaine or Esther's thoughts on Elaine. The failure to create Elaine represents Esther's failure to articulate her predicament. She reaches a

premature impasse in her writing which just shows how impoverished and inept she feels with only a borrowed language and a handed-down tradition of writing as an instrument to express herself. Significantly it is her inability to even form letters that marks the beginning of her insanity.

### **Conclusion**

The novel is marked by a certain restraint in style. One notices that there is no ranting and raving, no hysteria, no dramatic or climactic moments, no cries sent out in despair, no extreme utterances, no effort to bring out the intensity of the anxiety experienced, only a hueless narration. It is precisely this stripped-down, minimalistic tone that lends *The Bell Jar* its unsettling poignancy and quiet power.

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