

**Oppressed Women's Voices: An Examination  
of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Selected Poems**

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**To**

**Department of English and Humanities of BRAC University**

**and**

**my family.**

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### **Abstract**

During the late twentieth Century America women faced many challenges. After the two World Wars they feel the urge to work outside. Their need of separate identity encouraged them to look for new opportunities. At this point, literature became a source that helped them to release their inner private feelings. But the patriarchal society provides almost no support to the women of late twentieth century America. Furthermore, the society often criticized women for their contribution in literature. For instance, being a woman it was difficult for Sylvia Plath to establish herself as a writer. As a result, she suffered from many difficulties both in her personal and professional life.

So, Plath's writing became a source of conveying her frustration, rage, deception and betrayal to the readers of her works. Through her writing Plath captured the complex world of a woman's mind that is equally influenced by social oppressions. Women in order to keep balance between their private and public lives suffer from anxiety and depression.

In this paper I have made an attempt to present how Sylvia Plath's poetic creations reflect the narrow and rigid patriarchal society that try to undermine women as individuals and artists.

### Introduction

During her life Sylvia Plath was more known as the wife of Ted Huges, the poet Laureate of England, than a poet in her own rights. Many of her publishers were interested in her poetry because of her influential husband. During the last year of her life she struggled alone trying to raise her children with very little money of her own. Yet, she worked very vigorously on her poems later to be published in the volume titled *Ariel*, we really cannot know how the poems would have been accepted if Sylvia Plath was alive. But because of the traumatic nature of her death, Plath became a myth, and her books of poems received tremendous attention from readers and critics alike. She has been read as a confessional poet, became a cult of her time, and critics raged over the private life of Sylvia Plath and Ted Huges. This paper, however, focuses on some of her selected poems and the novel *The Bell Jar*, showing the extremely complex world of a woman who was continuously struggling with the various conflicting identities a woman has to deal with.

The first chapter of my dissertation is Plath and the Role of Traditional Women. It deals with Plath's outlook about the traditional women of America in the 1950s. Traditional women are the ideal women of the patriarchal society. They are busy with their children, maintaining household chores and taking care of their husbands. But Sylvia Plath opposes to this only appreciated image of women in her contemporary world. Plath believed that this will limit the scope for women to establish their particular identities in life.

An important part of Plath's work deals with traditional women. In many of her poems and in her novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath focuses on the conflict between the private

and public life of a woman. In this stage she shares her own feelings about her mother's controlling image that she rejects in her poem "Medusa". Here, it should be mentioned that after the death of Plath's father Otto Plath, her mother being a single parent had to support family alone, and in which she was very successful. But as a result she had to play the role of the man of the house along with the woman. Somehow, this had a negative effect on the girl Sylvia, who was very sensitive. She rejected the stern, manly and distant mother with whom she was never able to have an intimate relationship. Probably, Plath always blamed her father for leaving them untimely, and she herself felt acutely how a woman, who has a dual role to perform, suffers from identity crisis. Therefore, it can be seen that Plath is confused because neither she can accept the private, submissive image of the traditional women nor the dominant, loud image of a public woman. Plath's "Lady Lazarus" is a biblical figure who hates her private life and finally speaks publicly about the kind of treatment she got from the surrounding society that turns her into a frustrated, raged speaker who can "eat men like air." Later on, in her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* Plath portrays her main protagonist Esther Greenwood's conflicting mind that is unable to choose between the private and public lives of women. Though, Esther believes that a private life can only limit her to the boundary of her household and can destroy her career as a writer, at some point in the novel she starts thinking that maybe after marriage she won't be longing much for her writing. Later on, this confusion between private and public lives of women leads Esther to a great deal of troubles.

A later part of the first chapter is concerned with the treatment of traditional women as ideal wife, ideal mother and also the features of an ideal daughter that

emphasized many times by Plath in her poetries. Plath portrays, a spinster's opposing mind that rejects the idea of getting married in her poem "Spinster". Here, the speaker in the poem is afraid to get married, afraid of love and afraid to see herself in the traditional role of a wife. In addition, the speaker believes that an ideal image of a wife can only bind her to a certain position from where she has no way to establish a particular self. So at the end of the poem she creates an emotional barricade that can secure her from the emotion called love. Then, in her poem "The Applicant" Plath exposes the image of an ideal wife in the eyes of the patriarchal society. Here, the speaker represents the woman not as a wife but as an applicant that can fulfill the duties that are assigned to her. This poem all over criticizes the role of a traditional wife, where she ultimately turns into a mechanized person in order to fulfill the duties that are expected from her by the society.

Then, this chapter will also discuss the treatment of "motherhood" in Plath's poems. Motherhood is supposed to be an ideal stage for women. So, Plath captures many shades of motherhood in her poems. According to the patriarchal society, the role of a woman achieves its fulfillment after being a mother. But Plath, due to her rejection to the conventional roles of women, shows some other aspects of motherhood that carries the fears, pain and helplessness of motherhood for example in the poems like "Metaphor", "Morning Song" and in her free verse play *Three Women*. Then, she has also captured the happiness and feelings of fulfillment of motherhood in her poem like "You're".

The final part of the first chapter of my dissertation includes the controversial roles of a daughter in Plath's poems. So far it is clear that, Plath most of the time rejects the conventional role of women and so the role of the daughter is represented through frustrated image of the daughters who are not willing to accept the social bindings. It can

be said that Plath's personal experiences with her parents also influenced her to portray her daughter image as frustrated, raged and as a direct speaker. In her poems the daughters are not traditional daughters. But daughters that love their parents but refuses to be dominated by them.

The second chapter of my dissertation discusses the women in the Mirror. In this chapter the mirror poems of Plath are analyzed to find out how Plath views the women in the mirror. The mirror imageries are mostly used by Plath to show the fragmented identities of the women speakers. Moreover, the mirror never lies and so it reflects the real condition of the women speakers. In the poem "Mirror" Plath portrays the fragmented image of the female speaker. The speaker in this poem is in a submissive image where she is scared to face the society because as time passes the mirror is reflecting her growing age. But the patriarchal society always wants to see her as beautiful and young. So the image of the woman speaker is fragmented in this poem because she is unwilling to accept the truth of her real image. It also shows how the woman speaker is scared to accept the true self just because the society believes in her false self that will always be beautiful and youthful.

Later in her poem "In Plaster" Plath shows the double self of the speaker where the speaker is facing an identity crisis. And here she likes her white plastered self over her true yellow self. In this poem due to social oppression the speaker has turned into the white artificial self that fulfills all the social demands that are expected from her. Therefore as time passes the double self of the women speaker splits and finally the plastered self takes the control of her true self. But at the end of the poem Plath shows

rays of hope where the true self realizes her own importance and hopes to manage herself in future without the company of the white plastered self.

Next in this chapter poems like “Face Lift” and “A Birthday Present” are discussed. In “Face Lift” Plath shows how the women speaker is excited to see her new face in the mirror that she got through cosmetic surgery. Her excitement conveys that she is happy because she believes her face lift is a rebirth for her self. And now she can control her new image as if it is a new life for her. In her poem “A Birthday Present” the women speaker is also longing for a new birth and she feels that only death can free her from her present life. In this poem the mirror imagery suggests the persona’s desire for death.

Lastly, this chapter includes Plath’s autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. In this novel we can see the frequent use of mirror imageries that describes the main protagonist Esther’s fragmented mind where she is not satisfied with her own image that is reflected in the mirror. Later on in the novel the mirror imagery helps to show Esther’s psychological disorder where she can’t bear to see herself in the mirror. This is how Plath’s women in the mirror reflect many aspects of their characters that actually convey their growing psychological complexities and that leads to the final chapter of my dissertation.

The final chapter of my dissertation is about Plath’s *Women and Madness* the discussion on the earlier chapter introduced that women in the mirror are facing psychological complexities in order to deal with their own images. As we know the traditional women are expected to maintain the ideal image of a wife, mother and a daughter. While maintaining their ideal image at a point of their life they face identity

crisis and they urge for rebirth to take the control over their lives. But in order to get a new life the woman speaker is ready to die. That is what introduces the suicidal attempts in Plath's poems. It eventually introduces the mental disorder of the women speakers in her poems. And through her works Plath exposed the continuous social oppression and the pressure on the women speaker. That finally leads them to insanity.

It can be said that, Plath's controversial image encouraged me to choose her works as my thesis topic. But after going through the events of her life, and reading her works I get to see that her works are not only a reflection of her tragic life but it also reflects the condition of the American women of the 1950s. Also the social oppression, patriarchal social structure of the time is mostly responsible for the helpless condition of Plath's women. However it is interesting for me to work on the lives of American women. In addition, it is a kind of time travel to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century America through the works of Sylvia Plath.

### Chapter 1- Plath and the Role of Traditional Women

I try to describe this long limitation, hoping that with such power as is now mine, and such use of language as is within that power, this will convince any one who cares about it that this “living” of mine had been done under a heavy handicap....<sup>1</sup>

---Charlotte Perkins Gilman

This heavy handicap that Charlotte Perkins speaks about is something every woman poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has to go through in a patriarchal society. Sylvia Plath the brilliant modern woman felt handicapped in achieving her goal. At the end she surrendered to death by committing suicide. Sylvia Plath’s poems are reflection of her personal life and with extreme sincerity she has jotted down all her feelings in her poems. Plath’s poems belong to different stages of her life where her personal experiences largely influenced her writing. Moreover, Sylvia Plath’s works also deal with the continuous conflict that was running in her mind where she was unable to accept the traditional roles of women in society. The continuous dilemma in her mind on these traditional roles of women actually brings different varieties of works. On one hand, Plath wrote about enjoyment of motherhood, and on the other she portrayed the pain of losing unborn infant on part of a mother. Her poems often reflect the controversial relationship between mother and daughter where the conflict of private and public images of women plays an important role.

Actually, the conflict between private and public life of women is an important aspect of Sylvia Plath’s work. She explores this theme from various angles. In “Medusa”

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ann J. Lane, *The living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: an autobiography*. Pg: 104

she has portrayed the difficult relationship between mother and daughter, drawing the imprisonment and oppression that Plath always felt in her relationship with her own mother. She describes her mother as a controlling force in her life and it also shows that Plath was not being able to accept that role of her mother. So, she doesn't hesitate to compare her mother with the goddess of Greek mythology, Medusa. Medusa was a cruel monster who turned people into stones. Plath's antipathy towards her mother is clear in the poem "Medusa" where the speaker uses phrases like, "Squeezing the breath from the blood bells/ Off, off, eely tentacle!" Here the active verb "squeezing" reflects the inner fear of the speaker that relates Plath with her life; it portrays the impression as if her mother will smother her with love and aggression.

Furthermore, in her discussion on the private and public lives of women Mary Catherine Elizabeth Jackson says that,

Medusa is specifically feared by men according to classical mythology and Freud's theory on the "terror of castration." Plath uses Medusa to symbolize the terrifying mother rather than a Gorgon feared by men for her threatening feminine sexuality... The metaphorical umbilical cord acts as the long distance connection between mother and child. The poem does not specifically name the gender of the main speaker. Most critics interpret the central voice as Plath's; however, this leads the reader into a

biographical trap. "Medusa" is a fantastical re-working of the difficult relationship with her mother.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, in this poem her mother represents the image of a woman during the Great Depression who has to take the responsibility of her entire family. For that purpose, the conflict between the private and public image of women rises in Plath's "Medusa", as it reflects how she was unable to accept the authority of her mother over her life and ambitions.

Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,  
 Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous  
 Repair.  
 In any case, you are always there,  
 Tremulous breath at the end of my line,  
 Curve of water upleaping  
 To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,  
 Touching and sucking.  
 I didn't call you  
 I didn't call you at all. (15-24)

In these lines the speaker's frustration reflects the unhealthy relationship between herself and mother. The speaker by saying, "Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable" suggests

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Katherine Elizabeth Jackson, "Breaking The Bell Jar: A Study of the Boundaries Between the Private and Public Lives of Women." May/June2006  
[http://web.clas.ufl.edu/jur/200605/papers/paper\\_jackson.html](http://web.clas.ufl.edu/jur/200605/papers/paper_jackson.html)

that, though she is living away from her mother but through the umbilicus cord her mother is still controlling her.

However, Plath's mother, Aurelia Plath, was not just a negative force; she had a lot of contributions in Plath's personal and academic life as well. When Plath's father died, she was only eight; Aurelia became the sole caretaker of her two children. Plath felt that all her academic achievements were the reasons for her mother to be proud of her. This actually worked as a burden on Plath's mind. She desperately wanted to come out of the constant force that she was receiving from her mother. Thus it reflects in the poem where the speaker says,

Paralyzing the kicking lovers  
 Cobra light  
 Squeezing the breath from the blood cell  
 Of the fuchsia, I could draw no breath,  
 Dead and moneyless. (28-32)

Here, Plath draws reference of Medusa's activity from Greek mythology where through the power of her "cobra light" she turns her admirer into stone. Thus the speaker feels the suffocation of Medusa's controlling power that makes her helpless and she could draw "no breath."

So, the main speaker of the poem "Medusa" wants to escape from the mother but is unable to fully break the ties. Finally, the voice pleads to the mother,

Overexposed, like an X-ray.

Who do you think you are?

A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?

I shall take no bite of your body,

Bottle in which, I live. (33-37)

After expressing all her rejection over Medusa's control the speaker finally says,

Off, off, eely tentacle!

There is nothing between us.

This last statement has a double meaning; it can be interpreted to mean that there is nothing between the mother and child, as they are not tied by the umbilical cord anymore, or it can be read as there is no space between them, as her mother is smothering her with her love. This double meaning line shows the urge of the speaker where she wants to get rid of her mother's affection that actually creates a burden on her. But at the same time she can't deny the love of her mother as she is an important part of the speaker's identity. So, eventually, the conflict between the private image and public face of her mother remains the same till the end of the poem "Medusa".

Next, in "Lady Lazarus" Plath perceives that men possess the freedom to act as they please, whereas females are shackled by the constructs of Western femininity. In this poem the speaker is frustrated on the male supremacy that always suppresses women in general and so all over the poem she hysterically speaks against men. Also her suicidal attempts are described proudly by her in the lines, "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well." In this poem Plath compares herself to the biblical character of Lazarus who was resurrected by Jesus Christ Here, she is resurrected by Christ from her three times suicidal attempts. Also, she conveys that she has come back to take

revenge on men. In a way, it suggests that Plath believes her helpless condition occurred because of the male figures in her life. So, Robert Phillips says that,

..“Lady Lazarus” is a much —quoted poem in which Plath compares herself to that Biblical figure once resurrected by Christ (and to a cat with its nine lives) because she has been “resurrected” from attempted suicide three times. The poem is also an act of revenge on the male Ego<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, in “Lady Lazarus,” Plath shows the ways of the speaker’s inner conflicts that she is suffering in her private life. For this reason Plath uses some references from Nazism and to Jewishness. Thus Plath has successfully created a fragmented identity for the speaker, who is portrayed in this poem as an eternal victim of social privatization of the image of women. The tone of the speaker reflects her rage over the kind of treatment she gets, filling her voice with immense hatred against society and men. It actually shows how the long time oppression affects the speaker’s life and she has almost lost the sound ness of her mind. The speaker thinks she has gone through many tortures, deception and rejection and finally it brings her rebirth. In this context Jon Rosenblatt says, “Only when the Lady undergoes total immolation of self and body does she truly emerge in a demonic form. The doctor burns her down to ash, and then she achieves her rebirth.”<sup>2</sup> Thus in the final lines the speaker says:

Out of the ash

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Phillips. “The Dark Tunnel: A Reading of Sylvia Plath.”  
[http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m\\_r/plath/lazarus.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m_r/plath/lazarus.htm).

<sup>2</sup>Jon Rosenblatt. *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* .  
[http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m\\_r/plath/lazarus.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m_r/plath/lazarus.htm).

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air

Finally, it can be said that “Lady Lazarus” that deals with drama of external persecution, self-destructiveness, and renewal, with both its horror and its grotesque comedy, is played out through social and historical contexts that symbolize the inner struggles of Lady Lazarus.

Therefore, this conflict between boundaries of Private and Public lives of women is also one of the main debates that Plath introduces in her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. Esther, the main protagonist of this novel continuously struggles between these two phases of a woman’s lives. She is also afraid of having a private life that she believes can only limit her scope to progress in life. Furthermore, this novel explores the helpless situation of Esther’s life; where she is under constant pressure to maintain stereotyped image of women that society expects from her.

While attending college, Esther met many women who influenced her life in some way. Esther looked up to many women who eventually let her down and were full of rejections and separations. All of the women Esther met symbolized an aspect of some stereotype of womanhood. They dramatically impacted Esther’s life. Although Esther ultimately rejected the stereotypes the women represented, they were all responsible for shaping Esther’s life, making her the person she was. However, once the

women fully gave in to the negative socially constructed role of womanhood, Esther became depressed and her mental breakdown began.<sup>1</sup>

This breakdown of Esther is carried over in the novel and implies the effect of social oppression on Esther's mind. As an ambitious lady of 1950's Esther is unable to accept the "female social roles" where women are isolate within the domestic chores. Moreover, Esther realizes that women are 'doubly subjugated' by society and men. Although there are scopes available for women to progress in life, but women's identity is only defined by their relationship with men. Thus, in her relationship with Buddy Willard she never received any encouragement from Buddy towards her writing talent. At this point Esther says:

I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister voice knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think may be it was true that when you were married and have children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.(89)<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Esther's mind is unable to adjust with the conventional image of women in society. Eventually, it creates a fear in Esther's mind that she would never actually be able to have choices in life because of the traditional "housewife" role for women set by the society.

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<sup>1</sup>Kristen D'Elia, "Analyzing Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* through a Feminist Lens."  
[http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/kristendelia\\_paper.html](http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/kristendelia_paper.html).

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*. Pg:89.

Nevertheless, after Buddy many men arrive in her life but they let her down in one way or another. She faces attempt of rape by a “women hater” named Macro. Macro’s character represents the patriarchal society to Esther in which she lives. Like the patriarchal society Macro forces and uses Esther to fulfill his needs. His thoughts about women are so degrading that he takes Esther as his personal object or possession. “Macro set his teeth to the strap at my shoulder and tore my sheath to the waist. I saw the glimmer of bare skin, like a pale veil separating two bloody minded adversaries. Slut! The words hissed by my ear.”(114).<sup>1</sup> This incident increases the hatred for men in Esther’s mind. She feels the helplessness under the shelter of a man. Later on, she decides to stand against men and society in general.

Thus, Esther’s rejection of men and society inspires her to disagree with the marriage proposal of Buddy. The torrents of conflicts in her mind make her reject the typical role of women:

She explained her “unconventional” beliefs to him. Esther wouldn’t choose marriage over her dreams of a writing career. An article printed in “Housekeeping Monthly”, on May 13, 1955 described typical duties of a “good housekeeper.” Those chores included having dinner prepared, being “more interesting for him”, and “remembering that his topics of conversation are more important than yours.”<sup>2</sup>

Esther’s beliefs about marriage can be denoted as,

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.pg:114

<sup>2</sup> Kristen D’Elia, “Analyzing Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* through a Feminist Lens.”  
[http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/kristendelia\\_paper.html](http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/kristendelia_paper.html)

“getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curlers after he’d left for work to wash up dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively fascinating day he’d expect a big diner, and I’d spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted. This seemed dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s.”(88).<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, when Esther shares her confusion about being forced to change her choices in marriage and says that she is not interested in marriage, Buddy then calls her “neurotic”. “Neurotic, ha! I let out a scornful laugh. If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at once and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days.”(98)<sup>2</sup> This is how the conflict between boundaries of private and public lives of women shaped Esther’s mind in *The Bell Jar*.

Apart from the debate on the conflict between boundaries of private and public lives of women; the role of a wife in Plath’s literary works suggests her views towards the traditional image of women. The traditional role of women that the patriarchal society expects includes: a good wife, an ideal mother and an obedient daughter. Therefore, Plath is always torn between the ideal images of women and the image of an ambitious woman who wants to be successful in life. She couldn’t choose between these two. So, her works

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*. pg:88

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.pg:98

deal with this mental crisis of women and shows that women are mostly afraid to tie knot with men because it may destroy their ambitions, their identity as well as their freedom.

In her poem "Spinster" the speaker describes the inner thought of an unmarried girl who is unwilling to get married with the potential suitor. The poem begins with the arriving of the month April that always welcome spring the month for new life and freshness. But the speaker is uncomfortable with the upcoming spring and also reflects her inner thoughts related to her suitor:

Now this particular girl  
 During a ceremonious april walk  
 With her latest suitor  
 Found herself, of a sudden intolerably struck  
 By the birds' irregular babel  
 And the leaves' litter. (1-6)

In these beginning lines the speaker is introduced as "this particular girl", it builds up the idea that the speaker is different from the others. Later in the poem it suggests that the speaker is longing for winter, season that freezes everything perhaps the speaker wants to freeze her emotion called love:

How she longed for winter then!-  
 Scrupulously austere in its order  
 Of white and black  
 Ice and rock; each sentiment within border  
 And heart's frosty discipline

Exact as a snowflake. (13-18)

Her inner fear of losing her control over her own self doesn't permit her to marry. So, she creates an emotional barricade by herself in order to protect herself from men. Here, the speaker is playing a role against the image of a traditional woman of 1950's. So she is unwilling about marriage and love that can only limit her progress in life. That is why the poem ends as:

And round her house she set  
 Such a barricade of barb and check  
 Against mutinous weather  
 As no mere insurgent man could hope to break  
 With curse, fist, threat  
 Or love, either. (25-30)

On the other hand, Plath's hesitancy to portray woman as an ideal wife is boosted by the infidelity of Huges that ruined her happy family life. In her real life Plath tried to be an ideal wife to Ted Huges. But it was followed by innumerable suffering for her:

Plath didn't dislike looking after her family; in fact she quite enjoyed being married and guiding her children. Plath began to resent all she had done when news of Ted Hughes' infidelity became known. That news caused Sylvia to feel as though all of her dedication to the family was for naught, and that she put her desires on hold went unappreciated. She felt as though she was a victim, thus causing her to feel disillusioned by

herself, and generally unhappy. Those feelings increased after a separation from her husband later in life.<sup>1</sup>

This is how Plath's personal experiences create unwillingness to portray women as ideal wives. Thus in *The Bell Jar* the main protagonist Esther is also unwilling to perform the role of an ideal wife.

Later on, Plath's poem "The Applicant" describes the bureaucratic society where women for marriage are assessed as commodity. The patriarchal society values women in such a way.

The woman in the poem is referred to as "it." Like the man, she has no individuality, but where his suit gives him form, standing for the role he plays in a bureaucratic society, for the work he does, the only thing that gives the woman form is the institution of marriage. She does not exist before it and dissolves back into nothingness after it.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, in this poem Plath represents the applicant as a voiceless woman who is assessed by men as a commodity for marriage. And as time passes the married woman increases her value as she can cook, sew and also talk. So in this poem the woman is denoted as "it" as if she is not a human being but an object that is useful to maintain household chores:

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<sup>1</sup>Kristen D'Elia, "Analyzing Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* through a Feminist Lens."  
[http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/kristendelia\\_paper.html](http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/kristendelia_paper.html)

<sup>2</sup>Pamela J. Annas, "The Self in the World: The Social Context of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems."  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/annas.html>.

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,  
In fifty, gold.  
A living doll, everywhere you look.  
It can sew, it can cook.  
It can talk, talk, talk. (31-35)

Throughout the poem with the use of good humor Plath tries to portray the ridiculous features of a patriarchal society where the women are taken as submissive, loyal and fragile. It indicates that with time she will lose all the quality of a human being and she will only work as a mechanized person the way she is expected to behave by the society. So, here Plath indirectly criticizes the institution of marriage where men are using the tolerance and patience of the women. Eventually that leads the women to lose their identity.

Besides this, in her verse play *Three Women* Plath mainly discusses the darker aspects of motherhood. In the play the second voice had a miscarriage so she reflects the emptiness that she feels after her miscarriage. However, only the third voice in the poem shows the necessity of being legally married in order to keep her child to herself. She has been raped and later on this results her pregnancy, but it is difficult for her to keep her baby to herself. As abortion was illegal at that time so she decides to give her baby for adoption. Her condition contrasts the first voice in this poem who had a successful delivery. This is way in the same play Plath portrays various sides of motherhood through her three women voices. Therefore, Plath has much confusion in motherhood as well. It continues as:

A barren wife “infects” her husband’s garden with her own sterility, she wrote repeatedly about barren women who were unfruitful by their own doing: a woman who had abortions became, for Plath, the other. Nothing is simple here: we have Plath’s comment in her college journal that “I do not want primarily to be a mother.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus it suggests that, motherhood for Plath is again another complicated issue. Her personal fear about motherhood is portrayed in her poems as well. However, Sylvia Plath in order to portray the traditional images of women has discussed the stage of motherhood in various ways. Her poems do not only capture the positive sides of motherhood but she has also discussed the anxiety of a mother before experiencing the new parenthood. In her novel *The Bell Jar*, the main protagonist is scared about the delivery pain of mothers while giving birth to a child. So, through Esther’s character Plath shows her inner fear about motherhood,

Here was a women in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn’t groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forgot how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again.(68)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*.pg:95

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.pg 68

In “Metaphors”, Plath conveys an attitude of ambivalence towards pregnancy. The description of the fetus as newly-minted money implies that the persona thinks of it as something that is valuable and fresh. Moreover, the overall tone of the poem is humorous, with funny images such as, ‘a melon strolling on two tendrils’, which suggest that the persona is good-naturedly making fun of the physical shape of pregnant women. Despite the positive tone and images, the image of ‘a ponderous house’ seems to convey an ambivalent attitude towards pregnancy. A house implies warmth and protection for the fetus living inside the womb. However, ponderous seems to imply that the mother is laboring heavily to provide this warmth and protection. This oxymoron seems to convey that the persona wants to protect and care for her child, but she is also burdened by it.

The ambiguity of the first sentence may also convey an ambivalent attitude towards pregnancy. “I’m a riddle in nine syllables” can mean, literally, that the poem is a riddle with each line having nine syllables. However, nine syllables might refer to the nine months of gestation and the riddle might be the identity of the child within the mother. This can be interpreted in two ways. It could be that the mother is eagerly anticipating the answer, that is, the birth of the child. Alternatively, the comparison of the pregnant mother to a riddle might show that the persona is afraid of the unknown. So, she does not know what her child will be like.

Also, it seems that pregnancy itself is terrifying to the persona. “Boarded the train there’s no getting off” seems to convey a sense of inevitability — the child will be born no matter what the persona does, and it seems that her inability to control the process of childbirth is terrifying her. In conclusion, the persona in “Metaphors” seems to have

mixed feelings towards pregnancy — on one hand, she loves and cherishes the unborn child, but on the other, she is burdened by it and terrified by the inevitability of pregnancy.

In comparison, “You’re” seems to convey a more positive attitude towards pregnancy. There is a tone of jubilation, as conveyed through the sentence a common-sense / Thumbs-down on the dodo’s mode’. It is as if the persona is celebrating the innate superiority of the human baby and its sophisticated structure as compared to the extinct dodo. The persona also feels warmth and love towards the baby. She calls her baby little loaf, which conveys feeling of warmth, like a freshly baked loaf.

Despite the positive tone, the persona seems to have mixed feelings towards the fetus. She describes it as moon-skulled, quite an ambiguous phrase. Moon-skulled might refer to the color and shape of the fetus’s head. However, moon usually has negative connotations in Plath’s poetry, whereas skull carries implications of death. The association of the fetus with something as negative as death implies that the persona has negative feelings towards it. The persona also describes the ‘fetus [trawling its] dark as owls do’. It might just be a description of how the fetus swims through the darkness of the womb. However, another interpretation of this might be that the persona sees the baby as surrounded by darkness. She is again associating the fetus with negative images. Furthermore, the persona compares the fetus to owls. This comparison is ambiguous — it might be just a physical comparison — the fetus’s face is like an owl’s, pale and white. However, it is also possible that the persona sees the fetus as a predator. Perhaps she feels that the fetus is threatening in some way. On the whole, the mixture of feelings —

jubilant and warm and fear — signifies that the persona has an ambivalent attitude towards pregnancy.

Plath also conveys an ambivalent attitude towards motherhood, as expressed in “Morning Song.” The title itself is ambiguous. Morning might refer to the dawn of the baby’s life, or mornings when the persona has to take care of the child. Alternatively, it might be a pun on the word mourning, suggesting that the child brings the persona grief. However, the persona feels that the birth of the child is an event that should happen naturally over the course of her life, as she describes the baby’s bald cry [taking] its place among the elements. Moreover, the phrase ‘Love set you going’ imply that the baby is born out of love. In short, the first stanza reveals that the persona loves her child. Additionally, the phrase ‘One cry, and I stumble from bed’ signifies that the persona is trying to be a caring, loving mother. Though, there is a bit of ambiguity about this sentence. The word stumble implies that it is hard for her to care for her child. Also, it might be that she is trying to conform to society’s expectations about motherhood and child-rearing. The subsequent phrase, cow-heavy supports the interpretation that child-raising is a burden to her. The phrase implies that the persona thinks that she is like a cow, fat and ugly, and her only purpose is to give milk to her child. She might be blaming her child for being a burden and causing her unattractiveness. This idea is supported by the stanza, “I’m no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind’s hand’. It is possible that she thinks the child is sucking up her energy, attractiveness, and time. Also it has been said that, “her use of the adjectives “cow like” in several of her poems about babies and mothering reflected the

way she knew society would view her large, nursing, body. It was a new problem for her, one that stemmed entirely from maternity and its processes.”<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the persona might feel cold and distant towards the baby. We stand round blankly at walls conveys no hint of joy at the presence of the baby. Another interpretation of this ambiguous sentence might be that the persona is new to motherhood and does not know what to do. The sentence might be conveying her anxiety at having to care for her child. By giving the persona such mixed feelings, Plath conveys an attitude of ambivalence towards childbirth and motherhood.

Sylvia Plath and her poems reflect the core of emotions that a woman goes through. In her poems she discussed many issues from the conflict between private and public image of women to the different emotions of motherhood. Furthermore, the relationship of father and daughter is also showed in a controversial way in her poem “Daddy”. In her personal life Plath’s emotion, fear and inability to get the love of the father created a complex image of father in her mind. That is why the poem mainly holds Plath’s rage and frustration against the image of father.

The first twelve stanzas of the poem reveal the extent of Plath’s possession of the childhood image of her father that she carries forward into adulthood. In this portrayal of this image Plath uses her real experiences and memories along with her own psychic oppression. In order to portray her emotions in the poem Plath has used more general symbol, of the Nazi oppression of the Jews. For example, the man at the blackboard in

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<sup>11</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*.pg:95

the picture of the actual father is transformed symbolically into the “man in black with a Meinkampf look.”

Therefore, in this poem Plath accomplishes more or less chronological sequencing of these recollections of her childhood, and on through the suicide attempt of the speaker shows the urge of the woman to extricate herself from her image of daddy, is a dramatization of the process of psychic purgation in the speaker. The speaker’s systematic recollection of all the mental projection of her father amount on an attempt at dispossession through direct confrontation with a demon produced in her imagination. Both psychoanalysis and the religious rite of exorcism have regarded this process of confrontation with the “trauma” or the “demon” as potentially curative; and from whichever perspective Plath viewed the process, she has her persona confront-- in a way almost relieve- her childhood terror of a father whose actual existence is as indistinct as the towns with which the girl tries to associate him.

The role of a daughter is also reflected in Plath’s “Medusa”, where the speaker shares a love and hate bond with her mother. Firstly, it shows the hate for her mother where she compares her to a Greek monster that turns others in stone. Later on, the speaker agrees that it is impossible to break the bond she shares with her mother. In these following lines the speaker says: Off, off, eely tentacle! /There is nothing between us. It can be taken as they have no relation with each other or they share a kind of bond that makes them inseparable from each other.

Both of Plath’s poems “Daddy” and “Medusa” reflect an aggressive daughter who is again not in a traditional image of a good daughter. In “Daddy” the features of a daughter are described:

Whether “Daddy” actually results in the speaker’s psychic release is unclear however. The vocal dimension of the poem and the acting out of rage are undeniably reminiscent of the cathartic method but nothing indicates that the daughter is free at the end of the poem. As shown above, the father figure remains inaccessible. Moreover, the final words, “I’m through”, are highly ambiguous, suggesting as they do that the daughter is done with her father, but also that she is exhausted, that her verbal explosion has killed her.<sup>1</sup>

Thus in this poem Plath tries to break the ideal image of a daughter and portrays the ambiguous and problematic aspects of father-daughter relationship. In her poem “Medusa” she similarly presents an unconventional daughter image that is against her mother and only wants to untie all bonds that exist between them. “Medusa” also bears witness to Plath’s ambivalence about the curative virtues of poetry. The poem is alive with binary movement which reflects the intricate relationship between mother and daughter.

Pairs of adjectives-“dazzling and grateful”, “touching and sucking”, “fat and red”, “dead and moneyless”-, internal rhymes- “you steamed to me over the sea” “my mind winds to you”, “touching and sucking”-, as well as repetitions- “nevertheless, nevertheless”, “I never called you/ I never called you at all”- reflect not only the inescapable mirror relationship between mother and daughter, but also the pulsating movement of

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<sup>1</sup> Laure de Nervaux. “The Freudian Muse: Psychoanalysis and the problem of Self-Revelation in Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy” and “Medusa”. <http://erea.revues.org/index186.html?file=1>

attraction and repulsion between them, the daughter's movement away from, and back to the mother.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, it can be said that both these poems show the controversial images of a daughter who wants to be free from her parents. It also implies the inner thoughts of Plath, where as a confessional poet she wrote most of her poems from her personal point of view. Here "Anne Sexton's skeptical assessment of the therapeutic value of literature could easily be applied to Plath: "You don't solve problems in writing. They're still there. I've heard psychiatrists say, "See, You've forgiven your father. There it is in your poem." But I haven't forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did."<sup>2</sup> So, this shows that Plath's personal dissatisfaction with her parents is the main reason behind her portrayal of an aggressive image of daughter in her poems.

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<sup>1</sup>Laure de Nervaux. "The Freudian Muse: Psychoanalysis and the problem of Self-Revelation in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and "Medusa" <http://erea.revues.org/index186.html?file=1>

<sup>2</sup> Laure de Nervaux. "The Freudian Muse: Psychoanalysis and the problem of Self-Revelation in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and "Medusa" <http://erea.revues.org/index186.html?file=1>

## Chapter 2: The Women in the Mirror

The self is caught between stasis and process, isolation and engagement, objectivity and subjectivity, speech and silence, and the search for a self reborn into a reborn world occurs in conflict, between the twin mirrors of the world and her mind.<sup>1</sup> ----Pamela J. Annas

This is how Annas describes Plath and her mind that leads to the mirror concept Plath used in her poetry to show the different perspectives of the same woman. Sylvia Plath has been acknowledged as a feminist writer of great significance. Her works reflect her awareness of and distaste for the submissive role of women that was evident in the American society of 1950s. But later on, in her life she accepted some of the roles on her own terms. She had always wanted to be a beloved and loving wife, also holding strong desire to become a mother. In addition, she wanted to continue her writing that she believed would help her to express her "deeper self". However, when her expectations from her own life collapsed she couldn't help but go into depression. This depression was more of an identity crisis that questions Plath about her own existence in life. This identity crisis occurs because women from girlhood are told that they would find fulfillment and happiness as wife and mother, in traditional feminine roles. But, the reality is that as women spend more and more of their energy trying to be just that, and they feel more and more unhappy. However, Sylvia Plath uses mirror imagery in many of her poems. It plays an important role in her poems. So, it has been said that:

Plath's mirror poems originate in her doubts about her creativity and then reinforce those doubts. They almost all reveal a person who feels "sterile,

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The poetry of Sylvia Plath*. pg:6

empty". Because she believed that "I am what not posterior to herself, reflective of her, but rather was simultaneous with herself, co-operative of her. When her mirrors show an individual lacking in creative aspect, they expose a self already on the margins of disintegration."<sup>1</sup>

In Sylvia Plath's poems 'mirror' happens to be a repetitive image. William Freedman believes that, "Plath uses mirror as a symbol of female passivity, subjection and Plath's own conflicted self-identity caused by social pressures to reconcile the competitive obligations of artistic and domestic life."<sup>2</sup> Thus Plath's "Mirror" is a poem that reflects the fragmented self of the woman speaker. In this poem the mirror reflects the male view of woman that society expects from her: A woman should have an idealized image and youth that can hold her beauty forever. Therefore, in this poem Plath projects mirror as something that reflects the truth. That is why in the poem the first few lines suggests the true features of a mirror,

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever you see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful— (1-4)

Here the mirror claims to reveal the truth. As time passes the speaker grows old with age and the mirror reveals it as the truth but no cruelty. But it seems cruel to the woman who is constantly facing the identity crisis and fears to lose her position as she measures

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<sup>1</sup>Steven Gould Axelrod "The Mirror and the Shadow: Plath's poetics of Self-doubt."  
<http://www.jstor.org/>

<sup>2</sup>William Freedman, "The Monster in Plath's 'Mirror'."  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/freedman.htmlb>

herself through traditional yardstick of the male. In this stage the patriarchal society only values the beauty of woman and she became worthless with her growing age. So it leads the woman in the poem to search for her own existence in life. She takes an inner journey into her soul to find out her identity.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,  
Searching my reaches for what she really is. (10-11)

It has been said that, "The persona is both fascinated and abhorred by the image of the true self, which in the final line is described as a "terrible fish". Thus, there is certain ambivalence between the desire to shed the false self or to hide behind it, so to speak."<sup>1</sup> This leads the end of the poem where the woman hopes to find her true self and not the fragmented one. But she only sees the terrible fish which is no longer the beautiful girl she longed to see:

I am important to her. She comes and goes.  
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.  
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman  
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish. (15-18)

In the poem the features of the woman character reflects her subordinate role in a society where she is mostly concern about her beauty in order to keep her position strong in men's eyes. Also the process of agitation increases her fear. So the mirror is rewarded by the woman's "tears" and "agitation of hands." Freedman maintains that, "when the mirror announces its identity, it shows an active speaker and it is not a passive reflector

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Theresa Ib, "Mind over Myth?: The Divided Self in the poetry of Sylvia Plath." Ib.  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/dividedself.html>

anymore and is rebellious to the traditionally assigned roles of woman.”<sup>1</sup> The imagery of “a terrible fish” is the critical image of a woman that actually reflects the view of society towards a woman who is growing old with time, and to society her growing age is making her ugly like a “terrible fish”. Again, Freedman in his essay states that, “The fish is the woman as autonomous person and author. It is the role rejecting woman/mother who even as she proclaims her acceptance of the task, refuses passivity to mirror, man; infant or whatever else is set before it.”<sup>2</sup> The woman in the mirror then raises her voice against this view of society and tries to search her own self where she says, “In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman.” Later on, it can be said that “Mirror” is a poem where the persona deals with her conflicting self where ‘mirror’ reflects her true face that society criticizes as “a terrible fish”. Her fragmentation of identity is clearly visible throughout the poem. This fragmentation occurs because her own perception about her identity does not match with the social expectations. So, the divided self or fragmentation of women’s identity is visible in Plath’s work. Therefore, it has been said that:

Plath’s preoccupation with the mirror as a metaphor in the struggle between the true and false self emerges also in her academic work. She describes the conflict between the selves as an “inner duality [which] becomes a duel to the death” (10). This conflict is, in Plath’s critical evaluation, a fundamental search for identity in which the two selves must

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<sup>1</sup>William Freedman “The Monster in Plath’s ‘Mirror’.”  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/freedman.html>

<sup>2</sup>William Freedman “The Monster in Plath’s ‘Mirror’.”  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/freedman.html>

necessarily coexist in a balanced form in order for their host to survive; it is a “reconciliation of [man’s] various mirror images [which] involves a constant courageous acceptance of the eternal paradoxes within the universe and within ourselves” (52).<sup>1</sup>

“In this quote, Plath emphasizes the ambivalence outlined above, in relation to the struggle of the selves, namely that a reconciliation of the true and the false self involves courage. It is not easy, nor necessarily pleasant to be confronted by one’s true self or mirror image.”<sup>2</sup> So, it reflects that Plath’s women in the mirror are constantly struggling to find a solid ground to stand. Their inner duality and confusion to choose between true and false self creates further complexities for their life. Thus Plath discusses the concept of the mirror to project the complex mind of women’s in a patriarchal society.

However, her later poems also describe the divided self of women where the identity crisis leads to the double image of women where the true and false self of women clashes and creates a disaster for her. So, the late poems of Plath are as Pamela J. Annas says, “largely about what stands in the way of the possibility of rebirth for the self.” The mirror image also shows the reflection of self that creates a divided self of women’s in Plath’s poems. It has been also said that,

In theory, the mirror should have provided Plath with access to an “abstract Platonic realm” of pure imagination: “and so to the mirror- twin,

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Theresa Ib “Mind over Myth?: The Divided Self in the poetry of Sylvia Plath.”  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/dividedself.html>

<sup>2</sup> Maria Theresa Ib “Mind over Myth?: The Divided Self in the poetry of Sylvia Plath.”  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/dividedself.html>

Muse.” But in fact, it functioned merely as an agent of anxious narcissism. It was an “egoistic mirror” reflecting an ugly outer being but no inner queen.”<sup>1</sup>

This explains the mirror’s position in the lives of Plath’s women speakers. In the mirror they can only see their inferior, ugly looking true self. It also suggests that, women in the mirror can only see their broken images because they have lost their self-confidence. In order to fulfill their social commitments women’s have forgotten themselves.

In addition, this ugly outer image of woman gets another turn in Plath’s poem “In Plaster” where Plath shows the double self of women. In this poem Plath shows two selves of the woman speaker. The description is done in a way as if the speaker is speaking from the other side of the mirror. It actually reflects that the speaker is in her split personality where she is describing her two selves:

There are two of me now:

This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,

And the white person is certainly the superior one.

She does not need food, she is one of the real saints.

At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality (1-5)

In this description of the double image the “white image” is admired by the real image “the old yellow one.” The “white image” of the woman speaker actually reflects the image of a woman that society expects from her. So, she is praising that image for not having any need for “food” that turns her into the real saints. But as the poem progress it

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<sup>1</sup>Steven Gould Axelrod, “The Mirror and the Shadow: Plath’s poetics of Self-doubt.”  
<<http://jstor.org/stable/1028072>>

shows that the speaker is scared about losing herself into this “white image.” So it says in the poem,

Then I saw what the trouble was: she thought she was immortal  
 She wanted to leave me, she thought she was superior,  
 And I'd been keeping her in the dark, and she was resentful---  
 Wasting her day waiting on a half corpse!  
 And secretly she began to hope, I'd die. (34-38)

In trying to explaining these lines, Elisabeth Bronfen suggests, “The tension accelerates because these two selves cannot co- exist peacefully: while the old self realizes that she is so dependent on the external role of perfection that she has quite ‘forgotten how to walk and sit’ without her she also realizes that her immaculately refashioned self functions like her own coffin, threatening to cover her up entirely fully to encase her and take her place” (Bronfen1998:89).<sup>1</sup>

But later on, the true self gather the courage to feel that it can survive without the help of the false self that believes her self to be immortal which she is not. Thus the poem reflects this thought as:

Now I see it must be one or the other of us.  
 She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,  
 But she will soon find out that that doesn't matter a bit  
 I'm collecting my strength; one day I'll manage without her. (52-55)

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath*.pg:89

At this point, Bronfen supports the courage of the true self so she says, “Eventually the persona in order to break the perfect image of purity and beauty, and to become her true self, needs to “avenge herself” by escaping from this casement, allowing it to ‘perish with emptiness’”<sup>1</sup> (Bronfen1998:89). Thus it reflects how the “white image” of the persona works here as the mirror imagery for the real persona and eventually it helps her to find out the courage from where she can stand on her true image. It has been said by Maria Theresa Ib that,

As the poem progresses, the tone of the persona changes from despondent, to hopeful, to confident in the final line: “One day I shall manage without her”. The true self is ready to break free of its confinement and believes in its ability to stand on its own, i.e. without the superficial support of the false self.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, it can be said that the “white image” of the woman speaker is the mirror-double that expects her to be immortal but the true self has gathered courage to stand on her identity and not lose herself on the hand of the false self. It suggests that Plath is now giving courage to the true self to gain strength and not to live the sterile image that society expects from her.

In her poem “Face Lift” Plath introduces the positive mirror image of the woman speaker. The speaker of this poem has gone through a cosmetic surgery and realizes a

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath*.pg:89

<sup>2</sup> Maria Theresa Ib, “Mind over Myth?: The Divided Self in the poetry of Sylvia Plath.”  
<http://www.sylvia-plath.de/plath/dividedself.html>

refined self in her mirror. As if she reborn in this world with her new image. So it says in the poem,

Now she's done for, the dewlapped lady  
I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror-  
Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg. (25-27)

At this point, the speaker is describing the change in her face that has been achieved through a cosmetic surgery. Moreover, this surgery not only creates the new image for her but it also refined her self spiritually.

Nevertheless, the speaker in this poem is excited about her new image that is visible in the mirror. Her transformation is merely physical but it also brings the spiritual excitement for her. Here, it shows that the speaker was distant from her body. She is enjoying her present physical change because now she is being able to control it. Furthermore, Van Dyne argues that, there is a certain degree of the speaker's detachment from her body and "a parodic self-awareness of the resurrected body as grotesque."<sup>1</sup> (Van Dyne 1993:89) Moreover, the speaker loves her new image so much that she doesn't even care for her old image. And consider this new image as if she just born "as a baby". It says in the poem,

They've trapped her in some laboratory jar.  
Let her die there, or wither incessantly for next fifty years,  
Nodding and rocking and fingering her thin hair.  
Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze,

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Van Dyne, *Revising life Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. pg:89

Pink and smooth as a baby. (28-32)

In this context Susan Van Dyne comment on the persona's attempt at regeneration in "Face Lift":

The emergent self as walking corpse, flinging off her 'mummy clothes', shares a Lazarus's exhibitionistic bravado about her disfigurement [...] in managing her comeback the speaker pretends to reverse the mirror's sentence, but only by doing violence to an objectified, repulsive shadow self. (Van Dyne 1993:89)<sup>1</sup>

As it is noticed that, Plath's mirror imagery mainly reveal her self-doubt. In "Face Lift" the persona, here suggests, doubts about her power to claim her own newly discovered self. The inner contradiction so overwhelming dominant in "Mirror" as well is Plath's "distinctive poetics of self-doubts". (Axelord 1990:209)<sup>2</sup>

In "A Birthday Present" this identity crisis and want for a rebirth reveals the speaker's inner most feelings. The speaker in this poem is a traditional housewife who is working in her kitchen, mostly fulfilling the needs of her family. But she is not interested in her chores, and there is something else she is thinking:

I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is what I want.

When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it think (3-4)

Furthermore, in this poem Plath portrays a woman with the urge of finding her real identity. She is not satisfied with her life. Moreover, she is not happy with what she

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Van Dyne, *Revising life Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. pg:89

<sup>2</sup> Steven Gloud Axelord, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*. pg:209

is involved in. That is why her life holds no significance for her. Due to her long time dissatisfaction her frustration comes out as following:

‘Is this the one I am too appear for,  
 Is this the elect one, the one with black eye pits and a scar?  
 Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus  
 Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules.  
 Is this the one for the annunciation?  
 My god, what a laugh!’(5-10)

As a result, this time in her birthday she is longing for a birthday present that can free her from all these dissatisfaction. Throughout the poem she is maintaining suspense about her birthday present. Though giving hints that she does not want much from life as she is living accidentally, so this thought is represented in the following lines :

But it shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me.  
 I would not mind if it were bones, or a pearl button.  
 I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year  
 After all I am alive only by accident.  
 I would have killed myself gladly in any possible way  
 Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains,(11-16)

So it has been said that, “However, in a much later poem, “A Birthday Present,” the mirror suggests the persona’s desire for death and is a symbol of death”<sup>1</sup>:

Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity  
 Let us sit down to it, one on either side, admiring the gleam

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<sup>1</sup> Parvin Ghasemi, “Reflection of Self and Other in Sylvia Plath’s “Mirror” Imagery.” Shiraz University, 2007 [www.pf.jcu.cz/stru/katedry/aj/doc/sbaas01-ghasemi.pdf](http://www.pf.jcu.cz/stru/katedry/aj/doc/sbaas01-ghasemi.pdf)

The glaze the mirrory variety of it. (23-25)

Arid maintains that,

The only general conclusion which can be drawn from the varied uses of the mirror as a symbol is that, as in 'A Birthday Present,' it usually represents an absolute state from which or in which the poet strives to find a meaning. This is the value which it conveys in the late poem 'Mirror.'  
(Arid 1907:107)<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* also deals with this identity crisis of women. Here the main protagonist Esther Greenwood continuously suffers through this problem. She is never too sure of her own self identity, and she is also very much vulnerable and feels insecure within a relationship. Her fears to follow the traditional role of a woman lead her to focus on her career but her conflicting mind never lets her live a peaceful life. So, Plath uses mirror images frequently in this novel to expose Esther's vulnerable mind that never feels satisfaction to her in the mirror. To some extent it reveals how Esther is facing problems to deal with her own identity. So in *The Bell Jar* Esther's first acquaintance with the mirror occurs in a mirrored elevator of Amazon Hotel that exposes how Esther's appearance affecting others along with Esther:

I slide into the self-service elevator and pushed the button for my floor.  
The doors folded shut like a noiseless accordion. Then my ears went funny, and I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring

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<sup>1</sup> Eileen M Aird, *Sylvia Plath*, pg:107

idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used up I looked.(19)<sup>1</sup>

In this context G. Perloff says that, “As the self becomes increasingly disembodied, the reflection in the mirror gradually becomes a stranger. Having symbolically killed her false self by throwing her clothes to winds from the hotel rooftop, Esther rides home on the train to Boston suburbs and notes that “The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps, the mirror imageries of Plath in *The Bell Jar* mainly focus on Esther’s broken self-confidence. In the novel Esther’s experiences with mirror only portray her broken images. She is never confident in facing the mirror because she knows that mirror never lies. That is why at the end of the novel, again Esther comes across to face the mirror in the hospital. There she thinks,

It wasn’t a mirror at all, but a picture. You couldn’t tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person’s face was purple...The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colors. (185)<sup>3</sup>

“It is only when she smiles at this funny face and “the mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin,” (185).<sup>4</sup> that Esther is reminded of her identity and sends the mirror crashing to the

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.pg:19

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie G. Perloff, “A Ritual for Being Born Twice: Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*.”  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/perloff.html>

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.pg:185

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.pg:185

floor. It will take a long time to pick up the pieces.”<sup>1</sup> So, the mirror in *The Bell Jar* represents the main protagonist Esther Greenwood’s troublesome mind and a broken identity.

Lastly, it can be said that, Plath’s mirror imageries mostly reflect a sterile and submissive self that always struggles to find her true image. Also sometime the mirror creates a double self for the speaker and creates a difficult situation for her to hold the power of true self from the false self as reflected in Plath’s “In Plaster” In Freedman’s words, “much of Plath’s poetry...is a mirror of the male text as mirror, a replication of the passive images caught on its surface.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in Plath’s poem such as “Mirror” it mainly reflects the male views, “a perfect reflection of the feminine ideal in male eyes.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps, Plath’s mirror concept is another tool of her through which she expresses the fragmented self of women. In this fragmented condition women are mainly facing identity crisis in this context it is said,

At times, Plath’s poetic imagery leans towards reconciliation and what she herself called a “courageous acceptance of the eternal paradoxes ... within ourselves” (1989:52). At other times, the imagery focuses on a division of the selves sometimes with the hope of rebirth and sometimes with the despair of finality. Whichever way we choose to look at it, it is evident

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie G. Perloff, “A Ritual for Being Born Twice: Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*.”  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/perloff.html>

<sup>2</sup> William Freedman “The Monster in Plath’s ‘Mirror’.”  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/freedman.html>

<sup>3</sup> William Freedman “The Monster in Plath’s ‘Mirror’.”  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/freedman.html>

that the various sources from which Plath drew her inspiration each provided her with her a different solution in relation to the struggle of the self with the self.<sup>1</sup>

These fragmented and insecure images of women are visible in the mirror poems of Sylvia Plath. Her portrayal of identity crisis leads the women of her poems to get closer to death and insanity. In "A Birthday Present" the speaker longs for death and feels it could give her a new life on the other hand Esther's instable mind and insecure personality gets boost in *The Bell Jar*.

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Theresa Ib , "Mind over Myth?: The Divided Self in the poetry of Sylvia Plath."  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/dividedself.html>

### Chapter-3: Plath's Women and Madness

Outcast on a cold star, unable to feel anything but an awful helpless numbness. I look down into the warm, earthy world. Into a nest of lovers' beds, baby cribs, meal tables, all the solid commerce of life in this earth, and feel apart, enclosed in a wall of glass.---Sylvia Plath

This is how in a journal dated October 3, 1959, Sylvia Plath describes her long term depression that blocks her mind and limits her scope of writing. In most of her works the reflection of her personal life is evident. Her troubled psyche also becomes apparent in her writing. Thus, madness becomes an important factor in Plath's work. This actually reflects how much she suffered from her mental illness which left its track in a history of depression, suicidal tendencies and mental therapy, which includes electro-shock therapy. Moreover, Plath's death is nothing but a result of her long time suffering from mental illness. In her life Plath worked hard to achieve success but during her early success she experienced her first breakdown. As a result, her life became more difficult and she described the hospitalization as, " '[a] time of darkness, despair, and disillusion—so black only as the inferno of the human mind can be—symbolic death, and numb shock—then the painful agony of slow rebirth and psychic regeneration.' This was followed by a suicide attempt in 1953 and six months of intensive therapy, paid for by a benefactress." <sup>1</sup>

However, in many of her poems, Plath builds the atmosphere of psychological problems where the speakers suffer from mental instability. It is also to be noted that Plath's mental illness is much influenced by the social oppression and private sufferings.

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<sup>1</sup> Marie Griffin, "Sylvia Plath-Poet, Author: Great Talent in great darkness".  
<http://bipolar.about.com/cs/celebs/a/sylviaplath.htm>

Her father's death had a huge impact on her psychology. Plath's father Otto Plath died because he avoided doctor's instructions about his sore leg. The loss of her father was to affect Plath for rest of her life. Her love for her father turned into anger, grief and confusion because she believed her father could have prevented his death by following the doctor's suggestion. Therefore, after the death of her father Plath isolated herself from everyone and engaged herself in writing. It became an important source of expressing her feelings to others.

Besides this, her sensitive mind could not take the pressure of being an ideal woman. Plath was trying her best to become an ideal wife and mother, and for this reason she neglects her talent for writing. Later on, she came to feel the identity crisis where she was not satisfied with her personal life, and her marriage with Huges was facing problems. That is the time when she realized that she did not actually carry any particular self. This confusion of her mind led her mental illness to a disaster and finally caused her death.

Therefore, Sylvia Plath in her writing career used the theme of madness in many of her poems. Her suicidal attempts are visible in her poem "Lady Lazarus", and her absurd and aggressive emotion about her father in her poem "Daddy". In addition, her 'mirror' poems reflect the conflict of self and it shows her difficulties to deal with her own identity. This identity crisis later on led her to the final insanity. Her last poems are good examples of her mental imbalance. Also the speakers in these poems were engaged in searching the meaning of life. Additionally, her mirror images were used to discover the real self of the persona. So, these actually suggest as if Plath was trying to find out the meaning of life and self before her death.

It has been said that, "In the last 4 months of her life the word "mirror" appears in 8 out of 20 poems with its occurrences increasing towards February, when she killed herself." <sup>1</sup> Also in her second mirror poem "Brasilia" she foreshadows an upcoming danger:

People like light rays, leave  
 This one  
 Mirror safe, unredeemed  
 By the dove's annihilation,  
 The glory  
 The power, the glory. (19-24)

If we take a closer look into the uses of mirror imageries in Plath's last poems it can be seen that, "The view of different perspectives offered by the mirror that also enables reflection of a subject as an object is disabled totally in the poem named "Contusion" which is the last of her eight "mirror poems".<sup>2</sup>

The heart shuts,  
 The sea slides back,  
 The mirrors are sheeted. (10-12)

Later on, the evidence of Plath's mental illness is also visible in some other ways,

In case of Sylvia Plath the death is the main theme of 10 poems out of 51 written in the past 8 months of her life and the word "death" or "die" (or

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<sup>1</sup> Ida Kodrlová, Ivo Čermák, "Re-examining Diagnosis of Sylvia Plath" Institute of Psychology, Czech Republic. <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipsa/2005/proc/kodrlova.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ida Kodrlová, Ivo Čermák, "Re-examining Diagnosis of Sylvia Plath" Institute of Psychology, Czech Republic. <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipsa/2005/proc/kodrlova.pdf>

other words with the same meaning) occur 49 times in total in these poems.<sup>1</sup>

Thus it indicates the seriousness of Plath's mental disorder. Hence, her aggressive nature is also a reason behind her mental instability. In her journal "The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma" Andrea Nicki says that,

Mental illnesses, like physical illnesses, involve difficulties in social adaptation that, without proper accommodation, sources of support, and aid can be seriously disabling. Just as anyone fall severely mentally ill and disabled, with illness of both types exacerbated in those with unequal access to health care, social resources and support.<sup>2</sup>

This discussion on mental illness supports the helpless situation of Sylvia Plath. She was continuously suffering from all kinds of social and mental attacks like rejection, betrayal, identity crisis and all these accumulated and become responsible for her aggressive nature. It can be said that in deprivation of inadequate mental and social support caused Plath's psychological condition to deteriorate with time. That is why she was drawn in long term depression. She can be called a serious patient of depression but it would be too harsh to call her mad. At this point Andrea Nicki in her journal "The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability and Trauma" says that,

For instance, a woman who displays aggression and ambition, and is not feminine, risks being labeled "mentally ill" or, if genuinely mentally ill, having her illness seen purely in terms of her transgression against her

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<sup>1</sup> Ida Kodrlová, Ivo Čermák, "Re-examining Diagnosis of Sylvia Plath" Institute of Psychology, Czech Republic. <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipsa/2005/proc/kodrlova.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Nicki, "The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability and Trauma". <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810784>

gender. Cultural concepts of irrationality and sexist norms of mental health marginalize people with mental illness in attacking their personhood<sup>1</sup>

So, it should be taken in account that Plath is being marginalized because of her gender.

In her life Plath experienced many rejections and her sensitive mind could not bear these rejections. These rejections create a huge impact on Plath's psychology. Among all the rejections at least two proved to be disastrous for Plath- the first one is her father's death at the age of eight and her husband's abandonment when she was thirty. Her poems like "Daddy" and "A Birthday Present" reflect her aggression and frustration that was caused because of these two main rejections.

In the poem "Daddy" the speaker portrays an absurd aggressiveness towards her father. It comes as a shock for the readers. It is an unusual expression of emotion that the speaker conveys throughout the poem for her father. The following lines are given just to show the aggressive emotion of Plath's towards her father.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.

You died before I had time--- (6-7)

Next, the speaker in the poem moves on and says,

Every woman adores a Fascist ,

The boot in the face, the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,

In the picture I have of you,

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Nicki, "The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability and Trauma". <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810784>

A cleft in your chin, instead of your

Foot

But no less a devil for that, no not

Any less the Black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.

I was ten when they buried you.

At twenty I tried to die

And get back, back, back to you.

I thought even the bones would do. (43-55)

Through these lines Plath portrays the kind of suffocation, betrayal and rejection she had gone through after her father's death. Her aggressive nature of writing became the only way through which she could release her frustration. At the beginning of the poem she announces her guilt by saying that "Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time." This actually reveals the amount of rage that Plath holds for her father and she says that, "I probably wished many times that he were dead" and afterward "imagined that I had killed him." She also expresses her aggression towards the women who adore men like "fascist" and compares her father with a fascist. Moreover, in this poem she is not only expressing her anger towards her father but also towards her ex-husband Ted Hughes.

Additionally, in the poem "Daddy" Plath's complex mind is revealed that has shocked the readers of this poem over and over:

"Daddy" embodies Plath's ambivalent resistance toward and dependence on the discourse of her father. She combats his fascistic and demonic

violence, but her elegy reproduces it in exaggerating his evil and destroying his image. For Plath, patriarchal violence found its ultimate expression in the Nazi death camps, which were triumph of the victimization from which she suffers.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Plath's bitterness and anger reflect in the last lines of the poem where the speaker says, "I made a model of you,....A man in black with a Meinkamph look....And I said I do, I do....So daddy, I'm finally through"; Here many references are used and these all are used to show how difficult it is for Plath to deal with the difficulties of relationship. She was always unhappy about her childhood and later on her marriage turns into a failure for her. So her poem:

"Daddy" turns on retribution; yet it expresses the release of immense energy that occurs with the decision to break away from emotionally damaging relationships.<sup>2</sup>

It can be said that Plath's mental dissatisfaction also influenced her mental illness to take over the control. Her abandonment by her husband also adds to this depression. Her contradicting feeling for her father was something she always struggled and fought for. But she finally lost herself after her break-up with Huges:

Born under the sign of Scorpio , Plath speaks of the "motherly pulse of the sea" in an essay entitled "Ocean 1212-W," and here she again laments her abandonment: "Hugging my grudge, ugly and prickly, a sad sea urchin...I saw the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. The

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<sup>1</sup> Jahan Ramazani, " "Daddy, I have to kill you": Plath, Rage, and the Modern Elegy".  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/462991>

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Martin, " 'God's Lioness'—Sylvia Plath, Her prose and Poetry".  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/martin.html>

stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over.”<sup>1</sup>

It becomes apparent that depression, identity crisis and social obligations took away the free spirit of this talented lady. Her mental instability was not created by herself; but her surroundings actually pushed her in this horrendous dark world of mental illness:

In addition to childhood losses, the conflict between domestic and artistic interests, and the lack of financial security as well as health problems undoubtedly left Sylvia Plath extremely vulnerable to depression and suicidal impulses. Lacking favorable or at least serious critical response to her work must have been difficult and painful.<sup>2</sup>

That is why Plath’s poem “Tulip” portrays her bond with depression that she suffered all through. In this poem the speaker is in hospital and getting medication for her sickness. In addition, she wants no contact with the outside world; she is in a state of isolation. As the poem begins with “Tulips are too excitable” shows that tulip is symbolizing liveliness in the poem but as the poem progress it shows that the speaker is not willing to welcome the life and liveliness of “Tulips”. So the speaker does not appreciate the tulips and throughout the poem she says:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.  
 Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe  
 Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Martin, “ ‘God’s Lioness’—Sylvia Plath, Her prose and Poetry”.  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/martin.html>

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Martin, “ ‘God’s Lioness’—Sylvia Plath, Her prose and Poetry”.  
<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/martin.html>

Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.

They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down

Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color

A dozen red lead sinkers around my neck. (36-42)

However, by using 'Tulips' in this poem Plath tries to portray the result of social oppression that leads her to the hospital bed. After many of her suicidal attempts, the women speaker in this poem completely isolates herself from life. So now she does not care about anything. The hospital staff is bent on their duty, and she is only living the regular life of a patient. Moreover, she is scared to get back into her normal life where she is not sure of adjusting herself. At this stage she says:

The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,

They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps.

Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,

So it is impossible to say how many there are. (11-14)

Later on, the poem reflects that the speaker is not being able to relate herself with her family members. They remind her about the regular life she has always led and how it limited the scope to live freely. So she says, "My husband and child smiling out of the family photo; /Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks." Thus, her family represents the social responsibilities for her. At this vulnerable stage of her health she does not know how to take care of them because she is unable to take care of herself.

Nevertheless, the use of tulips is most important part of this poem. Tulips symbolize the freshness and liveliness of the outside world. The speaker also associates it with all the responsibilities that come with them. Although for a short time the tulips take

her to the state of tranquility. But she soon comes back to her psychic illness and unable to respond to the love of outside world represents through the tulips. So she says:

Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,  
 And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself  
 The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.  
 Before they came the air was calm though  
 Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.  
 Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise. (47-52)

This is the way the poetic persona rejects the tulips and feels that these flowers are there only to destroy her soothing life at hospital. She knows these flowers symbolize the love of her close ones but to her these are annoying. So again she says, "They concentrate my attention, that was happy/ Playing and resting without committing itself." All these lines show the severity of the speaker's mental illness. Also, the final lines foreshadows that the speaker is back in her positive mental state but still her psychological state is vulnerable. With this note the poem ends as:

The walls, also, seem to warming themselves.  
 The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;  
 And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes  
 Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.  
 The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,  
 And comes from a country far away as health. (57-63)

So in these final lines the goodness of the world is coming back to her again, but she knows it is all in vain. As so many of us understand, our problems do not simply go

away, and these last lines show us how she may leave the hospital in better spirits, but we know that eventually the crushing oppression of the outside world will tear her down again.

Later on, in the "The Colossus" Plath established the theme of her mental unhealthiness along with her hatred for men. Though "The Colossus" holds historical values for its past glory, for Plath the broken image of the Colossus can be compared to her broken identity. That is why the poem begins with the description of the broken and sterile condition of the Colossus:

I shall never get you put together entirely,  
 Pieced, glued and properly jointed.  
 Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy crackles  
 Proceed from your lips.  
 It's worse than a barnyard.(1-5)

In the beginning of this poem the speaker at a glance describes the Colossus but also as the poem progresses she introduces her hatred for men, compares nature with her psychological condition. So here she says:

Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.  
 The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.  
 My hours are married to shadow.  
 No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel  
 On the blank stones of the landing. (31-35)

Thus this poem deals with the sensitive issue of Plath's turbulent mind. The sense of servitude and of the impossible task of such service reflects the creative exhaustion Plath

felt during this period. "Her statement at the end that "My hours are married to shadow" may be an admission that she is married, in fact, to darkness and creative silence, rather than to the god of poetry who could fertilize her. Her fears also centre on the catastrophe that produced the crumbling of the idol: "It would take more than a lightning-stroke/ To create such a ruin." This admission, enigmatic if the statue is her father or a dying god, recalls Plath's early poetic concerns about creative paralysis and the sense of a collapsing order."<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, there are many other poems of Plath that reflect the helpless state of women speakers. Plath tried to show that women are getting mentally ill because of their unfavorable social condition and identity crisis. Plath's "Lady Lazarus" is a very famous poem here she explicitly expresses her suicidal tendencies. Moreover, she has taken "dying as an art". Here about her suicidal attempts the speaker speaks loudly as:

I have done it again.

One year in every ten

I manage it----- (1-3)

Next it is said that, all these aggressiveness portrays Plath's psychologically unbalanced state and also shows her hatred for the social oppressions. That is why this time the speaker in the poem ignores the impersonal tone and speaks much explicitly than the other women speakers of Plath's poems:

Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands

My knees

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Dicki, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*.  
[http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/plath/colossus.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/colossus.htm)

I may be skin and bones,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman. (30-34)

It reflects that, “each piece of Lady Lazarus is flagrantly on show, in much the same way as the earliest condemned criminals were on display during public tortures and executions. Rather than being kept quietly contained and hidden, as in modern methods of imprisonment, her torture plays in full view of the public”<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, the concluding lines of the poem also reflect Plath’s hatred for men. Throughout the poem Plath expresses her rage, frustration and aggression in order to lessen the weight of her mind. Thus the poem concludes:

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air. (82-84)

Nonetheless, the reality reflects that Plath was unable to control her psychological instability even though she expresses all her rage in her poems. Finally, she could not succeed in coming out from her depression.

In addition, not only Plath’s poems but her autobiographical novel *The Bell jar* also portrays the kind of helplessness she experienced in her life where she was provided with no support to overcome her mental instability. Also, she was given electro-shock therapy that deteriorated her mental stability. However, she also developed periodic bouts of depression, insomnia and also thoughts of suicide, as evidenced in her journals:

“To annihilate the world by annihilation of one’s self is the deluded height of desperate egoism. The simple way out of all the little brick dead ends

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Narbeshuber, “The Poetics of Torture: The spectacle of Sylvia Plath’s Poetry.”pg:195

we scratch our nails against.... I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb.”<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, Sylvia Plath’s mental pain to a large extent explored in the novel *The Bell Jar*. That is why G. Perloff says that, “Throughout the novel, Sylvia Plath emphasizes the curious similarity of physical and mental illness as if to say that both are of a larger condition which is our life today.”<sup>2</sup> *The Bell jar* opens with the following sentence : “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York.” (1).<sup>3</sup> According to Marjorie G. Perloff, “This sentence to electrocution sets the scene for everything that is to come: before the novel is over, Esther herself will know only too well what it feels like to be “burned alive all along your nerves.” The terrible electric shock therapy that Dr. Gordon makes her undergo is a frightening counterpart of the Rosenbergs’ punishment; Esther feels shattered to see the after effects of the shock treatments of other patient in the hospital. And it creates a fear in Esther’s mind so she says, “Each morning, when I heard the nurse knock with my tray, an immense relief flooded over me, because I knew I was out of danger for that day.” (217).<sup>4</sup> This reaction of Esther actually portrays the mental disturbances she has gone through in the novel.

However, *The Bell Jar* is not just about a neurotic patient Esther, but it deals with the reasons that influenced Esther to become mentally ill:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.neuroticpoets.com/plath/>

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie G. Perloff, “A Ritual for Being Born Twice: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.” <http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/perloff.html>

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.pg 1

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.pg:217

*The Bell Jar* is not on mental illness per se, but on the relationships of Esther's private psychosis to her larger social situation. Indeed, her dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject.<sup>1</sup>

Esther, however, does come back to life and at the end of the novel she can view the realities of life without getting confused. She knows that she does not want any love relation with a man, neither believes in being lesbian. But she becomes courageous to deal with the difficulties of life. So, at the end of the novel Esther gathers the courage to meet the doctors who will certify her discharge from the hospital after the final meeting with her. Here it goes as, "I had hoped, at my departure, I would feel sure and knowledgeable about everything that lay ahead- after all I had been 'analyzed'.....I kept shooting impatient glances at the close boardroom door....There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice- patched, retreated and approved for the road.." (257).<sup>2</sup> The above scene takes place at the end of the novel that shows Esther's anxiety before facing the Board of Doctors. Finally, the novel ends as, "The eyes and the faces all turned themselves towards me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room."(258)<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, it can be said that during her lifetime Sylvia Plath experienced many psychological trauma that caused her long time depression. In most of her later works she recurrently portrayed the mental illness as one of her main theme. Here it must be mentioned that the speakers of these poems reflects their mental instability through

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie G. Perloff, "A Ritual for Being Born Twice': Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." <http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/perloff.html>

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*. pg 257

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*. pg258

their expression of complex mind .In those poems she introduces suicide, frustration, aggressive emotional attacks to society, also to her loved ones such as her father and her husband. About mental illness, feminist theory of psychiatric has published their theory that:

..concerns the oppression of the mind by a society that rejects and despises the alternate mental states found in the psychiatrically disabled. The history of Western thought has not truly been about the glorification of the mind. True appreciation will come when there is no more oppressive talk of some mental islands called “madness” to which one in illness goes, no more morbid romanticization of offshoots of oppression and abuse-of “mad starving artists”-or scientific mystification of fettered minds. <sup>1</sup>

This discussion suggests that true appreciation of an artist is possible when her psychological disorder is not taken into account to judge her talent. Hence, it should be remembered that the women speakers of Sylvia Plath’s poems are suffering from mental illness but they should be acknowledged as the sufferer who failed to bear the social oppression and psychological trauma. Although, Sylvia Plath’s autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* ends with the possibilities of life for the main protagonist Esther, Plath herself fails to deal with the frequent psychological attacks and ultimately surrendered and succumbed to the temptation of death.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Nicki, “The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability and Trauma”. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810784>

### Conclusion

Self-doubt; seriousness, also questioned by the hours agonizing over appearance; concentration shredded into attracting, being attractive; the absorbing real need and love for working with words felt as hypocritical self delusion ('I'm not truly dedicated), for what seems (and is) esteemed is being attractive to men. ---Tillie Olsen

This explains the level of dedication of American women of the late twentieth century where their creative talent took the back seat because they were esteemed in being attractive to men. However, this traditional image of woman is not something enthusiastically appreciated by Sylvia Plath. So, in most her works she always rejected the conventional images of women.

Moreover, this whole paper is devoted to find out the complex world of women where they are continuously struggling with their own identity. In the social context of 1950s America evidences are available that women's progress in the field of education and literature decreased largely by this time. So, Paul Lauter mentioned in his article:

By the early 1920s, women were earning 16 per cent of all doctorates; that proportion gradually declined (except for the war years) to under 10 per cent in the 1950s. Similarly, the proportion of women in the occupational category of college presidents, professors and instructors rose from 6.4 per cent in 1900 to 32.5 per cent around 1930, but subsequently declined to below 22 per cent by 1960.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties' Feminist Criticism and Social Change by Paul Lauter.pg:42

This actually works in favor of Sylvia Plath's outcry where Plath claims that family can only limit the scope of establishment for women. So she says, "a woman has to sacrifice all claims to femininity and family to be a writer."(Plath: A letter when a graduate student)<sup>1</sup> That is why her objection over the traditional roles of women leads to create the complex world of women's mind where they suffer from identity crisis. For this reason, women develop their double selves that lead to them to urge for rebirth. Finally, Plath shows the downfall of women where they seek death in order to get a new life and eventually introduces the intensity of women's psychological disorder. All these happens because the patriarchal society of late twentieth century America never supports the women to have a separate identity. That ultimately led them to lose the control over their minds. Some of the reasons came out of this dissertation paper that can be described as following:

First, the patriarchal society limits the scope of establishment for traditional women. This idea supports the statement "Women are not born they are made" given by Simon De Beauvoir, this famous declaration about women by Beauvoir exposes the social contribution that results a woman to live with her limited identity. The patriarchal society of late twentieth century America only expects women to fulfill their family requirements. The society believes that, women can only manage the house and creative talent is not naturally available in them, "The acceptance- against one's experienced reality- of the sexist notion that the act of creation is not as inherently natural to a woman as to a man, but rooted instead unnatural aggression, rivalry, envy or thwarted sexuality."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sinences by Tillie Olsen. Pg:83.

<sup>2</sup> Sinences by Tillie Olsen. Pg:83.

Thus women's creativity is also marginalized by the sexist society. That is why; Sylvia Plath suffered a lot in order to establish herself as a writer of late twentieth century America. As we know that Sylvia Plath is better known as a confessional writer, and most of her writings are based on her personal experience. But the evidences support Plath's condition where Plath had little social support to establish herself as a writer. So, from the first chapter of this dissertation it can be said that the roles of traditional women are framed by the patriarchal society. Here, the patriarchal binary thoughts clearly explain the position of women,

"Under the following heading 'Where is she?' Cixous lines up the following list of binary oppositions:

Activity/Passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/Night

Father/Mother

Head/Mother

Head/Emotions

Intelligible/Sensitive

Logos/Pathos

Corresponding as they do to the underlying opposition man/woman, these binary oppositions are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system: each opposition can be

analysed as a hierarchy where the feminine side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance.”<sup>1</sup>

As a result, they face hard times to create their separate identity. That is why Plath rejected the traditional roles of women and portrays how the dominant social features harasses women and forced them to appear in frustrated, raged and angered images.

Secondly it can be said that, the social oppression is responsible for the identity crisis of women. The society’s notion of traditional women not only includes the ideal image of them but also expects women to be young and beautiful for ever. Besides this, after a certain period women feel the dissatisfaction in carrying just the roles of a wife and a mother. They feel no particular importance of them in their family. Nobody is concerned about their identity. So, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar mentioned Laura Riding’s thought in their essay:

And the lady of the house was seen only as she appeared in each room, according to the nature of the lord of the room. None saw the whole of her, none but herself. For the light for which she was both her mirror and her body. None could tell the whole of her, none but herself.<sup>2</sup>

Also, in the creative world of writing women are prohibited and not at all encouraged. Moreover, social oppression creates the psychological complexities in women. They suffer from self-doubt it further creates identity crisis and double self in them. In

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<sup>1</sup> An imaginary utopia by Helen Cixous.pg:102

<sup>2</sup> The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth –Century Literary Imagination by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar.pg:91

addition, the discouragement of society left women in a helpless situation where they also have to struggle in making their career in literature:

If male sexuality is integrally associated with the assertive presence of literary power, female sexuality is associated with the absence of such power, with the idea- expressed by the nineteenth century thinker Otto Weininger- that ‘woman has no share in ontological reality.’<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, Plath also went through this same difficult society in order to establish herself as a woman writer of the late Twentieth century American society. Also, the social structure were so highly biased towards men that if a woman chose to be pursue her career in literature she was denoted as, “absolutely unredeemable: no virtue can outweigh the ‘fault’ of her presumption because she has grotesquely crossed boundaries dictated by Nature.”(Ann Finch)<sup>2</sup>

As a consequence, women are facing problems in making their certain identity in life. So, this is how society is responsible for increasing problem in women’s life. And it also reflects in Plath’s works as well.

Lastly, Women are drawn into madness due to constant domination of the society. After being marginalized in every stage women’s lives take a furious turn when they face psychological disorders while continuously fighting with social oppression. In her last works Sylvia Plath also exposed the vulnerable psychological conditions of women. In the 1950s women to fulfill their regular duties as wives and mothers were dominated by men. Also due to constant domination women feel that they have no separate identities.

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<sup>1</sup> The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth –Century Literary Imagination by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar.pg:95

<sup>2</sup> The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth –Century Literary Imagination by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar.pg:95

As a result, it causes them to urge for death or drawn them into depression. So, if we look over the chronological events that took place in the lives of women then it is easy to understand that all these happened because of the social prejudices that never supported women to have their separate identities. In addition, women were alienated in the field of literature. This alienation increases the inferiority complex among the women thus it reflects in Anne Finch's poem:

They tell us, we mistake our sex and way;  
 Good breeding, fassion, dancing, dressing, play  
 Are the accomplishments we shou'd desire;  
 To write, or read, or think, or to enquire  
 Wou'd cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time,  
 And interrupt the conquests of our prime;  
 Whilst the dull manage, of a servile house  
 Is held by some, our outmost art and use

(Countess of Winchilsea)<sup>1</sup>

In this poem it is mentioned that all these works are male activities and it also reflects that, 'writing, reading, and thinking are not only alien but also inimical to 'female' characteristics. That is why women developed rage and frustration against the patriarchal society. And later all these negative emotions caused them mental disorders in life. This ultimately shows that society is responsible for the sufferings of women. Thus, Sylvia Plath through her writing portrays such oppressed women's voices that show the

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<sup>1</sup> The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth –Century Literary Imagination by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar.pg:95

narrow and rigid patriarchal society that always undermine women as individuals and artists.

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