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THE DETRIMENTAL INFLUENCE OF PATRIARCHY ON ESTHER'S DEPRESSION AND RECOVERY IN *THE BELL JAR* BY SYLVIA PLATH

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This paper examines the detrimental impact of patriarchal societal norms on the mental health of Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Using a feminist theoretical framework combined with psychoanalytic feminist concepts, the study analyzes how patriarchal structures constrain female autonomy and contribute to Esther's psychological decline. Through qualitative literary analysis and close reading of the male characters and their interactions with Esther, the research reveals how the metaphor of the bell jar symbolizes an oppressive system that isolates and suffocates women–particularly those asserting independence. The paper explores how societal expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood, and career shape Esther's identity and exacerbate her feelings of entrapment, leading to her breakdown. It also highlights moments of Esther's resistance and recovery, arguing that overcoming patriarchal control requires a redefinition of self and rejection of restrictive norms. Ultimately, this analysis positions *The Bell Jar* as a seminal feminist work that critiques mid-20th-century gender roles and portrays Esther's journey as both a personal and societal act of liberation.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, depression, patriarchy, gender roles, female writing.

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath, though primarily celebrated as a poet, made a significant contribution to prose literature with *The Bell Jar*, a novel that offers profound insight into the social realities of 1950s America, particularly regarding women's experiences. The novel continues to resonate with contemporary audiences due to its exploration of identity, autonomy–both psychological and corporeal–and the oppressive influence of societal expectations on women's lives. While extensive scholarship has addressed the novel's psychological aspects (Carona & Atanázio, 2024; Biroğlu, 2019; Fadlila, 2013), feminist interpretations remain essential to fully grasp the novel's cultural and political significance. Mid-20th-century female writing serves as a crucial counter-narrative to dominant patriarchal discourses, providing

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marginalized voices with a platform for critique and self-expression (Cixous, 1976, p. 877). Positioning Plath's work within this feminist literary tradition highlights *The Bell Jar* as both a deeply personal reflection and a politically engaged text that dialogues with feminist concerns of its era.

Although scholarly debate continues regarding Plath's own feminist identity or intentions (Richards-Winkler, 2003, p. 16), feminist readings of *The Bell Jar* have proliferated (Cedergren, 2021; Boffano, 2017; Álvarez, 2023; Ferretter, 2008; Budick, 1987). These studies frequently focus on the portrayal of women's mental illness and the nuanced depiction of female experience within broader societal constraints. However, there remains a notable gap in analyzing the direct relationship between patriarchal imperatives and the mental health struggles of female characters. This paper seeks to fill that gap by exploring how the patriarchal structures of the mid-20th century shaped Esther Greenwood's psychological deterioration and eventual recovery, offering a critical feminist perspective on the interplay between societal demands and individual identity formation.

2. Sylvia or Esther?

It is truly impossible to discuss Sylvia Plath's first and only novel, *The Bell Jar*, originally published in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, without considering the life and environment of its author–especially given that Plath committed suicide just one month after the novel's publication. This roman à clef (Đurović, 2013: 15) was first published under her real name in 1967 and later in the USA in 1971, following the wishes of her closest family members.

In 1950, she became, as she described herself, "a Smith girl" (Plath 2000: 119), having earned a place at the prestigious Smith College in Northampton (Gill, 2008: 4). While this was undoubtedly a major achievement, it also marked the beginning of a period filled with anxiety and self-doubt. Her straight-A record from high school continued at college, where her fellow student Nancy Hunter Steiner described her "almost savage industriousness–a clenched-teeth determination to succeed" (ibid.). Sylvia aspired to be everything: both a writer and a teacher, while also nurturing her deep desire to become a mother. Her writings abound with contradictions: "Must never become a mere mother or housewife. […] I will hate a child that substitutes itself for my own purpose: so I must make my own." (Plath 2000: 528) This is preceded by reflections such as: "I think a baby would make me forget myself in a good way. Yet I must find myself. […] Who am I? Why should a

poet be a novelist? Why not? […] I shall perish if I can write about no one but myself." (Plath 2000: 461, 523, 526)

And, in fact, she did perish. Shortly after *The Bell Jar* was published, she took her own life by gas poisoning at the age of 31, having given birth to two children and having become an acclaimed author. The novel itself remains highly controversial regarding its nature–whether it is truly a novel, a work of fiction, a thinly veiled autobiography, or a case study of suicide (Tsank, 2010). Regardless of these labels, *The Bell Jar* stands as a striking example of the overwhelming oppression Plath endured throughout her life, particularly as an intelligent woman growing up in a society that sought to suppress any signs of outspokenness in women, while at the same time glorifying it. As Joe Gill explains:

> Women were faced with contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable demands to be both clever and attractive, confident and submissive; to be high achievers yet to recognize that their greatest achievements would be marriage, children, and home. […] A friend from Plath's later years at Cambridge recalls that after her secret marriage to Ted Hughes, she exclaimed, 'Jane, you can't imagine what a relief it is to be free of that dreadful social pressure.' (Gill, 2008: 5)

All of these factors, along with the fact that her ideas about writing were heavily influenced by male authors during her college years–Auden, Joyce, Dostoevsky, D. H. Lawrence (though she also read extensively from Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Brontë) (Gill, 2008: 76) – could be seen as important pieces of the puzzle when analyzing *The Bell Jar*. Whatever we choose to call it – autobiography or consummate fiction – *The Bell Jar* remains a haunting and jarring testament to a different time and a distinct social and political agenda.

3. The Bell Jar – A Prison of Oppression and Depression

The Bell Jar is widely regarded as a *roman à clef* (Scott, 2023), blending fiction with autobiographical elements in a way that reflects Sylvia Plath's personal struggles. As Jovanović (2016: 27) notes, "most pieces of autofiction are about writing life in search of one's identity," and Plath's novel clearly aligns with this mode of writing. Though names and surface details are fictionalized, the narrative closely parallels real-life events, offering insight into a young woman's psychological disintegration within a rigid social framework.

Esther Greenwood, the protagonist, shares not only biographical experiences with Plath–such as winning a guest editorship in New York, suffering a mental breakdown, and undergoing hospitalization–but also carries symbolic weight.

Richards-Winkler (2003: 21) emphasizes that "through Esther, Plath was able to write more acutely about her own life's experience, as she was an adult survivor projecting backward." The protagonist's name, Esther, meaning "star," and the surname Greenwood, Plath's maternal grandmother's family name–underscores this autobiographical layering. In a revealing statement, Plath described the novel as follows: "What I've done […] is throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add colour – it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels after a breakdown […] I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar" (Bridgford, 2012: 75).

The novel's opening reference to the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg – charged with espionage on behalf of the USSR – is more than a historical aside. It anticipates Esther's own experience with electroshock therapy, suggesting an analogy between political punishment and psychiatric coercion. Esther's reaction – "The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick […]" (Plath, 2005, p. 1) – functions as a premonition. Tsank (2010: 167) reads this moment as a deliberate parallel, while Đurović (2013: 17) sees it as a generational marker that frames Esther's initiation into womanhood.

The psychological weight of societal expectations is a recurring concern in Plath's writing. As Carona and Atanázio (2024: 1) observe, both Plath and her protagonist are stifled by environments that inhibit emotional expression and personal autonomy. These conditions foster internal conflict, which in Esther's case culminates in mental collapse. A related theme appears in Plath's poem "Night Shift", where she evokes a disturbing mechanical sound. Alvarez (2013: 15) interprets this as emblematic of threatening masculine forces: "It is a poem, I suppose, about fear, and although in the course of it the fear is rationalized and explained (that pounding in the night is caused by machines turning), it ends by reasserting precisely the threatening masculine forces there were to be afraid of."

Kate A. Baldwin (2004) expands this connection by arguing that *The Bell Jar* should be read within the ideological framework of Cold War containment. She draws a powerful parallel between Esther's electroconvulsive therapy and the execution of Ethel Rosenberg, framing both as state-sanctioned responses to nonconforming female subjects. Baldwin views the novel as critiquing not only personal oppression but also geopolitical strategies that "contain" women through domesticity, psychological discipline, and social conformity (Baldwin, 2004). This Cold War context enhances the metaphorical resonance of the bell jar itself, suggesting that

Esther's entrapment reflects not just gendered oppression but also broader national anxieties over deviance, citizenship, and identity during the 1950s (Baldwin, 2004: 22–26).

3.1 Patriarchal Structures and the Psychological Fragmentation of Esther Greenwood

In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath constructs a world in which male presence is not only dominant but often invasive – manifesting through physical, psychological, and institutional means. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist, repeatedly encounters male figures who limit her agency, define her identity, or impose authority over her body and choices. This intrusion is rarely overtly violent at first glance, but its cumulative effect is deeply corrosive. Through a series of encounters marked by imbalance of power and symbolic possession, Plath articulates a broader critique of patriarchal norms that suffocate female autonomy and contribute to psychological fragmentation.

The connection between two opposite perceptions of the sexes is a recurring motif in *The Bell Jar.* The male characters are always presented in connection to the city and pollution, whereas female characters represent the natural world (Wilkins, 2012: 38). The image of the patriarchal world being an unhealthy system and hence causing sickness within the world of nature, which has stereotypically been viewed as the world of women, is clear. These ideas resonate the thoughts of ecofeminism as expressed in Karen J. Warren's words that "there are many different 'historical-causal' ideas and explanations for how men's domination over women leads to domination over nature" (Wilkins, 2012: 38).

Furthermore, the title itself is an implication of a closed system (the bell jar) which could be interpreted as a metaphorical amalgam of patriarchy and Esther's overwhelming depression (Carona & Atanázio, 2024: 2). Mason Harris notes that "the novel is enclosed in many prisons, all expanded forms of the bell jar" (Wilkins, 2012: 38). This may also be seen as a reference to the Rosenbergs, who were, prior to electrocution, both imprisoned in a system and by a system of patriarchy. Electricity itself, in this context may be viewed as a form of male exploitation of nature and its possibilities, and though it has numerous benefits and is positive on the whole, it it was still used for punishment and pain. Budick claims that "[i]n the context of international relations, electricity preserves social order by painfully punishing dissent. In the world of sexual relations, it is the powerful male charge

that obliterates female consciousness (Esther falls asleep after her treatment), shrinking and fragmenting her identity […]" (2012: 211).

Moreover, one of the ways in which men "pollute" Esther is by removing her ability to make choices about her future. "The impossibility of the choices available to women such as her heroine Esther Greenwood is exposed to dreadful effect" (Gill 2008: 5). Esther herself says, at one point: "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, but choosing one meant losing all the rest […]" (Plath 2005: 73). A connection could be drawn between this metaphor and the one used by D. H. Lawrence in *Women in Love,* which here represents Esther's paralysis when faced with a "multitude of unreachable and indistinguishable opportunities" (Gill 2008: 76) imposed by the world of men. What it comes down to is that it might represent frustrated desire. (Gill 2008: 76)

3.2. Manifestations of Male Dominance and Violence in The Bell Jar's Urban Landscape

Allison Wilkins (2012) develops the idea that the male figures function as pollutants in this context, in the city. The first significant male figure introduced is Lenny Shepherd, a disc jockey who resides in a lavish apartment decorated with hunting trophies–symbols of his control over nature. This setting, a display of his power and masculinity, becomes the backdrop for his interaction with Doreen, Esther's more free-spirited friend, and Esther herself. Lenny's intention is to seduce Doreen, who is clearly intoxicated, treating her much like one of his conquests. Esther, in contrast, is largely overlooked during the encounter. Notably, before the encounter turns sexual–though this is only implied–Lenny and Doreen are described as physically engaged in what resembles a struggle, with Lenny growling like an animal: "Then Lenny gave a terrible roar" (Plath 2005: 15), and soon after calling Doreen "a bitch" (ibid.). Disturbed by the scene, Esther leaves the apartment and steps into the stifling heat, which she describes as striking her "like a last insult" (Plath 2005: 16). This moment leaves her disoriented, confessing that she no longer knows where she is.

Another example of harmful male behaviour is that of Marco, a friend of Lenny Shepherd's. Marco is a representation of brute force and potential for violence among men. Esther labels him a "woman-hater" (Plath 2005: 102), which proves absolutely true since subsequently Marco tries to rape Esther all the while calling her a "slut":

"Sluts, all sluts. […] Yes or no, it's all the same." (Plath 2005: 105) As Karen Warren notes: "Probably no behaviour of dominance is more symptomatic and symbolic of patriarchy than rape" (Wilkins, 2012: 44), though, as we know today, rape is considered a major crime and is considered outrageous, even in a male dominated society However, apart from the verbal insults themselves and the brutal attempt at rape, another deeply insulting act is that of Marco bleeding on Esther (after she had punched him in the nose), as if he had marked with his own blood (Wagner, 2009: 75). This bout of aggression taught Esther the lengths to which men are willing and capable of going in order to get what they want, even if it means subduing her body in the aftermath of a failed attempt to subdue her mind and intellect. On the same note, even before this flagrant demonstration of violence and hate, at the very beginning of their encounter Marco grabs Esther so firmly by the arm that it leaves it bruised: "I looked down at my arm. A thumbprint purpled into view. Marco watched me. Then he pointed to the underside of my arm. […] I looked, and saw four, faint matching prints." (Plath 2005: 101). Not only did Marco cause physical harm to Esther, but he also proudly showed off his dominance by pointing to his "accomplishment".

Moreover, the dance scene with the two of them is worth mentioning. After he had inflicted pain upon her body, Marco tried to get her drunk (ordering daiquiris for Esther without her knowing or asking for it) and asked her for a dance. However, saying "asked" would be putting it mildly, since he did not take her initial refusal for an answer. What is more, he gripped her arm and pulled her onto the dance floor. Even after she said that she couldn't dance, he replied: "You don't have to dance. I'll do the dancing. […] Pretend you are drowning." (Plath 2005: 102-103) The message here is obvious. Her will, her desires, her fears even, are absolutely irrelevant since she will be made to do what the man wants, even if it entails her own death.

After the Marco incident, Esther decides to return home to her mother's house. Here she is awaited by the news that she had not been accepted for a creative writing class. An important fact is that the professor of the class is a man, thus, she is told by a man what she can or cannot do, or whether she is or is not a writer. Allison Wilkins puts it like this:

> Not getting into the writing class makes Esther question her identity: if she is a writer, then she should be in the class; she is not in the class, so she cannot be a writer. It must be mentioned that the professor of the class is a man; Esther is again being told who she is – or, in this case, who she is not – by a male. (2012: 46).

Following this revelation, Esther sinks into depression, and her suicide attempt is to follow soon afterwards. While in this state, she loses her ability to read and write, and the only thing she can utter and put on paper are nonsensical patterns and lines of randomly scattered letters: Bababadalgharaghtakamminarronn-konnbronntonnerronnruonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoohoordenenthhurnuk! (Plath 2005: 119).

Esther's handwriting had also changed to an unrecognizable degree, all the possible signs of her becoming a whole different person, or at the very least, ceasing to be who she was. She was utterly confused about what she was to do that summer or in her future in general. She made plans on what to do before the beginning of the next semester, but all of them fell through as she could not even bring herself to start any of it. She spent most of her time in her room, predominantly in her bed, covering her head with the sheets – "[…] and let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone" (Plath 2005: 119) In the events to follow she decides to put off the novel she had intended to write, not to go to the honours programme and become an "ordinary English major" (Plath 2005: 120). Finally, her mother thought of convincing her to learn shorthand, to have something she deemed useful, for future employment. Although Esther pondered over the idea for a moment she discarded it momentarily, realizing she couldn't stand being neither a secretary nor a typist. (Plath 2005: 121) Throughout this period she had been seeing a Doctor Theresa, who she tried to go to help her deal with her malady, but all she got and requested from her were sleeping pills. Dr Theresa was the one who recommended a psychiatrist, a Dr Gordon, to Esther.

3.3. Gendered Power Dynamics, Female Disillusionment, and the Journey toward Autonomy

Here we come across another toxic male character whose involvement in "treating" Esther's depression had probably caused her to sink even deeper and led to her coming suicide attempt. Esther's first impression of him was one of inviolable hate – "I hated him the moment I walked in through the door." (Plath 2005: 123) Contrary to her expectations of an old, sentient man who could lead her to the answers to her countless questions, she had come across a young, handsome man, full of himself and showing off a photo of a beautiful trophy wife and children on his desk. This was not something unusual for the time, since most physicians were men, medicine having been under male dominance. We can assume that her therapy

sessions with Dr Gordon made Esther feel constantly under threat and that she was not at all happy for going to him – "Doctor Gordon cradled his pencil like a slim, silver bullet." (Plath 2005: 129).

We are faced with a figure of a male character who is supposed to help Esther heal, help her rise from the ever-sinking depths of her depression, but instead pushes her deeper into the abyss. The moment he prescribes electroshock therapy he assumes control over her mind and her soma. Dr Gordon is a representation of an extremely patriarchal force of society and has been present in the novel throughout the other male characters, but it is his character that gives the male societal superposition its "institutional legitimacy" (Đurović, 2013: 24). He presupposes to know what Esther's problem is, without even paying enough attention to her neither as a patient nor as a young woman in very turbulent times. Esther's conditioned worsened exponentially after the first treatment. A striking sentence in which she sees this as a punishment for something, but does not know what, appears: "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done." (Plath 2005: 138).

If we view this statement in the light of the events which we know had led to Esther's illness and its aggressive treatment, we can assume that Esther thought she was to be blamed for being who she was, for trying to be more than society expected from her, for "daring" to venture outside of the confines of the patriarchal image of what a woman should or should not do, and for failing to meet all those bipolar criteria. The terrible thing that she had done was that she tried to be a self-governed woman in a man-governed world, and now she was to be rectified by one of the members of that sex and turned not into what she was supposed to be based on her own individual predispositions, but into what she should be and should always have been based on what men thought was good for her, even though that was the reason for her downfall.

Unlike the other male characters in the novel, which were all, to a certain extent, hurtful towards Esther, Buddy Willard is a representation of a less threatening male figure, but extremely influential in the novel. Esther had known Buddy from childhood, their families were very close and it seems that Buddy loves Esther. Esther, on the other hand, would prove to be a bit more difficult to read on this matter, since she does love him up to a certain point, but after that she grows distant. Buddy could, in fact, be viewed as the instigator of Esther's ruination (Wilkins, 2012: 40). He wants to marry Esther, but to her that would mean to "flatten out underneath his feet." (Plath 2005: 80) Her first impulse to his proposal

of marriage was to burst out laughing and saying that she was not yet ready for such a leap.

Not only would it have been an enormous change in her life, it would also foretell her rejecting everything she thought she was. On one occasion Buddy ridiculed her desire to become a poet and diminished the worth of any piece of writing by comparing a poem to "a piece of dust" (Plath 2005: 53). What is more, Buddy is of the opinion that once she has had children and become a wife, her attitude towards writing and her becoming a poet would most definitely change, in the sense that she would no longer feel as enthused with that idea as she is:

> So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state. (Plath 2005: 81)

The metaphor of political oppression here is used to demonstrate Esther's fear of patriarchal oppression in marriage. (Wilkins, 2012: 41)

Another scene where Esther is faced with men's dominion over women is the childbirth scene. Buddy Willard, who is studying to be a doctor during their courtship, invites Esther to come to the hospital where he works. Although the cadavers did not bother Esther much, what she couldn't avert her eyes from was the sight of a woman giving birth. One of Buddy's colleagues told her that she shouldn't be seeing that, in fact, no woman should, because then no woman would want to have a baby and that would be the end of the human race. (Plath 2005: 61) Again we have a man telling Esther what she, as a woman, should or shouldn't do, under the guise of her own well-being. It is a flagrant statement of men's awareness of the importance of women and their pivotal role in the creation of life, but also their willingness to take even that from them, to the point of leaving them unaware what will/would happen to them in the process of childbirth, all for the cause of preserving their own, male, world in which women are but tools.

The next scene confirms this. Buddy goes on to explain to Esther that the woman whom she had seen screaming in pain was on a drug that would make her forget she had had any pain and that she was not even fully conscious. "I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent," (Plath, 2005: 62) are Esther's words. The labour drug "symbolizes the way men force women to deny crucial aspects of their experience in order to conform with what men want them to be." (Wilkins, 2012: 42) Even childbirth, which is and always has been supposed to be an entirely female experience is being stolen and controlled by men.

Following Buddy's recovery from tuberculosis, he tries to teach Esther how to ski, disregarding all her expressions of fear and doubt (reminiscent of Marco's behaviour on the dance floor), even though he has never skied himself. Despite Esther's primary refusal of the idea of going down the slope, after a thought of her potential death which formed "coolly as a tree or flower" (Plath 2005: 92) she flings herself down the slope – "This is what is to be happy." (Plath 2005: 93). However, her path is cut by another skier, a male one and she falls and gets her leg broken in two places. Once again, a member of the patriarchy inflicts pain on her body and interrupts her infinitesimally short moment of freedom and happiness. Throughout the novel, the male characters have been depicted as inflictors of pain.

Nevertheless, despite all the previous occurrences, it is after discovering Buddy Willard's lie that Esther is irremediably disappointed with him and decides to sever all ties with him. At one moment, he confessed to Esther that he was not, in fact, a virgin since he had lost his virginity with another woman. Esther who was still a virgin, preserving herself for marriage in accordance with the times, could not get over this double standard of sexuality and became obsessed with the idea of losing her virginity – "Ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck." (Plath 2005: 218).

Esther loses her virginity with a man called Irwin – a kind and respectful man – she had known for a short while, but the act itself, even though it represented a "miraculous change" (Plath 2005: 218) was yet another source of unexpected pain. Still, this pain was a good one since it finally made her feel like she belonged in the world of women – "I couldn't possibly be a virgin any more. I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition." (Plath 2005: 219) Losing her virginity, and in it, regaining control over her sexuality, her body and her Self, Esther broke away from everything society expected her to be and through this act she defied the patriarchy which had broken her. Finally, it was through one of its members that Esther found a way to remake herself, which would ultimately lead to her recovery. Basically, Esther's newly found aspect of her womanhood shows her the path towards health.

It would be interesting here to entertain the idea of Esther's position in the world of women, especially after a situation in which she witnessed explicit sexual behaviour she had been cautioned against by the patriarchy, which at the same time revelled in it and made full use of. The two female characters from the city who are introduced first are Doreen and Betsy. On the level of the novel, they are representative of two contradictory female models with whom Esther can equally

identify (Đurović, 2013: 18). Doreen is described as an easy-going, outspoken, brazen and beautiful woman who is not inexperienced in dealings with men. Basically, mostly everything Esther was not, but aspired to be. Esther actually felt so out of place when out with Doreen that she created an alter-ego for herself – Elly Higginbottom, from Chicago. "After that I felt safer." (Plath 2005: 11).

The other woman, Betsy, was an absolute opposite to Doreen – a well brought-up girl, smart (but not as smart as Esther), cheerful and hardworking. Doreen at one moment calls her a "Pollyanna Cowgirl" (Plath 2005: 6). Betsy was definitely the one Esther could identify with more but struggled to accept that. This is an important distinction because Esther was torn between two worlds of women which were worlds apart. In one situation, Esther sees Doreen at her doorstep visibly intoxicated and incapable of taking care of herself (after an outing with a man), so much so that at one moment she vomits on the carpet in front of Esther's room while being held in Esther's arms. Again, the image of a woman being sick after an encounter with a man resurfaces. It is in this moment that Esther decides that she will no longer have anything to do with Doreen and that it is Betsy who she resembles at heart, thus going back to her and her "innocent friends". (Plath 2005: 21) In these first few chapters, we bear witness to the very beginning of Esther's internal divide due to a desperate attempt to "imitate, accept and assimilate" the two opposite types of womanhood that she sees in her friends, all of which will lead up to the break-down of her own personality (Đurović, 2013: 19).

However, though these women may have been cogs in the overall machinery of Esther's psychological downfall, it was, again, a woman who leads her on the path of recovery and liberation. While Dr Gordon and his brutal and inhumane approach almost cost Esther her life, Dr Nolan (who treats her after a failed suicide attempt) gives Esther hope and faith in a new beginning. Dr Nolan is a kind and empathetic woman who challenges both the notion that only men could be doctors and that electroshock therapy must necessarily be painful (Bloom, 2009: 50). Even though at first Esther was sceptical of Dr Nolan and even threatens to actually kill herself if given another electroshock therapy (*ibid.*), in time she grows to even love her doctor and finds solace and comfort in her presence (Bloom, 2009: 52). Another very important aspect of their relationship is that Dr Nolan gives Esther a prescription for a diaphragm, showing, once again, her intent to protect Esther and her psyche by giving her the means to have control over her body and her sexuality. The importance of this is highlighted by Bennet:

> Her dilemma is resolved, however factitiously, in the final section of the novel through her contact with Dr. Nolan, the "good mother," and through her acquisition of a diaphragm, the contraceptive device that will presumably allow her to exercise her femininity without fear of accidentally falling under the domination of a man by becoming pregnant and therefore dependent, as, in effect, Plath's mother did. (qtd. in Bloom, 2009: 54)

Though men have had a detrimental and very harmful influence on Esther as well as numerous women around her, it is in a woman and in her own femininity and womanhood that Esther finds the strength and support to combat and ultimately win in a male world. While the male doctor made her sick, the female doctor cured her and gave her insight into another world, that of empowered women, who were empowered not through obeying the rules of patriarchy, but through expressing their true female selves, as Esther must learn to do herself.

4. Conclusion

The male characters in *The Bell Jar* can be understood as distinct manifestations of patriarchy, which, from Esther's perspective, collectively contribute to her psychological decline and suicide attempt. While no single individual exerts a decisive influence, their combined impact creates an oppressive environment in which Esther feels increasingly alienated and dehumanized. Emotionally and physically betrayed, hurt, and abandoned by nearly every man she encounters, Esther confronts the bleak prospect of losing herself to a society that demands conformity. In this sense, patriarchy attempts to annihilate the authentic Esther for failing to meet its prescribed standards. Her depression emerges as a consequence of the relentless and pervasive pressures present across every sphere of her existence. Yet, her eventual recovery symbolizes a profound resistance–not only against the patriarchal system but also through an embrace of her own femininity, which becomes a source of empowerment and strength.

The Bell Jar may be read as an autobiographical reflection, not only of Sylvia Plath's personal struggles but also of a broader experience shared by many young women of the era. Esther serves as a nuanced representation of those women–often characterized by heightened sensitivity or psychological vulnerability–who were particularly susceptible to the mental health consequences imposed by rigid patriarchal norms. Although not all women endured such outcomes, the novel underscores the specific risks faced by those unable or unwilling to conform. Each male character, whether intentionally or unwittingly, leaves subtle yet enduring scars

on Esther's psyche, illustrating the insidious and often unconscious complicity within the patriarchal framework. Ultimately, *The Bell Jar* exposes the devastating effects of patriarchal oppression while telling the story of a woman who, after numerous battles both lost and won, shatters the bell jar enclosing her and emerges into the world renewed.

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