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THE PROBLEMATICS OF EXISTENTIAL ANGUISH: MOTHER-DAUGHTER CONFLICT IN  
SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*

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ABSTRACT

Mother-daughter conflict is not a simplistic one-way study of daughter's rebellion against her mother's orthodox thinking and lifestyle, but a complex study of the causes and consequences of the rift between two females that differ in time and being. The reasons for the mother's continuous insistence on need for her daughter to bow down to social, traditional and moral obligations will be taken into account. On the other hand, the daughter's decision not to settle down for the roles that made her mother submissive, powerless and docile will be analysed.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explores what it meant to be a daughter, wife, lover, mother and most importantly, a woman in 1950s. In this research paper, Beauvoir's theoretical postulates regarding mother-daughter relationship will be analysed vis-à-vis the lived experiences of the character of Esther in *The Bell Jar*.

**Key Words:** Existential feminism, mother-daughter conflict, Sylvia plath, The Bell Jar, Generation gap, Search for self, Self-Other.

*The Bell Jar* is an autobiographical account of major events in Plath's life. The book is a purgative expression of Plath's solitary existence. It is the journey of Esther (fictional name of Plath) who had hard time in gathering courage to live life on her own terms. She had to fight against the ingrained beliefs, norms and expectations that society had woven into her.

All through her life, Esther struggled to resolve the dichotomy between her real self and the ideal self that she was expected to perform. Esther is the product of expectations of her society. Her inability to mould herself in accordance with the stereotypical expectations from a woman and the societal pressure to not to be her real self, strangled her sense of self and identity altogether.

The problem of inadaptability got worse when Esther's mother also emphasised upon the need for her to be a woman as per the social expectations. Beauvoir's view that the mother is "...at once overweeningly affectionate and hostile towards the daughter; she saddles her child with her own destiny: a way of revenging herself for it" relates to Esther's troubled relationship with her mother (*The Second Sex* 309). Esther's anguish can be equated with the anguish of Jamaica Kincaid, who has worked upon the theme of mother-daughter

conflict in her semi-autobiographical works. For instance, her poem entitled "Girl", which is a set of directions that a mother gives to her growing daughter in order to curb her instinct to be unusual and different.

According to Beauvoir, intellectual women suffer from isolation, self-doubt and insecurity as they are unlike other women. "The independent woman, and above all the intellectual, who thinks about her situation-will suffer, as a woman, from inferiority complex..." (*The Second Sex* 694). The effort to be subjects, and not objects requires courage as it signifies the choice to be a part of the dreaded realm of what Sartre calls 'Nothingness' (*Being and Nothingness*). The anxiety that accompanies the freedom of choice is an undesirable existential experience. Thus, Esther's existential dilemma of being different echoes Beauvoir's depiction of the pangs and sufferings of intellectual and assertive women.

Throughout her life, Esther struggled to be free of expectations imposed on her. Her mother expected from her to learn typing and shorthand. The social setup in New York expected her to be fashionable, sexually liberal and studious at the same time. The gender norms of the times pressurised her to settle down and bring up children. Esther could not connect herself with either of these sanctioned roles and felt like an outsider all the time.

In the beginning of the book, Esther confesses that she wanted to write and to travel. But she felt the pressure to fall in line with others around her. Her being different from others threatened her. She felt uneasy for being unlike other girls around her who were having the best time of their life in New York- going for parties, dating, getting expensive makeup kits as gifts, purchasing expensive dresses and writing about fashion for the magazine they were working for. Esther tried hard to conceal the fact that she was different from other girls by adopting fictional names and selves. She behaved like the imaginary character Elly in front of Lenny and even tried to be like her friends Doreen or Betsy at times but inwardly she could relate to none of these adopted personas.

Esther's dilemma highlights the plight of educated, aspirational and unconventional women whose personalities cannot be confined within the constraints of simplistic idealisation of femininity with respect to biology. As Paula Bennett opines in *My Life a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics*, *The Bell Jar* aptly represents "the oppressive atmosphere of 1950s and the soul-destroying effect this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high-minded young women like Plath" (124). Women like Esther felt dissociated from their bodies because of their inability to limit their intellectual exploration as per the expected gender norms. Their mind and body failed to form a complete and compatible whole.

The dominant gender norms in 1950s get highlighted by the fig-tree story that Esther reads in the beginning of *The Bell Jar*. This fig-tree grew on a green lawn between the houses of a Jewish man and a convent where the Jewish man and a nun kept meeting at the tree to pick ripe figs until one day they witnessed the act of an egg hatching in a bird's nest on tree. When they saw this, they touched the backs of their hands together and after that, the nun never came to pick figs with the Jewish man. From then, a 'mean-faced' Catholic kitchen-maid came to pick the figs and counted up the figs the man had picked to make sure he hadn't picked more figs than she had and the man was furious.

With this example, Esther is reminded of the two sanctioned roles for women. The first category is of a mother who loses her identity after having a child, represented by an egg hatching incident in the story. This makes Esther perceive motherhood as an imprisonment. The second category is of women who demand equality by counting the figs the man picked to be sure he hadn't picked more than she did. The woman who opts for equality with the man is presented as a 'mean-faced' woman that emphasises the custom of domesticity in 1950s American setup. Betty Friedan also endorses a similar opinion in *The Feminine Mystique* and points out that independent women were discouraged and labelled as "man-eating feminist, the career woman- loveless, alone"(93). Stephanie Coontz also depicts in *The Way We Never Were*, "Women who could not walk the fine line between nurturing motherhood ... or who had trouble adjusting to creative "homemaking", were labelled neurotic, perverted, or schizophrenic" (8).

Betty Friedan, who was Beauvoir's contemporary, pointed out in *The Feminine Mystique* that women of their times were made to move back to their homes and limit themselves to household chores by idealising the conventional roles of a homemaker and mother. They were made to believe that they would lose their

femininity if they move outside the realm of feminine model of passivity. Even brilliant women gave up their education and careers as they did not possess the audacity to be outrageous. It had drastic effects on their emotional, physical and mental health. Having education and employment on the one hand and family and home on the other, the generation of 1950s suffocated in the roles that could not co-exist.

Thus, social institutions work as agents to condition women into the 'givens' of gender, in order to bind them into repressive household duties and roles. The conditioning make women internalise the conventional myths and beliefs about gender so strongly that they it is hard to think beyond the gender binaries. The dread of not falling into line with the usual is hard to overcome. It took Esther some time and a lot of courage to resist her mother's view of place of women in society. She had to rise above the mainstream discourse in which her mother was stuck so as to proclaim her individuality and identity. Esther's assertion echoes Beauvoir's claim:

One is not born woman, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature. (249)

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther states that she was happy until the age of nine, which is an age when children are not yet conditioned according to gender norms. By losing her father at the age of nine, she turned into a lopsided personality, lacking balance in life and relationships. Esther could not relate to the androgenic model because of lack of father figure and could not adapt to the feminine model either, which became the prime cause of her split self. According to psychological model explained in *The Second Sex*, "[H]er drama is epitomised in the conflict between her 'viriloid' and 'feminine' tendencies" (43). Beauvoir criticises the psychological theories of Freud and Adler regarding gender. She rejects psychologists for their ignorance of scope of choice for women. Plath's fluctuation between her wish to be like her father and her inability to detach herself from her mother's influence coincides with the psychological model which Beauvoir is sceptic about. Esther expresses her disappointment at the lack of a masculine role model in her life after the death of her father. It indicates her idealisation of her father and her repulsion of her mother, as Freud proposes in his theories. Thus, Beauvoir's criticism of psychological model does not coincide with the incidents and experiences depicted in *The Bell Jar*.

The psychological training of women in the social structure that marginalises women explains why Esther had a troubled relationship with her mother. She could never confide in her mother as her mother always remained embedded in the conventional structure. Esther developed a hatred for her mother and almost cuts her off from her life at Dr. Nolan's hospital. For intellectual women like Esther, who cannot be confined to the stereotypes, their mothers serve as reminder to be what they cannot be. Esther complains in *The Bell Jar*:

My own mother wasn't much help. 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. (39)

When mothers fail to extend help and support to their daughters facing identity crisis, they add to their dilemma of inbetweenness. Moreover, the powerful- powerless equation which parallels man-woman binary leads to turbulent relationship between mothers and daughters. The image of mother serves as what Lacan calls the 'mirror image' to which the daughter can relate physically as they look alike biologically but cannot connect mentally as their thinking patterns do not match. At the same time, the improbability to relate to the father's image as the 'mirror-image' makes Esther turn into a schizophrenic. They are stuck between a body and a mind that cannot form a complete whole as they are not compatible with each other. The prevalent social norms do not let a woman regard an aspiring, dominant and intellectual mind fit for a woman's body, leading to the claustrophobic feeling of being trapped in a 'bell jar' that signifies the distance between body and mind, self and society.

In her work *My Mother/ My Self*, Nancy Friday shows how mothers control their daughters' individuality and deny their sexuality because they were themselves made to do so. It is a chain process that has to be ended somewhere to pave the way for liberal personal space for growing women. Mrs. Greenwood

strongly advocates sexual uprightness for women. It makes Esther see sex as an obstacle in her personal growth. For her, different codes of sexual morality for men and women became an entrapment, leading to her several purposeful attempts at losing her virginity.

Terry Apter in *Altered Loves: Mothers and Daughters During Adolescence* suggests that in adolescence, a daughter's relationship with her mother undergoes a change. A daughter's conflict with her mother is actually a way of maintaining her relationship with her mother who is unlike her. As Apter states, "she fights with her mother because she wants, and believes she can, make her mother see and make her mother listen" (Apter 77). Carol Gilligan expresses a similar belief:

For girls to remain responsive to themselves, they must resist the conventions of feminine goodness; to remain responsive to others, they must resist the values placed on self-sufficiency and independence.... (Gilligan 20)

Relating Apter's and Gilligan's beliefs to Esther's experiences it seems that because of the lack of support and motherly love, Esther lost her sense of self and identity. Esther failed to make her mother see the world from her point of view. Her silence became a sign of protest to the world that was deaf to her wishes, including her mother. This made her outgrow her bonding with her mother.

Gradually, in order to survive, Esther learned to pursue external goals. After struggling for long, Esther began to internalise what was expected of her as a woman. This internalization was not a result of a sudden self-transformation, but a gradual and subtle control on the individual by societal norms and pressures. The Ethel Rosenberg example at the beginning of *The Bell Jar* is where the internalization begins. The leitmotif of the Rosenberg story symbolised Esther's rebellious and split self. While stating that Rosenberg story has "nothing to do with me" (*The Bell Jar* 1), Esther was ironically expressing her empathy with Ethel as a rebel and outsider. The Rosenberg story depicts the fact that stringent gender norms have not only psychological, intellectual and personal but social and political significance and agendas.

In June 1953, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed. Public predominantly considered them to be traitors. But Ethel was also criticised for her negligent attitude towards her role as a mother, since during the Rosenberg trial, her sons, Michael and Robert, had no home to go to. Thus, in the public eye, Ethel had become a 'mean-faced' traitor and a bad mother. In "The Radical Imaginary of *The Bell Jar*", Kate Baldwin points out that Ethel's "status as a bad mother - an image the press went to great pains to construct - stays with Esther as a reminder that she must conform to the era's dictates and be a good mother" (12).

The execution of Ethel made a deep dent in Esther's psyche and the eventual elimination of Ethel through execution further threatened her not to be unusual. Esther feels threatened by 'goggle-eyed headlines', staring at her all the time (*The Bell Jar* 3). In Foucauldian terms, the headlines serve the function of disciplinary gaze, similar to panoptical watchtowers. In other words, with the execution of Rosenbergs Esther feels threatened with being labelled like Ethel; a bad mother, a traitor to her country, and a demonized woman, and it is this threat that keeps Esther withdrawn.

Throughout the book, Esther feels alienated and fragmented and longs to relate to something or someone but fails. She fails to reassemble her fractured selves into a wholesome personality. The imagery of cadaver head in the beginning of the book predicts Esther's future split self. It anticipates the future enigma Esther is going to suffer from. The cadaver head acts as a kind of ill omen that haunts Esther. She complains, "For weeks afterwards, the cadaver head - or whatever there was left of it - floated behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast. I felt as if I was carrying that cadaver's head around with me on a string...." (11).

This imagery of cadaver head paves the way for recurrent set of distorted, absurd and disjointed body parts Esther relates to throughout her narrative. The image of baby's head coming out of women during birth, the image of Esther's bruised, shapeless face after electrocution, her comparing herself to a Chinese woman, her denial to accept her past photograph as hers highlight the fact that she has lost sense of uniformity. She cannot perceive things in totality and rather has developed a habit of analysing its different parts in relation to the whole.

Esther's split self-reminds one of Atwood's unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing*. Atwood's protagonist, like Esther, too suffers from split self as she is torn between two dualities that needed be combined to form a

complete whole. She perceives body as the representation of emotion, irrationality, and mysticism. On the other hand, she relates mind to rationality, intellect and logic. Her inability to find a connecting link between them contributes to her dual self. Just like Esther did in New York, Atwood's heroine lost her sense of self when she moved to city. She confides in the text, "[T]he trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the head or body either; only the neck that creates the illusion that they are separate...." (75). As mentioned in this statement, the binaries, be it the body-mind, emotion-intellect or man-woman; are mere 'illusions' that need to be shattered in order for one to come to terms with the reality. However, gradually, Esther apprehended the need to realise the interdependent and relative nature of gender dialectics in order to come to terms with her being unlike the stereotypical women image portrayed by gender norms and myths. Whereas, Beauvoir consistently refers to the gender binaries being a strong element responsible for the exploitation of women but she regards their existence as given and unavoidable.

In *The Bell Jar*, Mrs. Greenwood is presented as an embodiment of parental indifference and generational difference. She does not respond to Esther's needs and demands even at the moments of distress. She takes her daughter's depression as insignificant and temporary. She suggests, "We'll act as if all this were a bad dream" (267). She behaves as if she can control everything, without being sensitive to Esther's illness. When Esther declares that she will not go for more shock therapies, Mrs. Greenwood, instead of being concerned, expresses her relief. "I knew my baby was not like that... I knew you would decide to be all right again" (119). Her insistence on Esther's depression being something Esther could choose to put an end to easily, portrays her as an insensitive mother. Esther feels disappointed as her mother fails to give enough power, encouragement and solace to her during her struggle to gain individuality.

Esther realises that her anger towards her mother is the root of her illness. She tells her therapist Dr. Nolan that she wants to sever ties with her mother and doesn't want her to visit her in the hospital. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath quite openly expresses her true feelings for her mother unlike in *Letters Home*, where she pretended to have a smooth relationship with her mother. *The Bell Jar* and *Journals* present a different picture, presenting Plath's harsh feelings for her mother in their crude form. In *Letters Home*, Plath continued writing to her mother in positive terms to assure her that all is well as she could not bear to put her mother at unease and to cause misery to her by rebelling against her. That is why Plath wrote to her brother to get this autobiography published secretly under a pseudonym and used fictional names in it.

It is significant to note that in *Letters Home*, the letters covering the times when Plath was in asylum are missing. The flow of Plath's letters to her mother was consistent enough to have 673 letters as a part of *Letters Home*. The probability that Esther had no communication with her mother when she was at declining health and the fact that there is no mention of her and Ted Hughes' troubled marriage in the letters turns the readers and critics sceptic whether it is the complete set of correspondence between the daughter and the mother.

The way Plath has implicitly stated her mother's seeming negligence at various points in *The Bell Jar* indicates that her mother was complicit in Esther's suicidal attempts. Esther's trial to hang herself with her mother's bathrobe's belt and her eating sleeping pills from her mother's supposedly closed cabinet rises suspicion about her mother's intentions.

Marilyn Yalom in his article opines that *The Bell Jar* is actually about the writer's obsessive maternal fears. She internalises this fear, which makes her adopt a negative attitude towards motherhood. That is why she gets haunted by several child-images in the book. She is reluctant to have a child of her own. When Esther attends a woman's delivery at Buddy's clinic, she realises the major difference in her sensitive temperament and Buddy's excessively rational attitude towards childbirth as a doctor. The way human foetuses were kept in jars as non-human objects made Esther even more reluctant towards motherhood and childbirth.

Esther's behaviour echoes Beauvoir's claim that "her daughter wishes not to be like her, worshipping women who have escaped from feminine servitude: actresses, writers, teachers; she engages avidly in sports and in study..." (322). However, the end of the book shows a massive change in Esther's beliefs and ideas. Esther shifts the role and place of the mother in her life from her biological mother to her physician Dr. Nolan. Unlike Mrs. Greenwood, Dr. Nolan attends to her demands, sufferings and problems like a mother. She realises

that her mother's insensitivity towards her cannot and should not be a reason to adopt negative attitude towards motherhood and women at large. It is Dr. Nolan, a woman, who comes as a source of rescue for Esther, unlike the conventional stories where a prince charming, a male, has to be the rescuer of a helpless damsel under the control of a torturing mother. A similar opinion is presented by Macpherson as he states that Esther, "turns from the dead-end with the mother.... The illusion is that only the Man, like the God Himself, can create woman. The culturally enforced illusion is that the daughter needs to be purged of the devouring mother, by being 'born again' from the Prince's kiss" (*Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* 11).

At the end of the novel, the image of her plucking the butterfly from her goggles to give to her child presents her as caring mother, who intends to be sensitive towards her child's needs, happiness and well-being. Esther seems to be cured of her infantophobia. She has a child, possibly to answer Buddy's claim and to counter her own fear that a woman like her, who suffered from acute depression, is not likeable enough to find a match. Esther overcomes her own and the society's suppositions and barriers that for long strangled her real self by keeping her buried under the weight of endless expectations that could not match her own desires and needs.

On one hand critics such as Mason Haris opines that Esther's recovery is putative because it "seems to consist more of resignation to prison than escape from it [...] a depressing return to her 'old best self' because nothing better has been found"(64). Critics like Haris see Esther's decision to get a coil fitted as her decision to learn to adjust to the feminine roles she is supposed to fulfil. By getting rid of her fear of pregnancy, she feels confident to enter into the real world, accepting its crude double standards.

But other critics like Marjorie Perloff and E. Miller Budick believe that Esther's recovery is actual and permanent and that it is her rebirth as a woman. Esther's words at the end of the book stand as evidence to her insistence on her existence. She says, "I took a deep breath and listened to the old bray of my heart: I am, I am, I am" (*The Bell Jar* 276). When Joan asks Plath to enter into lesbian relationship with her as she has lost faith in men, Plath realises that she cannot feel like a lesbian. Though she has suffered at the hands of various men in her life, yet, she cannot get rid of her usual feminine self. Even Adrienne Rich asserts the need for women to form a positive perception towards their bodies and self. She states in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, "Not biology, but ignorance of ourselves, has been the key to our powerlessness" (240). This serves as a climax for Esther as she realises and accepts her existence as a woman without any regrets and complaints. Her words 'I am, I am, I am' echo her existential assertion to take hold of her life and body.

Esther learns to embrace womanhood on her own terms. After getting rid of the prospect of unwanted pregnancy, Esther gets rid of her fear of motherhood and child-bearing. Thus, it is not the child-birth but the pressure of motherhood and homemaking being the only sanctioned roles for women, which makes Esther dread being a wife and mother. After getting the coil fitted, she no longer finds female body as a hindrance in fulfilling her physical desires. She exclaims, "I was my own woman. The next step was to find the right man" (*The Second Sex* 216).

To conclude, as far as mother- daughter relationship is concerned, Beauvoir and Esther voice similar concerns. Just like Beauvoir's sceptic attitude towards motherhood, Esther shows strong contempt towards marriage and motherhood. Esther's observation of lives of Mrs. Greenwood and Mrs. Willard represent what Beauvoir calls "immanence", "narrow round of uncreative and repetitious duties" that Esther denies to visualise as her future (*The Second Sex* 12). For both Esther and Beauvoir, motherhood and marriage are dominant means to turn women passive and ambitionless.

Esther's life-long troubled relationship also exemplifies Beauvoir's outlook of mothers being strong advocates of patriarchy because of their tendency to pass on their own destiny to their daughters. Esther's strong contempt towards her mother for her indifference towards Esther's suffering and trouble echo Beauvoir's conviction about intellectual women's conflicted relationship with their mothers. Esther had to resent her mother's impositions to succeed in her attempts at individuation. She had to liberate herself from the inhibiting hold of her mother in order to emerge as a liberated being.



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