Unveiling the Female Self through Madness in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Alaa Gazairi

Department of English Language and Literature Istanbul Aydın University, Istanbul, Türkiye

ABSTRACT: Over the centuries, the word madness has been associated with negative connotations. However, what if experiencing madness is the only way to achieve liberation? Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1966) tells the story of Esther Greenwood and her dream of becoming a famous poet, which is shattered by the deterioration of her mental health. The novel explores the mental and emotional struggles of Esther and depicts an image of the effects of social pressures, gender roles and psychiatric institutions' interventions on Esther's psychological well-being. The novel takes place in the Cold War era which is characterised by its extensive paranoia and extreme surveillance. This article will, in this context, argue that the construction of the female self must undergo a self-destructive madness as an essential step toward achieving female liberation, given the historical repression centered around the female body. It will also reveal that madness emerges from the socio-political conflicts of the Cold War era, as reflected in Esther's perception of Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) as a tool wielded by the political agenda to mold individuals into obedient citizens.

KEYWORDS: anti-psychiatry, madness, female self, agency, The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath

INTRODUCTOIN

The Bell Jar (1966) stands as Sylvia Plath's only novel, initially released in London in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, and subsequently republished in the USA in 1966 under her true identity. The novel narrates the journey of Esther Greenwood, unfolding her quest for self-discovery and the pursuit of her authentic identity, as she employs her own body as a tool to deconstruct the externally imposed false self. Plath's narrative delves into the complexities of finding an identity amidst the patriarchal imposed rules, mental health issues, and social expectations. Through Esther's intentional use of her body as a way of untangling the layers of her false selves, the novel becomes a milestone in which the body of Esther serves as a means of gaining liberation, freedom and agency. Moreover, during her quest of finding her real self, Esther undergoes many hardships such as suicide attempts, being hospitalized in a mental institution, insulin shock treatment, and the experience of electroconvulsive therapy. Both Esther and Plath share a parallel experience of grappling with suicide, viewing it as an attempt to shed a fabricated self and construct an authentic female identity. Thus, this article will discuss that the formation of a female self necessarily involves a process of self-destructive madness. Despite its outwardly destructive nature, this journey proves indispensable for attaining female liberation, as the reclaiming of women's bodies – historically the primary site of oppression – marks the foundational step toward emancipation.

1. Theory

From ancient times, madness has been a very complex and difficult notion to define, grasp and find a treatment for. The definition and construction of the concept of madness and mental illness are clearly shaped by the prevailing beliefs and the religious interpretation of each period of time. In ancient times, mental illness was mainly linked to supernatural and spiritual beliefs. As Ingrid G. Farreras states, "[t]hroughout classical antiquity we see a return to supernatural theories of demonic possession or godly displeasure to account for abnormal behavior that was beyond the person's control" (2019, p. 246). In general, it was perceived as a way of divine punishment and demonic possessions and the superstitious believes still hold the same position concerning mentally ill individuals. Subsequently, women were the scapegoat for the inquisition holding them accountable for the ills of the society and were labeled as witches. They became the target for the inquisition and were subjected to witch trials which often ended with them being burned at a stake. Jonathan B. Durrant argues in his book *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany* (2007) that "[t]he emphasis of the interrogation was therefore placed primarily on establishing that the defendant was spiritually corrupted" and "that she had transferred her allegiance from God to the Devil, ignored or abused the sacraments of the Church and taken part in other heretical activities" (p. 47). The witch trials were often manipulated to the advantage of the

inquisition rules against the allegedly misconduct of these witches. Later on, Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot attempted to convince the public that these witches were suffering from mental illness, and that this had nothing to do with demonic possession or supernatural believes; however, the inquisition banned their writings (Farreras, 2019, p. 247). This underscores that while ideological frameworks may vary across periods, the ultimate objective remains consistent; in other words, whether labeled as witches or mentally ill individuals, the outcome involves suppressing any behavior perceived as a threat to the dominance of the ruling ideology.

However, this was altered when the first mental asylums were established in the seventieth century whose function was more to marginalise and confine individuals afflicted with mental illness. As Farreras discuses, "[m]odern treatments of mental illness are most associated with the establishment of hospitals and asylums beginning in the 16th century. Such institutions' mission was to house and confine the mentally ill, the poor, the homeless, the unemployed, and the criminal" (2019, p. 247). The outcome of this practice turned out to be confining any individual considered to be troublesome. To do so, these people were often labeled as mad. Furthermore, in *Madness and Civilization* (1988), Foucault discusses the establishing of *Hôpital général* of Paris in 1656 which was a representation of the changing attitude toward the so-called "mad". He describes that the hospital did not function as a medical institution but rather as part of the social order system "the Hôpital général is not a medical establishment" and that it is instead "a sort of semijudicial structure, an administrative entity which, along with the already constituted powers, and outside of the courts, decides, judges, and executes" (Foucault, 1988, p. 40). Therefore, the main aim of the General hospital of Paris was to enforce its rules upon individuals who deviated from the accustomed norms of the society. During this period of time, the method of involuntary hospitalisation altered to take a medical basis for locking individuals away. Furthermore, this shift was more apparent in the twentieth century with the advancements of psychiatric institutions and advanced medical treatments such as antipsychotics and antidepressants.

The late twentieth century witnessed the emergence of countercultural movements, and as the name suggests, these came as a reaction against the existing conditions of the society. They challenged the mainstream social morals, institutions and values of that time and called for a change in every aspect of life. One of the most controversial of these movements was the anti-psychiatry movement that challenged the mainstream of psychiatric institutions and advocated for a change in different psychiatry treatments such as involuntary hospitalisation, coercive treatments, and the legitimacy of mental illness as a method of manipulating individuals. The term anti-psychiatry was introduced by David Cooper in his book *Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry* (1967) in which he challengeds the practices of psychiatric institutions and calls for other methods in treating mental illnesses. Furthermore, the advocators of this movement, such as R. D. Laing, Thomas Szasz, and Michel Foucault, argue that psychiatric interventions were employed to control individuals' behaviors and mold them into becoming docile individuals without any sense of self-autonomy. The anti-psychiatry movement took its roots from existentialism and phenomenology. As Arya Aryan explains:
Anti-psychiatry was a key reference point of the countercultural critique of institutionalisation, instrumentalisation and scientism. Although it took its cue from French philosophy, especially phenomenology and existentialism, anti-psychiatry came to be identified with the more popular image of the Counterculture, with experimentation with psychedelic or recreational drugs and music that altered the 'normal' state of consciousness, with the advocacy of open, free sexual relations, premarital sex, homosexuality and the normalisation of contraception. (2020, p. 94)
Moreover, the anti-psychiatry movement flourished in the post war period due to the constant growth of psychiatry authority with the return of veterans to their homeland. Having this type of authority meant that they could gain control in every aspect of their patients' lives. Therefore, the existence of the anti-psychiatry movement was a necessary step to question psychiatric institutions' legitimacy and reveal their true motive which lies behind their therapeutic measures.

One of the key figures of this movement is Thomas Szasz. In *The Myth of Mental illness* (1974), he argues that until the middle of the nineteenth century, illnesses were used to describe a bodily malfunction and that psychiatrists then created a new criterion for identifying mental illnesses. Szasz (1974) contends that "the identification of new psychiatric diseases began not by identifying such diseases by means of the established methods of pathology, but by creating a new criterion of what constitutes disease" (p. 12). Hence, the method for diagnosing these diseases relies on examining the patient's behaviours. This implies that the classifications of diseases are based solely on the physician's judgment which in turn lessens the legitimacy of such classifications. Moreover, this criterion encompasses a wide range of so-called mental illnesses and legitimises them as means of control over individuals via coercive treatments. As Szasz (1974) puts it, "[w]e have thus come to regard addiction, delinquency, divorce, homosexuality, homicide, suicide, and so on almost without limit, as psychiatric illnesses" (p. 38). Therefore, when a psychiatrist classifies a person as mentally ill, the society in turn will treat him as such. Consequently, the creation of this myth of mental illness was used as a tool to manipulate individual's behaviours so that they would fit into the dominant ideology of the time and unproblematically maintain the status quo. Furthermore, in *The Manufacturer of Madness* (1997), Szasz draws a parallel between those labelled as witches and individuals deemed mentally ill, highlighting the striking resemblance between the authority wielded by the inquisition and that of institutional psychiatry. The analogy between the two describes the irony of how the dominant ideology controls individuals based on the social values of each particular time. As Szasz (1997) puts it:

Unveiling the Female Self through Madness in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar

Like the typical European witch in the fifteenth century, the typical American mental patient today is usually a poor person in trouble or accused of making trouble, who is declared mentally ill against his will. Such a person may accept the role or may try to repudiate it; the institutional psychiatrist confronted with him may try to keep him confined in his role, and perhaps in a hospital, for a long time, or may release him after a relatively brief period of incarceration. In any case, the psychiatric authorities are in full control of the relationship. (xxvii- xxviii).

Szasz employs this analogy to emphasize how institutional psychiatry operates as a manipulative system, aiming to assert and consolidate its power over individuals.

Another prominent figure in the anti-psychiatry movement is the Scottish psychiatrist Ronald David Laing. His book *The Divided Self* (1960) explores different cases of individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia and relates their experiences in a way that is comprehensible to everyone. Laing believes that mental illnesses are induced by social factors rather than biological ones. He also argues that aside from chronic schizophrenics, he encounters challenges in identifying the 'signs and symptoms' of psychosis in individuals during his own interviews (1960, p. 28). This demonstrates how the scientific field of psychiatry has a huge margin of errors when it comes to classifying individuals as mentally sick.

Moreover, Laing introduces the notion of "the false-self system" which is the result of the individual experiencing ontological insecurity. "The false-self system" is a type of defence mechanism individuals tend to develop to protect their real self from annihilation from the external world. The annihilation of the self takes place when individuals perceive that external pressures may lead to the complete destruction of their authentic selves. In response, they construct a false-self system as a means to conceal and safeguard their genuine self from obliteration. Laing (1960) contends that "[t]he false-self system to be described here exists as the complement of an 'inner' self which is occupied in maintaining its identity and freedom by being transcendent, unembodied, and thus never to be grasped, pinpointed, trapped, possessed" (pp. 94-95). For that reason, this constructed false self provides protection from the outside world that might cause existential threat to the authentic real self. Creating the false self is thus an important method in coping with life-threatening moments such as traumatic experiences and the ultimate protection from circumstances which could cause the self to disintegrate and shatter. People tend to wear a mask at some point in their lives to shield themselves from feeling vulnerable. However, this mask is different from the false-self system which is practiced by the person who is under an existential threat. An exemplification of a person who has constructed a false-self system due to traumatic experiences is the schizoid individual. Laing explains the experience of a schizoid individual as follows:

The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself 'together with' others or 'at home in' the world, but, on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation; moreover, he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as 'split' in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so on. (1960, p. 17)

In other words, individuals afflicted with schizoid personality disorder feel disconnected with the world they inhabit, which thus creates a split in their personality. Also, the way they preserve their surroundings is characterised by a sense of alienation and isolation. Laing emphasises that the false-self system is the accumulation of an individual experiences in the world. Thus, the false-self system is a defence mechanism created compulsively in order to satisfy the wishes of other people.

In *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (1967), Laing discusses that psychiatrists should focus on individuals' experiences rather than their behaviours. He contends that "we can see other people's behaviour, but not their experience" and that "[t]his has led some people to insist that psychology has nothing to do with the other person's experience, but only with his behaviour" (1967, p. 15). That is how most psychiatrists in the twentieth century stigmatise individuals as having mental illness while only examining their behaviours without giving much thought to their past experiences which could have affected them to reach that state. Thus, when analysing the behaviours of certain characters, it is crucial to consider their past experiences within the context of the novel and their current situations; this holistic approach is necessary to arrive at a proper analysis of characters' behaviours and actions.

2. Analysis: Deconstruction of The False Self and Rebirth of the Female Author:

The novel starts with Esther expressing her dissatisfaction and emptiness. Esther dissatisfaction is perfectly articulated in in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1979) by Betty Friedan. Friedan focuses on the concept of "The Problem that has no Name" and discusses the predicament women faced in the 1950s, which originated from social expectations and the conceptualisation of femininity during that period. Women's happiness at that time was only defined in terms of their roles as housewives, mothers and homemakers. Whenever they articulated their contempt with their situation, they got shunned down from the American society. As Friedan states: "[t]he problem was dismissed by telling the housewife she doesn't realize how lucky she is- her own boss, no time clock, no junior executive gunning for her job" (1979, p. 19). Friedan's notion of the nameless problem revealed that this issue was not merely a personal one tied to an individual woman but a symptom of a widespread social problem. It had reached a point where educators were actually suggesting the exclusion of women from colleges, reserving this space only for boys in the atomic age (1979, p. 19). However, if women had the luxury of entering the university, they were mostly taught specific courses

Unveiling the Female Self through Madness in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar

that would aid them in their role as housewives. Moreover, this issue remained nameless for a long time because it was not openly discussed nor recognised as a real problem. However, Friedan spoke it out. As she states, "[w]e can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home'" (1979, p. 27). This resonates with Esther's situation as she craves to gain from life more than a husband and a house. As Esther recounts her story, she initiates by articulating her discontent during her time in New York. Despite being in a situation that many girls would envy, she candidly reveals an inner sense of suffocation, acknowledging a profound dissatisfaction with almost every aspect of her life: "I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo'' (Plath, 1966, p. 3).

The Bell Jar is considered to be a semi-autobiographical novel. As Claridge et al. contend, "[a]ll her writing is autobiographical; she [Plath] can never escape from the subject of her own impressions, her own miseries, terrors and nightmares" (1990, p. 207). Thus, Esther Greenwood life closely mirrors Plath's own life including her time working for *Mademoiselle* magazine. Similarly, in the novel, Esther works in *Ladies' Day* magazine. While working there, Esther experiences the restricted and confining space allowed to women writers in the field of journalism. The magazine symbolises the constraints imposed on women writers, dictating not only what they should write but also prescribing how they should conduct themselves in social gatherings and even guiding them on the appropriate way to pose for a picture. Caroline J. Smith (2010) reveals that while the magazine ostensibly aims to offer readers choices, Mademoiselle paradoxically constrains those choices and, on occasion, appears to discourage women from venturing beyond the confines of the private sphere (p. 7). Through all this, Esther contemplates the imposed limitations on women's autonomy and authorship as she is treated as a mere commodity during her posing for a photo in *Ladies' Day magazine*:

But undressing in front of Buddy suddenly appealed to me about as much as having my Posture Picture taken at college, where you have to stand naked in front of a camera, knowing all the time that a picture of you stark naked, both full view and side view, is going into the college gym files to be marked A B C or D depending on how straight you are. (Plath, 1966, p. 71)

The language that Plath employs here shows the amount of suffering that women have had to endure and their limited chances of actually achieving agency and autonomy. The dehumanisation that she encounters in *Ladies Day* magazine is also evident in her relationship with Buddy Willard. It manifests in the way Buddy treats Esther, consistently disregarding her passion for writing and persistently attempting to instruct her, reflecting his perception of himself as superior to her. Esther discovers that "Buddy Willard [is] a hypocrite" (Plath, 1966, p. 54). This happens on the day when Buddy askes Esther to accompany him to the hospital where a woman gives birth: "Buddy kissed me again in front of the house steps, and the next fall, when his scholarship to medical school came through, I went there to see him instead of to Yale and it was there I found out how he had fooled me all those years and what a hypocrite he was. I found out on the day we saw the baby born" (Plath, 1966, p. 64). Her characterisation of Buddy as a hypocrite stems from the revelation that he has been intimate with someone before, which, in itself, does not trouble her; what annoys her is the realisation of his manipulative behaviour: "What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face" (Plath, 1966, pp. 73-74). Esther notices that the dehumanisation she suffers from is deeply rooted in every woman life.

She becomes acutely aware of the extent of dehumanisation that women endure when she witnesses a woman giving birth, which intensifies after Buddy discloses that the woman has been administered a drug to induce forgetfulness of her pain: "Thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent" (Plath, 1966, p. 68). She describes the process of the woman giving birth by saying that: "I was so struck by the sight of the table where they were lifting the woman I didn't say a word. It looked like some *awful torture table*, with these *metal stirrups* sticking up in mid-air at one end and all sorts *of instruments and wires and tubes* I couldn't make out properly at the other" (Plath, 1966, p. 67 emphasis added). The choice of machine-like words here is intentional in order to exemplify the dehumanisation of women within the medical institution. The process of giving birth is a symbol of how scientific institutions are patriarchal and reduce women to mere objects with no space for individuality and authorship. The world in which Esther lives is a scientised and soulless one where the integration of the self, agency and identity are constantly shrunk and lost. Indeed, Plath writes at this post-war moment of "contestation of clear authorial agency and intention . . . [and] a dissolution of the humanist conceptualisation of authorship" (Aryan, 2019, p. 108). Moreover, this dehumanisation is similarly evident in Esther's physics teacher, Mr. Manzi, who attempts to oversimplify physics for female students. Esther strongly opposes the notion of a book exclusively tailored for girls, implying inferior mental capacities compared to men. The dehumanisation that Esther undergoes indicates that she is treated as a nonentity and an object-like figure. According to Laing, the experience of being treated as an object creates a sense of alienation and existential detachment from reality. As he puts it, "[i]n the face of being treated as an 'it', his own subjectivity drains away from him like blood from the face. He essentially requires constant confirmation from others of his own existence as a person" (1960, pp. 46–47). Esther's situation is very similar to Laing's description of a person with a split personality or divided self as she is treated as a nonentity in every aspect of her life.

Moreover, Esther regards the society that she inhabits as a place where she has no voice or autonomy. She considers the medical and the psychiatric field both as a representation of the unjust treatment toward women. Hence, women are often compelled to either conform to social expectations placed upon them or confront severe treatments, including incarceration in

mental hospitals, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), and lobotomy. As Szasz argues, "[c]onformity was still demanded. The nonconformist, the objector, in short, all who denied or refused to affirm society's dominant values, were still the enemies of society. . . it was viewed in terms of Public Health. Its internal enemies were thus seen as mad" (1997, p. 13). This is why Esther is forced to undertake electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and why her friend Valerie has lobotomy surgery which turns her into a conforming object: "I looked at Valerie in awe, appreciating for the first time her perpetual marble calm" (Plath, 1966, p. 204). This shows that the main purpose behind conducting a lobotomy surgery and injecting the woman with medicine during her labour is to implement a state of numbness and forgetfulness upon women who deviates from social norms. Towards the end of the novel, Esther reflects on the prospect of leaving the asylum, and her contemplation is coupled with her mother's decision to forgive her, reassuring her that the entire ordeal is nothing more than a distressing dream. However, for Esther, this is not simply a bad dream; it is her life, and she remembers every detail that she encounters during that time. In a patriarchal society, where Esther encounters all this dehumanisation, she goes into what Laing calls ontological insecurity. As Laing states, "[i]f the individual cannot take the realness, aliveness, autonomy, and identity of himself [sic] and others for granted, then he has to become absorbed in contriving ways of trying to be real, of keeping himself or others alive, of preserving his identity, in efforts, as he will often put it, to prevent himself losing his self" (1960, pp. 42-43). Laing seems to suggest here that if a person lacks the basic sense of security in their lives, they then feel the need to create new ways to affirm their own existence and identity. This is all done in order to protect their real self from getting annihilated by the outside world. In the jar that Esther lives in, she is deprived of the most fundamental human need, which is the possession of agency and control over the course of her own life. She always feels threatened by the outside world; therefore, she tries to contrive new ways to assure herself that her real self is safe from any harm. What Laing expresses aligns with what Esther goes through, specifically how social pressures compel her to construct false selves in order to live in an unlivable situation. As an attempt to cope with her hostile environment, Esther is compelled into manufacturing a false self to be able to protect her authentic self from annihilation by the outside world. Yet, these false selves are byproducts of the patriarchal society that Esther lives in; for that reason, she needs to get rid of the imposed false selves to uncover her true self. Esther's divided self is actually a mechanism that will help her to fragment, detect and peel off those imposed false selves, and this process represents her first step towards constructing or finding out the true female self. As in the case of many women writers, this helps Esther as well as Plath "to construct a coherent story: the creation of a coherent self" (Aryan, 2019). As Laing mentions, schizophrenia "is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation" (1967, 95). The only choice that Esther is left with is to deconstruct the imposed false self and to embrace the uncertainty that it might lead her into madness. This deconstruction helps her to reveal "contradictions . . . which highly question and overturn binary oppositions" (Aryan, 2022, p. 1) such as masculinity/femininity. Hence, Esther has to experience madness in order to uncover her true and genuine self. This experience of madness is an essential process for the emergence of her authentic self. In this context, madness functions as a breakthrough, liberating Esther from the shackles of social expectations and the imposed false selves, ultimately paving the way for a rebirth of her authentic female self.

The female body is the place where patriarchy exerts its power upon; hence women need to free themselves of their bodies in order to liberate themselves from the patriarchal grip. Thus, for Esther, the deconstruction of the false self involves dissolving physically to be able to be reborn as a new baby. For Esther, this transformative process entails seeking refuge in a womb-like environment, and her bathtub becomes the sanctuary where she feels the safest: "There must be quite a few things a hot bath won't cure, but I don't know many of them. Whenever I'm sad I'm going to die, or so nervous I can't sleep. . . then I say: 'I'll go take a hot bath'" (Plath, 1966, p. 151). The tub for her represents a secure place where she can cleanse herself and is born again. She further adds:

I lay in that tub on the seventeenth floor of this hotel for-women-only, high up over the jazz and push of New York, for near onto an hour, and I felt myself growing pure again. I don't believe in baptism or the waters of Jordan or anything like that, but I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water. I said to myself: "Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure." The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft white hotel bath towels I felt pure and sweet as a new baby. (Plath, 1966, pp. 21-22)

This part illustrates Esther's yearning for a rebirth akin to that of a new baby. The bathtub serves as a symbolic space where she can dissolve her past experiences and connections, particularly those entwined with her false self. The phrase she uses in the end "I felt pure and sweet as a new baby" (p. 22) implies more than just cleansing; it conveys a sense of rebirth, as if she has undergone a transformative process – an act of rebirth for her. Hence, in dissolving everything that she has ever encountered, she simultaneously deconstructs her false self, attempting to be reborn as a newborn baby.

Similarly, the imagery of reverting to a womb-like environment emerges when Esther attempts suicide in the bathtub, describing the release of blood from her wrists as "the redness flower[ing] from my wrists, flush after flush through the clear water" (Plath, 1966, p. 156). This shows that for her, the process of deconstructing the false-self needs to be in the shape of a rebirth through

utilising her own body. As Aryan (2020) argues that "[c]onfronted with her own cultural lack of power, each time she is rendered overtly impotent, Esther feels impure and feels the need to rid herself of her impure body" (p. 89). Also, Esther's connection to the babies displayed in the jars becomes evident when Buddy introduces her to them during their hospital visit. Subsequently, during a beach outing with her friend Judy, they engage in a conversation about a play in which a mother contemplates harming her enraged son. In the course of their discussion, Esther broaches the sensitive topic of suicide, inquiring about the methods one might employ if such a decision were contemplated: "I thought drowning must be the kindest way to die, and burning the worst. Some of those babies in the jars that Buddy Willard showed me had gills, he said. They went through a stage where they were just like fish" (Plath, 1966, p. 166). Esther's identification with the babies in the jars serves as a metaphor for her own sense of confinement within a jar forcibly imposed upon her, a stifling container designed to restrict her. This symbolism further encapsulates her yearning for a rejuvenation, a liberation from the inauthentic self tethered to the constraints of a patriarchal society. To break free from their dominion, Esther recognises the imperative to shed her corporeal form, a symbolic act of emancipation. Consequently, it underscores the notion that a woman's ascent as an author can only be achieved by dismantling the limitations imposed upon the female narrative.

3. The Cold War as an Era of Madness:

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath also offers a profound exploration of the effects of the Cold War on the psyche of the individual. Esther Greenwood is a genuine embodiment of what it means to live in that era. The story takes place in a world filled with Cold War tensions where people are always afraid of the possibility of a Third World War. Esther's psyche reflects the turmoil of that period, as she deals with her inner struggles amid the conflict and pressures of that time. The feeling of being under constant surveillance plays a significant role in intensifying the atmosphere of paranoid suspicion contributing to Esther internal struggles. The novel vividly fictionalises the challenges individuals faced during that era through the lens of the protagonist's experiences, and captures the pervasive struggles people endured, particularly when confronted with the constant scrutiny of surveillance. The era generated a feeling of suspicion that anyone could be a communist sympathizer or a leftist which ultimately led people to live in constant fear of being labelled as such. Therefore, this section will argue that the origins of madness can be traced back to the overarching socio-political landscape of the Cold War era, characterised by an enduring culture of surveillance. Esther's perspective on electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) goes beyond viewing it merely as a psychiatric intervention; she perceives it as an instrument aligned with the political agenda of that era, intending to manipulate individuals into submission and conformity.

The Cold War period roughly lasted from 1947 until 1991; it was essentially characterised by the continual conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. This period of time was marked by its anxious atmosphere and the wide spreading of fear and paranoia to its population. During this time, the US government implemented anti-communist polices. These measures were established as precautions in order to prevent the expansion of communism. Thus, communism had to be perceived as a totalitarian system in the same manner Nazism and Fascism were looked upon. As Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam argue, "[i]f Communism had once been imagined as a powerful alternative to fascism, midcentury history convinced some Western intellectuals that Communism and fascism were parallel forms of totalitarianism" (2012, p. 5). The idea that communism manifested great danger was mainly propagated by George E. Kennan, an American diplomat who worked at the American embassy in the Soviet Union. He published an article in 1947 called "The Sources of Soviet Conduct". His notion revolved around the recognition that, given the nuclear capabilities of the Soviet Union, direct military defeat by the United States seemed implausible. Instead, he proposed a strategy centred on controlling the dissemination of communist ideologies. This concept evolved into the policy of containment, wherein the primary objective was to curtail the spread of communist ideas, acknowledging that restricting ideological expansion was a more feasible approach than engaging in open conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary. This policy also controlled the cultural production of the time which ultimately led to intense surveillance on any cultural product. According to Belletto and Grausam, "'containment' has often functioned as a metaphor in literary studies, a way of registering anxiety about dissent, visibility, and surveillance" (2012, p. 9). Therefore, anxiety and fear started to rise amid the population in fear of being labelled as a communist sympathiser. Also, the writings of that period represented what it is like to live in paranoia and fear. The era generated paranoia simply because of the continuous surveillance along with the idea that anyone could be a Soviet agent. Therefore, everyone was scrutinised and monitored in fear of Soviet infiltration in the American society.

Yet, as Aryan argues, "paranoia can be viewed as a creative energy which is directed and channelled through storytelling that helps the writer maintain a degree of control and agency which would otherwise be existentially threatening" (2023, p. 341). In the same fashion, *The Bell jar* (1966) illustrates how paranoia evolved into a broader social atmosphere during the Cold War era. The novel begins with Esther drawing parallels between the electrocution of the Rosenbergs and her own electrotherapy. The American couple Julius Rosenberg and Ethel Rosenberg were accused and convicted of espionage concerning passing secret information about an "atomic bomb" to the Soviet Union. Their trial was one of the most famous trials in the world; it took place during the Cold War era, a period which was marked by its intense fear of communists in the United States. In 1951, the couple were found guilty of espionage and were sentenced to death. The Rosenberg case was a controversial one, and there were many

debates whether their trial was fair or not. Many people believed that their conviction was because of the anti-communists hysteria that was spreading in the United States. As Michael E. Parrish states, "[o]n the one hand, there are those who believe that the Rosenbergs were innocent of spying, the hapless victims of anti-Communist hysteria, lying relatives, a vindictive trial judge, and perhaps a conspiracy manufactured by government officials anxious to soothe the public's fears of domestic sub-version and the Russian atomic bomb" (1977, p. 806). Despite all the controversy that was raised during that time, they were executed by electrocution in 1953. The similarity between Esther situation and the Rosenbergs lies in the fact that they are both considered as non-conformists. Hence, electrocution was used as a way to brainwash and control non-conformists. The novel starts with Esther commenting on the incident:

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all here was to read about in the papers– goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. (Plath, 1966, p. 1)

Esther's remarks stem from her profound identification with Ethel Rosenberg. Both women endure the harsh scrutiny imposed by society, existing within a framework where females are pressured to either conform to social norms or face potential elimination. This elimination manifests in various forms, exemplified by the tragic fate of the Rosenbergs resulting in their physical demise. Alternatively, for those like Esther who dare to challenge social norms, the repercussions may manifest through methods such as electroconvulsive therapy, subjecting them to the punishing consequences of disobedience and dissent. As Robin Peel (2019) states, "[i]n 1953 the fate of Ethel Rosenberg, who before her arrest had seemed to be a conventional 1950s wife and mother, suggested the terrible fate of those who heroically refused to conform" (p. 203). Hence, the aim behind the electrocution of the Rosenbergs was to send a clear message to the masses that individuals should either conform or face similar consequences. Women were expected to conform to the predefined categories set in that era. Also, Esther perceives electroconvulsive therapy as part of the political agenda that aims to brainwash individuals and enforce conformity depriving them of their free will and identity. The way she identifies with the Rosenbergs foreground her shared experience with them and how they are both treated as passive objects. Later on, when she has a conversation with her friend Hilda, who is also a guest editor in *Ladies' Day* magazine, Esther asks her about the Rosenbergs:

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 was only as the two of us waited for the others in the tomb-like morning gloom of the conference room that Hilda amplified that Yes of hers. "It's awful such people should be alive." She yawned then, and her pale orange mouth opened on a large darkness. Fascinated, I stared at the blind cave behind her face until the two lips met and moved and the dybbuk spoke out of its hiding place, "I'm so glad they're going to die" (Plath, 1966, p. 1)

The statement from her friend that "she is so glad they are going to die" (p. 105) showcases the extent to which her mind has been brainwashed. Pat Macpherson views Hilda as "Plath's creature born from the unlikely marriage of McCarthyism and Mlle" (1991, p. 36). McCarthyism refers to Senator Jospeh McCarthy campaign against communists. The main aim of his campaign was just to expose communists' sympathisers in every aspect of the American society, and people who shared similar views to his were labelled as McCarthyite citizens. Thus, Hilda's statement exposes the deep internalisation of the American anti-communist propaganda within her beliefs. The novel establishes a sombre atmosphere as it portrays the world that Esther occupies, indicating the influence of the prevailing ideology and the impact it has on individuals, shaping their perceptions and attitudes in a way that contributes to a bleak and foreboding narrative tone: "New York was bad enough. By nine in the morning the fake, country-wet freshness that somehow seeped in overnight evaporated like the tail end of a sweet dream. Mirage-grey at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, cindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat" (Plath, 1966, p. 1). This passage takes us to New York during a time where the country was devoid of any sense of security or stability. The "Mirage-grey" (p. 2) symbolises how the city streets are lifeless and colourless, and the "dry, cindery dust" (p. 2) represents the constant feeling of fear and uncertainty that keeps suffocating Esther. Plath here perfectly describes what it is like to live in a period where uncertainty and tensions of the Cold War govern everything around it.

Moreover, the idea of marriage for Esther is also associated with the Cold War era and its brainwashing agenda: "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 about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (Plath, 1966, p. 89 emphasis added).). For Esther, marriage represents a significant obstacle to pursuing her passion as a writer, a prospect she ardently opposes. Her difficulty in making such a choice is perfectly symbolised in the fig tree section: "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, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet" (Plath, 1966, p. 80). Esther struggles to make a choice which can be interpreted as a rebellious act against the social norms of the era where marriage was considered as a fundamental part of every woman life. She did not wish

to be brainwashed like her friend Hilda, and the last thing that she wants is "infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (Plath, 1966, p. 87). Esther refuses to be a static and passive object where she can only gain stability from marriage. She wants to create her own journey where she could enjoy her freedom and agency. Also, when Esther meets with Constantin, she sees a Russian girl who is a simultaneous interpreter. At that moment, Esther starts to contemplate how unhappy she is, and how much she wishes to be in that girl's place: "I wished with all my heart I could crawl into her and spend the rest of my life barking out one idiom after another. It mightn't make me any happier, but it would be one more little pebble of efficiency among all the other pebbles" (Plath, 1966, p. 78). Her yearning to immerse herself in the experience of that girl signifies Esther's rejection of American values and an admiration for Russian values that promise to restore her agency. She resolutely refuses the role of someone's wife; instead, her aspirations involve delving into languages, pursuing a writing career, and launching herself in various creative directions.

Therefore, Esther's rejection of the social norms is the reason why she has to undergo electroconvulsive therapy. After her first ECT experience Esther states: "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done" (Plath, 1966, p. 152). The only terrible thing that she has done is to be non-conformist. Her resistance to conformity, including conventional expectations for women, is the reason behind her incarnation in mental hospital and receiving ECT treatment. The marginalisation and stifling of non-conformists such as Esther and the Rosenbergs have engendered an atmosphere of collective apprehension. The fear of being labelled as a communist sympathiser or merely deviating from the social norms has permeated the air, creating an environment that can be characterised as somewhat frenzied. Plath echoes a parallel sentiment in her journals, expressing concern about the harsh treatment meted out to anyone accused of espionage or even displaying sympathy for leftist ideologies:

Why do we electrocute men for murdering an individual and then pin a purple heart on them for mass slaughter of someone arbitrarily labelled "enemy?" Weren't the Russians communists when they helped us slap down the Germans? And now. What could we do with the Russian nation if we bombed it to bits? How could we "rule" such a mass of foreign people – we, who don't even speak the Russian language? How could we control them under our "democratic" system, we, who even now are losing that precious commodity, freedom of speech? (2000, p. 40).

This demonstrates Plath's disappointment as she witnesses the country entering a state of paranoia and fear. This state is represented in the way that the American government treats its citizens by punishing anyone that might deviate from the country's predefined standards. Hence, Plath's portrayal of Esther's mental health is significant in order to showcase the effects of the Cold War era on her psyche. Esther struggles are manifested in how she dealt with societal expectations, mental health issues and regaining her agency back during a period of time that does not allow its people to navigate outside the sphere of its arbitrary rules, and if one dare to do so they will be faced with utmost cruelty and monstrosity. Thus, Esther psyche and inner struggles reflects the broader social and the political atmosphere of the time exemplifying what it is like to live in an era where fear and paranoia govern everything in it.

CONCLUSION

The Bell Jar (1966) narrates the formidable challenges and tribulations that Esther confronts in her journey, and unfolds a narrative wherein women, to attain authorship and agency, must navigate a path that involves using the female body as a tool for dismantling a fabricated identity. Rejecting the imposed social roles becomes a pivotal stride toward women's liberation, a realisation that Esther acutely grasps. In an era marked by hysteria and madness, exacerbated by the pervasive surveillance of the Cold War, Esther's struggles intensify. Living in a time that consistently undermines her, she recognises that seizing agency over her body stands as the sole route to her liberation. In this context, the female body emerges as a critical instrument in Esther's quest for freedom and symbolises a metaphorical battlefield where she can undergo a rebirth as a female author. The utilisation of her body therefore becomes a profound and transformative act in her pursuit of personal and creative autonomy.

REFERENCES

1) Aryan, A. (2020). *The Post-war Novel and the Death of the Author.* Palgrave Macmillan.
2) Aryan, A. (2021). Fiction as Therapy: Agency and Authorship in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*. *The Interdisciplinary Research Journal, 9*(1), 107-123.
3) Aryan, A. (2022). *The Postmodern Representation of Reality in Peter Ackroyd's Chatterton.* Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
4) Aryan, A. (2023). The Literary Critic and Creative Writer as Antagonists: Golding's The Paper Men. *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies, 25*(3), 338-353.
5) Aryan, A. (July 2019). The Traumatised Shaman: The Woman Writer in the Age of Globalised Trauma. *Alluvium*(special issue). doi:https://doi.org/10.7766/alluvium.v7.3.06
6) Belletto, S., & Grausam, D. (Eds.). (2012). *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment.* University of Iowa Press.

7) Budick, E. M. (1987). The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's the Bell Jar. *College English, 49*(8), 872-885. doi:https://doi.org/10.2307/378115

8) Claridge G. Pryor R. & Watkins G. (1990). *Sounds from the Bell Jar: Ten Psychotic Authors.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

9) Durrant, J. B. (2007). THE Witches. In *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany* (pp. 45-86). Brill.

10) Farreras, I. G. (2019). History of mental illness. In R. Biswas-Diener & E. Diener (Eds), *Noba   textbook series: Psychology.* Champaign, IL: DEF publishers

11) Foucault, M. (1988). *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* Vintage Books.

12) Friedan, B. (1979). *The Feminine Mystique.* Dell.

13) Laing, R. (1967). *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

14) Laing, R. D. (1960). *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness.* London.

15) Macpherson, P. (1991). *Reflecting on The Bell Jar.* Routledge.

16) Parrish, M. E. (1977). Cold War Justice: The Supreme Court and the Rosenbergs. *The American Historical Review, 82*(4), 805-842.

17) Peel, R. (2019). *The Bell Jar*, the Rosenbergs and the Problem of the Enemy Within. In T. Brain (Ed.), *Sylvia Plath in Context* (pp. 203-212). Cambridge University Pres

18) Plath, S. (1966). *The Bell Jar.* London: Faber and Faber.

19) Plath, S. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath.* (K. V. Kukil , Ed.) Anchor Books.

20) Smith, C. J. (2010). "The Feeding of Young Women": Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar, Mademoiselle" Magazine, and the Domestic Ideal. *College Literature, 37*(4), 1-22. doi:https://www.jstor.org/stable/27917762

21) Szasz, T. (1974). *The Myth of Mental Illness* (Rev ed.). Harper & Row.

22) Szasz, T. (1997). *The Manufacture of Madness: A Comparative Study of the Inquisition and the Mental Health Movement.* New York: Syracuse University Press.