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Marriage and the Exploitation of Women: A Case-Study of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath

Abstract

The present is a case study with a special focus on the institution of marriage which is inflicted upon women for their exploitation as represented in the selected text. This objective has been realized through a text-based exploration of the exploitation of female members of the society in the name of marriage. The selected text has been analyzed in light of feminist ideology. The research highlights the exploitation of women in the 1950s. The institution of marriage has been viewed as a hard chain that restricts female members of American society from flourishing as individual beings. The outcome of this exploitation has been seen in the negation of this institution by the protagonist and her negative impression of this institution. The study has consulted the perspectives of feminists such as Josephine Donovan, Kate Millet and Sheila Cronan to critically evaluate the suffering and its consequences for the protagonist.

Key Words:

domestic life, female exploitation, marriage, patriarchal totalitarianism, Sylvia Plath.

Introduction

In the 1950s, American society was not generally open to women as individuals. Though after the Second World War, when capitalist ideology was at its peak, they were allowed to work and earn money. But it was not acceptable for women to have a higher position in society. Women were also facing strict social patterns without even having entered into marital relationships. But the institution of marriage is considered the strongest pillar of patriarchal ideology. It is considered the major driving force to exploit women. This institution demands twenty-four-hour service from women, as a result, they do not find enough time to contemplate their life as an individual being. They are forced to be engaged in domestic life to such an extent that they cannot even think about their rights and their legitimate needs.

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (2014, first published 1963) draws the attention of the reader towards female exploitation under the banner of the institution of marriage. This institution appears to be protective of females. Male members claim that this institution has been created to guard women. Its aim is to free them from working outside the house. In reality, it has been created for men's comfort and to bind women inside the four walls of their house. It is to make the home atmosphere peaceful for men so that after the hectic routine of job men may have cooked food, washed clothes, dishes and a clean house. This school of thought allots women sub ordinate roles and grants men authoritative roles. They were expected to behave in the light of the normative roles and to bear children.

Childbearing is another tactic to bind women. This makes the institution of marriage more useful for men.

Women are to bear and bring up children. They have to take care of the child and men are free from this responsibility because they run the house and earn money. Plath, through her protagonist Esther Greenwood who has been disillusioned of these mistreated restrictive patterns of society, asserts that marriage is a tactic for female exploitation. It has not been designed to guard women. It has been designed to subjugate their freedom and to entrap them in domestic life. The study has analyzed the strict patterns of the society which force women to perform allotted roles through the views of the protagonist Esther Greenwood. The study has viewed the whole scenario from Esther's point of view. The focus is upon the views of women regarding the institution of marriage.

Literature Review

Sylvia Plath is an American writer and her entire literary output spins around feminism. Her poems usually are based on the theme of separation and alienation and also deal with the suicide and miseries of the female members of society. She has very bold and strong views regarding each aspect of life. *Lady Lazarus* (Plath, 1962) is based on the theme of feminist submission and miseries. Most of her literary writings reflect her own life, experiences, happiness and sorrows. Hence, viewing Sylvia's work from the autobiographical perspective has been a common trend among critics.

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In her writings, Plath adds her own life experiences and portrays the miserable picture of females living in the 1950's American society. *The Bell Jar* is her greater feminist writing that is the story of an innocent girl who has been entrapped in the social bell jar of male dominance and has the feminine sense of being exploited by the 1950's social setup. The way she chooses to liberate herself from this oppression is self-victimization. It leads her towards depression and this sense of social repression builds in her dual personality and a mental gap which causes inner and outer conflict. The literature review consists of a study of the previously conducted research on the novel *The Bell Jar*, particularly as a feminist novel.

For Edward Butscher (1976), the social oppression depicted in Plath's novel raises the "double demon" in her female character. He writes: "*The Bell Jar* is more than the personal vendetta; it is a solid ... a masterpiece of sardonic satire and sincere protest, an authentic American novel about the disintegration of America" (310). He highlights Plath's intention to reveal her predicament of "evil double" (307) by using her protagonist as an "alter ego".

In the opinion of David Peck (1987), *The Bell Jar* is a feminist landmark. The novel which was published one month before the death of its author reveals the protagonist's dropping down into schizophrenic hell and the initial steps of her psychological healing. Peck also argues that the novel is enriched with thematic depths as it tells the tale of a grown-up female of the 1950s. The author's analysis of the novel throws light on the difficulties of women writers in the social setup of the 1950s. The article declares the novel as a bludgeon in the war to convey the argument of literature back into the perspective of the lives out of which it develops. The novel draws readers' attention towards the unease for the misplaced individual in a society that does not cater to human needs, where institutions no longer work. Hence the novel is an essential feminist initiation in the war against 1950's social setup.

According to Linda Wagner-Martin (1992), the novel highlights the "ritualized feminine behavior" (34). The novel is clearly a tale of a woman's bitter tragedy. Kristen Elia (2003, pp.1-5) views *The Bell Jar* through a feminist lens and analyses the young women's role in the oppressive and patriarchal society of the 1950s. The narrative highlights the chief aim of the protagonist Esther Greenwood to be a working woman in the field of writing which was at that time completely dominated by men. Hence, the problem, the psychological trauma she faced in the form of the bell jar, is the major aim of the critique to uncover. Esther was born to be a writer, she had this God gifted skill in her; hence she gets the opportunity for guest editorship.

Mahrukh Baig (2013, pp.1-17) argues that Plath strives to highlight "female degradation through male dominance and double sexual standards" (p.1) in the 1950's American society. The novel has three layers and all the layers reveal the woman's fight back against social constraints. These three layers of jar include various thematic depths which build up an airless vacuum around women. The chief aim of the novel in all thematic depths is to portray a woman's resistance despite suffocation. Hence the novel traces the journey of a woman fighting for her freedom from the imprisonment of an airless life.

Theoretical Perspective

The present study endeavors to explore the text of Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* from the feminist perspective. Plath has shown that in the mid-twentieth-century American society, women were subjected to oppression at the hands of the patriarchal social order and that the consequences of such subjugation were negative. Patriarchy uses the institution of marriage to keep women under control. Plath shows us the institution of marriage from the viewpoint of the central character, Esther Greenwood who sees married women as, "slave", "numb", and "brainwashed" (*The Bell Jar*, 76). The study also includes men's perspective on marriage. The text of the novel serves as the primary source and secondary sources consist of scholarly journal articles and books.

Feminism as a theory is based on the rejection of the ideology of the superiority of men. The American feminist Kate Millet in her book *The Sexual Politics* (1969) sees patriarchy as a political institution that focused on the subordination of women. Though, patriarchy has been focused as a theory while conducting the research because both the theories are inter-related as one denies the other and one is the reason for the emergence of the other. The present research focuses on the concept of the institution of marriage and allotted gender roles from a woman's viewpoint.

Sandra M. Gilbert (1978, p.146) writes about Sylvia's interpretation of marriage at an early age: "I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from three meals a day--- Spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free". Some feminists are not in favor of the institution of marriage. Sheila Cronan (1973, 219) thinks that the freedom of women "...can never be achieved without the eradication of marriage". Marlene Dixon (1977) observes: "The institution of marriage paves the way for women oppression: through the role of wife the suppression of women's rights is sustained".

The prescribed normative roles of patriarchal ideology are the roles through which women are pushed into darkness. Lois Tyson in her book *Critical Theory Today* (2006, 85) writes that these roles project women as irrational, submissive, and inessential. Simon de Beauvoir remarks: "...humanity is basically male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... He is the subject, he is absolute - she is the other" (1961, 59). Josephine Donovan (1997) has also expressed a similar opinion.

For the purpose of the present study, the following research questions have been framed:

- What stereotyped view of marriage in a male-dominated community has been depicted in the novel by Plath?

- How domestic and family roles work as the major driving force behind female exploitation in the institution of marriage as depicted in *The Bell Jar*?
- To what extent bearing a child serves as the major pillar in the exploitation of women through marital relationships?

Discussion & Analysis

Domestic Roles

In the American society shown in Plath's novel, married women were required to play their traditional gender roles which included mainly housekeeping and bringing up children. However, Esther, a prominent character in the novel, prefers to view her society from her own viewpoint. That is why the patriarchal concept of marriage leaves a depressing impression on her mind. Marriage seems to her as a restricting experience which forces her to give up her individual ideals and become what the institution of marriage demands from her. Mrs. Greenwood and Mrs. Willard have been presented in the novel as the two models of stereotyped patriarchal wives. Esther's impression of the institution of marriage is mainly based on these models. The rigid roles for married women shape their negative impression of marriage. She is confused by the social demand for chastity and disillusioned by the narrow approach of boys. As a consequence, Esther turns against marriage and decides never to enter marriage.

Esther was only nine when she lost her father. Esther's mother had to work very hard to earn her living. She wanted Esther to be a typist so that she was able to get some work after her college time. Hence, women were expected not only to do housekeeping but in the lurch, they were expected to run the house as well.

My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen. She was always on to me to learn shorthand after college, so I'd have a practical skill as well as a college degree. "Even the apostles were tentmakers", she'd say, "they had to live, just the way we do" (*The Bell Jar*, p.35).

Esther's impressions of marriage are pessimistic; she views the institution of marriage as a kind of authority used by men to suppress the rights of women. Mrs. Willard often shares her view of marital life with Esther. Mrs. Willard is a stereotyped housewife and she has a typical view of marriage which is predominantly patriarchal. She holds extremist views about the purity of men and women. When Esther comes to their home, she notices her closely to get some idea about her virginity: "Mrs. Willard was a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both. When I first went to her house for supper, she gave me a queer, shrewd, searching look, and I knew she was trying to tell whether I was a virgin or not" (*The Bell Jar*, p.63).

Mrs. Willard performs daily tasks while being a working woman at the same time. The novel offers many occasions when Esther sees domestic roles as male agenda to suppress women through marriage. On her visit to Mrs. Willard's house, she finds her working hard to mend her husband's old suit. Mrs. Willard adds "tweedy browns and greens and blues patterning" (p. 75) into the braid. But then it is used as a kitchen mat instead of being a decoration on the wall. This is how Esther records her response to this situation: "And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (*The Bell Jar*, pp.75-76).

Such notable remarks reveal the male dominance of the day. She knows the real motive behind the cunning offering of gifts before marriage. For her, it is part of men's plan to entrap women. This throws light on the subordinate roles of women and emphasizes the central position of men in marital relationships. Therefore, Esther is forced to see marriage as a male plan to deprive married women of their freedom.

Virginity was another patriarchal concept that was attributed only to female members of society. Women were expected to guard their chastity before their marriage. Men were excluded from this responsibility. If some girl could not do so, she was punished in a way that she had to face hardships. Mrs. Willard shares such patriarchal views with Esther which throws light upon the preservation of virginity as another female allotted role. Mrs. Willard tells her son Buddy: "What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security". Just like a true patriarchal woman, she stresses the need of a woman to be sheltered by a man. She says: "What a man is: an arrow into the future, and what a woman is: the place an arrow shoots off from" (*The Bell Jar*, p.64). Mrs. Willard's views reflect the acceptance of the sub-ordinate roles for women as well as the dominance of men.

The article sent to Esther through her mother is another proof of domestic and allotted roles for women. The article entitled 'In Defense of Chastity' argues that a woman must not go into bed with any man before her marriage. She can do so only with her husband after their marriage. According to Esther, the chief objective of the article was to project the difference between the roles of men and women. They come from two distinct worlds. These two worlds can only be combined through marriage. "It gave all the reasons: a girl should not sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married" (*The Bell Jar*, p.72). For Mrs. Willard, every girl must realize this fact before it's too late for her.

The article says that the type of woman a man wants to marry is the pure woman and it is their sense of superiority that makes men prefer pure women. A man wants a woman to learn the art of intimacy from him. It is not appropriate for a woman to have the

knowledge of intimacy independently: “The best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they were not pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex” (*The Bell Jar*, p.72).

The article also reveals the deceitful approach of men. They seduce women although they assure that they will ultimately marry the fallen women. The women, who fulfill the demands of treacherous men, lose their dignity. Such women turn into a commodity for men. They hardly succeed in winning the trust of men: “Of course they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men and they would end up by making her life miserable” (*The Bell Jar*, p.72). Esther is quite sure that the article forces men’s viewpoint upon women. Providing the female point of view which was absent in the article, Plath observes sarcastically: “Now the one thing this article didn’t seem to me to consider was how a girl felt” (*The Bell Jar*, p.72).

Childbearing

For Esther, the institution of marriage and the process of childbearing both work together like a spider’s network. “So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (*The Bell Jar*, p.76). Words like “slave”, “numb”, and “brainwashed” show her depressing view of marriage.

The process of childbearing is a symbol of the entrapment and the consequent suffering of women. Linda Wagner-Martin (1992, p.38) has suggested that Esther is quite conscious of the choices in her life. Esther knows clearly that a woman can either establish herself in a career or she can become a housewife, but she cannot succeed in both at the same time. In a scene in chapter six, Esther is in the hospital with Buddy Willard and sees a pregnant woman who is about to deliver a baby. For Esther, the table upon which the woman lies is “...some awful torture table” as it has “metal stirrups”, and different kinds of “wires”, “instruments” and “tubes”. She sees the woman’s baby bump as, “... an enormous spider fat stomach and two little ugly spindle legs”. During the process of delivering the baby, her disturbing sounds are seen as, “inhuman whooping noise” (*The Bell Jar*, p.58). These details are horrifying. The patient was given some drugs to relieve her of the pain of delivery. Esther perceives this drug as something which was invented by a man. The drug works to reduce the pain. The woman will, at some later time, start conceiving another baby: “... when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long blind, a doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again” (*The Bell Jar*, p.58). Plath sees the use of the painkilling drug as a conspiracy of the patriarchy against a woman.

In the novel, Dodo Conway is the greatest symbol of female exploitation through marital and childbearing processes. Plath portrays Dodo Conway, a pregnant woman with six children, in these words: “A woman not five feet tall, with a grotesque protruding stomach, was wheeling an old black baby carriage down the street. Two or three small children of various sizes, all pale, with smudgy faces and bare smudgy knees, wobbled along in the shadow of her skirts” (*The Bell Jar*, p.104). Now she is expecting her seventh baby and has been offered a special discount from the milkman. In the name of marriage, she is continuously being exploited. She has to bear children and bring them up as well. All the responsibility is upon her shoulders while her husband is free from these roles as these are the domestic roles for women only.

Conclusion

The discussion concludes that marriage is a tactic for female exploitation. It is a patriarchal agenda to deprive women of their individual self-realization. After their marriage, society binds women into domestic roles and into childbearing processes. The aim is to deprive them of spare time so that they may not be able to think for their own selves. The events of the novel clearly reflect the domestic roles for women. Childbearing is the strongest chain that binds a woman and confines her strongly into the four walls of her house. Her quality of fecundity becomes the greatest hurdle in her career and talent. Summing up the discussion, it may be said that Plath highlights women’s plight and the attitude of society towards them. The narrative is an alarm for females and for the society as well. It reminds female members of the society of their exploitation in the name of marriage which is the agenda behind men’s love for women. This realization is expected to make women think of their place in society and act accordingly. The narrative also throws light upon society’s attitude towards its female members. The biased attitude of patriarchal society was one of the causes of increasing depression among female patients in American society in the mid-twentieth century. Hence, the narrative insists upon the society to change its approach and give way to feminist ideology by crushing the oppressive patriarchal agenda. Else, it can result in social chaos which is destructive.

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