

Madness and Women: A Reading of Three Women's Novels

Sonika Islam
Student ID: 07103016

Department of English and Humanities

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BRAC University
66, Mohakhali C/A, Dhaka 1212.

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Novels

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Sonika Islam
ID: 07103016

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Dedication

To *nanima*.

Long ago, when she was still here in this world, I once told her: You know, *nanima*, I don't feel all right. I think I will become mad.

She replied: No, you won't. It's the society you live in; it's the people around you that make you mad. Tell yourself repeatedly: I am all right. I *am* all right.

To *those*, who needed to know they were all right before it's too late.

To all, who will be reading this paper wondering whether they are all right or not.

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Abstract

The state of madness is often associated with women. This paper will try to reveal the situations which drive a woman into mental imbalance. Three phases of female life are explored here- adolescence, youth and middle-age in three consecutive chapters. It has been demonstrated that when a young adolescent girl turns mad, her family background and her surrounding are mainly responsible for her neurotic condition. When a young intelligent girl confronts socially created gender roles and fails to explore the world which she needs to fuel her creativity, she loses her self-value and gradually loses self-control and gets obsessed with suicidal thoughts. The third chapter demonstrates how racism along with inability to meet social expectations can become the oppressive force to turn a woman mad. The common theme of the three chapters is that the subjugation of the female sexuality by society works as a key factor behind the madness in women.

Introduction

Phyllis Chesler comments on madness in woman, that it is “an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to overcome this state” (qtd. in Nickie).¹ This concept forms the main focus of my thesis. I will show how patriarchal society creates doubts and hesitations in the female psyche.

The first chapter deals with the madness of a young adolescent girl, Pecola in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Pecola gets completely lost in her world of fancy and hallucinates. In her hallucinations, she not only sees that her black eyes have turned blue but also acquires an imaginary friend, the only friend she believes is not jealous of her blue eyes. In my first chapter, I will explore the factors that drive Pecola to this mental state. I will try to show that it is not only Pecola’s personal trauma but also the continuation of trauma African-American have suffered for generations.

How an intelligent young woman, with control over her life, is obsessed with the idea of suicide is discussed in the second chapter. This young woman is Esther, the protagonist of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963). In this chapter, I will discuss how the confrontation between a woman’s sexuality and her career in a patriarchal society turns into a psychological conflict for a woman writer.

The third chapter discusses Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (1950). I will analyse how Mary’s lack of autonomy destroys her inner strength and how she loses self-

¹Andrea, Nicki. “The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma.” *Hypatia*. Vol.16. Autumn. 2001. Nov.2010. p. 83. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810784>>

control and finally gets overpowered by an African man. Her relationship with nature, both intense and destructive, will also be examined. In this chapter, I will also show how the memory of a sexually abusive father haunts Mary in such a way that she cringes from her own sexual feelings. This chapter also reveals that when racism and class distinction give power to one group of men, they become oppressive for women of both groups.

Together these three chapters will demonstrate how women can be subjected to madness at different phases of their lives- in adolescence, in youth and middle age. In none of the stages of her life is a woman safe from the scorn of society. Autonomy and independence are denied to her, and constant negotiation with society results in mental breakdown.

The chapters are arranged, not in the chronological order of year of publication, but according to the stage of life that its heroine is at. Thus, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is the first novel under consideration followed by *The Bell Jar* (1963) and finally *The Grass is Singing* (1950).

Madness of Pecola, an Adolescent Girl in Toni Morrison's

The Bluest Eye

Introduction:

Pecola, an adolescent girl becomes mad when she can no longer endure her complicated traumatic life in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Pecola has no emotional support from her family which has internalized white attitudes regarding beauty, class and race. So she takes recourse to imagining that she has blue eyes like white girls, expecting in vain that she will no longer be discriminated against for being black. Pecola's mental disturbance gradually turns into madness. The particular construction of her mind along with her sexuality helps to ripen her internal conflicts and disturbances into neurotic behavior. Therefore, to explore the reasons behind the madness of Pecola, we need to talk about her family background.

Role of Pecola's family in her madness:

Pecola's life is more or less governed by her family. Her dysfunctional familial life influences her thoughts and actions. The miseries of her parents that have been created by the dislocation and the internalization of white gaze are transferred to Pecola.

Dislocation:

The dislocation of Black people has its roots in slavery. It started with kidnapping Black people from their home in Africa and bringing them to the plantation sites in the

America tearing them away from their place of origin. Toni Morrison has set her novel on the life of black people in America. After arriving in America and especially after emancipation, African-Americans kept on moving from place to place in search of better prospects. The community bond was disrupted, but a new kind of community develops in the process. In the American south, blacks had a more compact social system and almost in the same way as they had in Africa replacing family and tribal bonds with community.² The dislocation from the south to the north created many kinds of crises in their lives- disruption of family values, loss of communal ties and the dangers of free life. Now, I will analyze how dislocation makes both Pauline and Cholly incapable of saving Pecola from her madness.

Loss of family values:

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* black mothers do not have any authority over their children, and even black men³ had very little control over their lives. When Baby Suggs remarks that she had eight children from six different men and grieves that "[e]very one of them taken away from [her],"⁴ we are shocked at seeing how racism has destroyed the family values of blacks. Later, with the emancipation act, when both parents were involved in paid work, the children were left alone. Though these children were saved from slavery, the female children like Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* were subjected to a different kind of oppression. We find that even though her brothers could leave school for work Pauline still had to take care of the home. Yet she did not have any special

² Alphonso Pinkney. *Black Americans*. New Jersey: Prentice, 1969. pp. 5-6

³ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Picador, 1987. p. 5

⁴ Ibid. p. 5.

importance in her family. Pauline's only connection with her family was through arranging the housework and taking care of her younger siblings. She reflects back and finds that many things were 'incomprehensible' to her such as:

why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done; why no one ever remarked on her food preferences- no cooking of the peas in a separate pot without rice because she did not like rice; why nobody teased her, why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged any place.⁵

Though, Pauline does not complain directly against her parents, her resentment at not being cared for as tenderly as her other siblings shows a distant relationship with her parents, especially with her mother. Mothers show their preferences by such attention as saving the best piece of chicken or cooking the special dish for the favorite child. The indifference that she received from her family is later reflected in her own attitude towards her child. The dream that the "separateness and "unworthiness"⁶ would go away by marrying Cholly makes her disappointed in her marriage. Her frustration and anger with her husband and in her own blackness and poverty is transformed into anger towards her daughter. Simone de Beauvoir says in her book *The Second Sex* that "no maternal 'instinct' exists [...] The mother's attitude depends on her total situation and her reaction to it."⁷ Therefore, the fact that Pauline fails to protect her daughter from violence and

⁵ Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Vintage, 1970. P. 86.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Beauvoir, de Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley. London: Vintage, 1949. p. 526.

especially fails to save her from her self-hatred arises from her dissatisfaction at her situation. She wants to balance her inferior status by having respect from her children:

and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly's mother's [...] into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life.⁸

This fear, injected by her mother, makes Pecola passive and she cannot confront the boys when they taunt her or Geraldine when she calls her a black bitch. According to Beauvoir, comparing a child with his father asking her/him that not to be like him, exerts a mental pressure on the child. Moreover, Pauline herself believes that, what she is doing is "fulfilling a mother's role conscientiously when she points out their father's faults or punished them when they showed any slovenliness."⁹ Beauvoir continues:

A mother who punishes her child is not beating the child alone, in a sense she is not beating it at all: she is taking her vengeance on a man, on the world, or on herself. Such a mother is often remorseful and the child may not feel the resentment, but it feels the blows.¹⁰

This is what happens in Pauline's relations with Pecola. The young girl does not understand that by beating her, her mother is giving vent to her own frustration or shameful feelings of being black. But as Beauvoir says she "feels the blow"¹¹ and therefore does not feel the warmth of her mother's love, unlike Frieda and Claudia who

⁸ Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 100.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. op. cit. p. 529.

know no matter how much their mother beats them, “she wouldn’t kill us, or laugh a terrible laugh at us, or throw a bottle at us.”¹² Again when Pauline beats Pecola who was already burnt by the hot juice that fell on her legs, and angrily kept saying: “Crazy fool [...] my floor, my floor,”¹³ and thus Pauline’s “[M]aternal love [...] loses itself in the angry scolding that goes with the care of a well kept home.”¹⁴ Beauvoir explains that when a mother scolds a daughter for messing up her tidy household, the daughter, who becomes “the foe of waxed floor,”¹⁵ feels less worthy than the house itself. However, Pecola’s situation gets worse as along with her mother’s indifference she also feels neglected when her mother’s love is taken over by a white blue-eyed little child. And so she longs to be a white girl.

Similarly, Cholly was a victim of the disruption of family values of American Blacks. His father, unwilling to take the responsibility of his illegitimate child left his mother. His mother who was known to have mental problems, tried to abandon him at the railway station, but he was saved by his great aunt. Growing up without any parental care and love, Cholly never learns the role of a father. He feels “dumbfounded” and “totally dysfunctional” and does not know how to raise children, and “having never watched any parent raise himself, he [cannot] even comprehend what such a relationship should be.”¹⁶ Besides knowing “only a dying woman whose age, sex, and interests were so remote

¹² Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 81.

¹³ Ibid. p. 85.

¹⁴ Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. op. cit. p. 541.

from his own”¹⁷ for the first thirteen years of his life, he simply could not find any “stable connection between himself and the children.”¹⁸ Disowned by both of his parents he does not regard them as “material heirs.”¹⁹ If he could have felt any connection with his children and feel for them as his own, then he could be protective and responsible towards them. So, approval and acceptance from a father is essential for the healthy mental growth of a daughter, and in spite of having a father Pecola is deprived of fatherly protection. In fact, it is her father who rapes her and thereby ruins her mental state forever.

Loss of community ties:

The loss of communal ties due to dislocation, that the blacks had to go on their journey from the south to the north of the United States, also left a permanent wound in Pauline and Cholly. For Pauline, migrating from the south to the north with Cholly was like tearing herself from her origins and roots. When she was in the south, she at least was a part of a community, with other children she would “[go] berry picking after a funeral”²⁰ but in the north not only was she an outcaste for whites but also for northern blacks. Pauline remembers “northern colored folk was different too. ... No better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count, ‘cept I didn’t expect it

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 126-127.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 127.

from them.”²¹ This reflection clearly shows the unexpected wound in Polly’s heart because of the rejection from people of her own race.

Unlike Pauline, Cholly’s separation from his own community occurred at a very early age. Out of fear of making Darlene pregnant, like his father, Cholly too escapes from his own home country leaving behind community bonding. This loss of family and communal bonding makes him a free man. I will later discuss how his limitless freedom breaks the conventional relation between him and his daughter. Before coming to this point, I need to focus on how his dislocation from the north to the south has destroyed him completely. He came to the North expecting to earn lots of money, but would not fulfill his expectations. In the rural south, he had many jobs like weeding, washing etc but in the industrial North, when northern people were not getting jobs because of the migrants it was really difficult to get a good job. Due to poverty, “[m]oney became the focus of all their discussions, hers for clothes, his for drink”²² and he failed to give mental support to her wife, who feeling completely rejected by both the southern black community and white society sought “total dependence on him.”²³ Since both of them felt alienated from the community, they could not provide each other with a sense of belonging, but managed to transfer the feeling of alienation to their children.

Internalization of the white gaze:

Another aspect of oppressed black life that contributes to Pecola’s madness is the internalization of the white gaze by her parents. In her article “Failures of Love: Female

²¹Ibid. p. 91.

²² Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 92.

Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison,” published in *American Literature*, Jane S.

Bakerman quotes Toni Morrison:

When the strength of race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble. [...] The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and discursive ideas of the western world, and we should have nothing to do with it. Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present or future. Its absence or presence was only important to them, the white people who used it for anything they wanted.²⁴

Morrison reflects this opinion successfully in her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Throughout the novel we find that by promoting the beauty of blue eyes and white complexion, whites have systematically tried to dominate blacks psychologically, regardless of their class and society. “From every billboard, every movie, every glance”²⁵ they have learnt that they are ugly. This internalization is so deep that while watching the tall, athletic physique of a black man performing a ritualistic action of breaking a melon, Cholly thought:

God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad. It must be the devil who looks like that- holding the world in his

²⁴ Bakerman, Jane S. “Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison.” *American Literature*. Vol. 52. Jan 1981. Sep. 2010. p. 543. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2925450>>

hands, ready to dash it to the ground and spill the red guts so niggers could eat the sweet, warm insides.²⁶

Here, we see the fatal destruction of black aesthetic power. Later, Cholly also loses respect for the inner strength of black people when he was psychologically abused by some white men who compelled Cholly to make love in front of them. In spite of this terrible humiliation “[n]ever did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless.”²⁷ By hating his own race he tries to comply with the existing situation of blacks, since hating white people means protesting against a power which would remind him of his impotence. Edward Guerro, in his essay “Tracking ‘The Look’ in the novels of Toni Morrison,” explains that as a consequence of this learned helplessness,

Cholly displaces his rage onto the only target within his social grasp, his sexual partner Darlene, and by generalization onto all black women. This dominating, sadistic look, then, becomes one more instance in a casual chain of devaluation that culminates in disaster for the entire Breedlove family.”²⁸

He loses interest in his wife and even in himself, and gets sealed in his self-hate forever.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 105.

²⁷ Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 118.

²⁸ Guerro, Edward. “Tracking ‘The Look in the Novels of Toni Morrison.” *Black American Literature Forum*. Vol 24. Winter, 1990. Sep.2010. p.765.<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041801>>

Pauline too learnt to believe in the ugliness of being blacks, immersed in the values of European aesthetics. From the essay "Tracking 'the look' in Toni Morrison's novels" by Guerre we learn:

"Women suffer negation of self by having to identify with a sexual object displayed to identify with a sexual object displayed for the pleasure of the male gaze at the screen, Pauline as a woman, and as one of colour, must suffer this negation in a compounded sense, for her like hardly exists anywhere on the screen. She is therefore, forced to look at and apply to herself a completely unrealizable, alien standard of feminine beauty and to dissatisfaction resulting from the contradiction."²⁹

So, the frustration of not being beautiful according to the prevalent white notion kills her love of her life as a black wife and mother and after internalizing the white gaze, she too finds it hard "to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen."³⁰ Consequently, when Pecola is born, in spite of the fact that she has a nice head full of hair, she finds her daughter ugly.³¹ Patrice Cormier-Hamilton remarks about Pauline in her essay "Black naturalism and Toni Morrison: the Journey away from Self-Love in *The Bluest Eye*" saying that "[n]ot only is Pauline's awful sense of self worth passed on to her

²⁹ Edward Guerre. "Tracking 'The Look in the Novels of Toni Morrison.'" op.cit. p. 764.

³⁰ Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 93.

³¹ Ibid. p. 98.

child, her impossible dream of blonde blue-eyed beauty is passed on as well.”³² Like her mother, Pecola too longs for the beauty of white girls. And the way Pauline “settled down to just being ugly”³³ after trying in vain to look like the white heroines of movies, Pecola too accepts her ugliness believing only girls with blue eyes can be beautiful and fortunate.

By internalizing the gaze of southern community and whites, both Cholly and Pauline stops trying to be a part of the southern black community. Being free due to this loss of community bonding only makes them more confined in their miserable life.

Freedom of Cholly:

The greatest tragedy in Pecola’s life is that she is a daughter of parents who have freed themselves from their responsibilities for their children. Cholly had always been a free man and Pauline freed herself from any real connection with her home and family. The freedom that Cholly felt as a bachelor gets disrupted by his marriage, but still its influence remains active in his personality. According to Freud, there are three levels of the psyche: id, ego and superego. Id, governed by the pleasure principle always drives one to satisfy pleasures and needs. On the other hand, superego, which is developed by the social and religious education, prevents one from the pleasures that satisfying the needs could bring. And ego, developed from the reality, is the personality which tries to

³²Cormier-Hamilton, Patrice. “Black Naturalism and Toni Morrison: The Journey away from Self-Love in *The Bluest Eye*.” *Melus*. Vol 19. Winter, 1994.Aug. 2010. p. 120. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/468206>>

³³ Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 96.

make a balance between id and superego.³⁴ Now, if we observe Cholly's life, we will see that he never got the chance to learn about social norms through familial or religious restrictions. As a result, he never felt the need to control his id remaining "[d]angerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt – fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity."³⁵ Therefore he falls into the trap of his intermingling emotions of "revulsion, guilt, pity, then love"³⁶ for his daughter. His self-hate is so deep that he cannot accept the love in his daughter's eyes. He is furious at his daughter's love for him and wonders: "What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would in turn allow him to accept her love."³⁷ If he could at least retain self-respect for himself as a human being, as a father of a daughter who loves him despite his deficiencies, then Pecola could have been saved from his lust which was mingled with his love for his daughter. Freud's explanation of the three levels of personality explains why Cholly fails to restrain himself from his desire towards his daughter:

From the point of view of instinctual control, of morality, it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the super-ego that it can be super-moral and then becomes as cruel as only the id can be. ... [T]he more a man controls his aggressiveness, the more intense becomes his ideal's inclination to aggressiveness against his ego.³⁸

³⁴ Lefrancois, Guy R. *Of Children: An Introduction to Child Development*. 2nd ed. California: Wadsworth, 1973. pp. 143-146.

³⁵ Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 125.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 127.

³⁷ Ibid.

The more Cholly tried to find a way to love his daughter like a father the more he felt the lust towards her as in his drunken state he could not quite separate his daughter from his wife. His id wins over the superego, which had not developed strongly in him due to the absolute absence of any social or religious restrictions. Deprived of such moral education he just knew that it is a “forbidden and wild thing”³⁹ to make love with his daughter but knew no other option than sex to show his tenderness to his daughter.

Freedom of Pauline:

To forget the alienation from the black community and also to seek the worthiness of a white woman, Pauline forms her own world in the house of the Fishers freeing herself from any direct connection with her own house and family. By denying her own family the expression of her love she tries to suppress her identity of a poor, ugly, alienated mother. And by being a regular church goer she finds solace in projecting herself as a loyal wife of a devilish husband. She finds that “more and more she neglected her house, her children, her man – they were like the [...] dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely [...] Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household.”⁴⁰ With this retreat to an imaginary life with a white woman’s comfort, she becomes the example that Pecola will follow later to escape from the haunting memories of her life, by believing that she has got nice blue eyes.

³⁸ Freud, Sigmund. “The Ego and the Id.” *On Metapsychology*. Vol.11. New Delhi: Shrijee, 2003. pp. 427-428.

³⁹ Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 128.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 99.

Pecola's own life:

Now, with such a morbid, destroyed family background, Pecola does not have many choices to alter the flow of her life. Before starting the novel, Morrison writes a children's story in three ways- first is properly punctuated and spaced, second is spaced but without punctuation and the third time it is written without any punctuation and space. Pecola's mental state gets disoriented gradually in the same way the story gets disoriented from a properly written one to an indecipherable one. One after one several dreadful events in her life pile up into a complex state of affairs which Pecola, a young girl of only twelve or thirteen years, cannot contend with any longer and hence mentally collapses.

Loss of family values:

The violence in her family makes her vulnerable and it also injects deviant emotions in Pecola. She was so sick and tired because of the fight between her parents that "she [struggles] between an overwhelming wish that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die."⁴¹ This powerful sentiment of wishing either one of her parents or herself dead can only be evoked in children who have experienced violence in their life. Moreover, the fight between her parents, the nakedness of her father, and Sammy's screaming to kill her father make her want to disappear, but she can

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 32.

never make her eyes disappear.⁴² Perhaps, because she is still a child, she can comprehend the world only by seeing “[all] of these pictures, all of these faces”⁴³ that are closely related to her. Being the daughter of parents who have internalized the white notion of beauty, she lacks self-approval. Not only has she developed self-loathing like her parents, she is also not aware of her sexuality. Frieda, younger than her is much more educated about menstruation and female sexuality guided by her mother, Mrs. McTeer and another woman, Mildred. It is Frieda who helps Pecola during her first period and even tells her that starting menstruation means Pecola is now capable to “have a baby”⁴⁴ only “somebody has to love [her].”⁴⁵ Thus, the absence of a communicative relation with her mother keeps her ignorant about female issues which are usually passed from a mother to her daughters.

Pauline cannot admit Pecola’s complaint against Cholly, partly because she is so isolated from the community that she does not have any support to go against her husband and therefore gives vent to her frustration by beating up her own child whom she holds as a cross and whom she had failed to protect from the vices of the father⁴⁶ and partly because she herself was unloved and never knew what it means to be protected by her family. Cholly rapes Pecola not out of lust only but more out of a confused love and tenderness for his daughter, only he did not know what to do to make his daughter ‘smile’

⁴² Ibid. p. 40.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 34.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 23.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 98.

or to be 'useful' to her⁴⁷ due to" my myriad [...] humiliation, defeats, and emasculations"⁴⁸ he had experienced. Thereby, Pecola becomes the ultimate victim of loss of family values.

Internalization of the white gaze:

Like her parents, Pecola too internalizes the white gaze. When Cholly, instead of hating white hunters, projects his anger to all black girls, and Pauline neglecting her family and home, imagines the Fishers' baby and home as her own, Pecola too subdues her tears by eating nine "Mary Janes," with the picture of a "[s]miling white face. Blonde hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort" as for her to "eat the candy is somehow to ... [b]e Mary Jane,"⁴⁹ white girl. This shows her longing to be a white girl. She is also very fond of Shirley Temple, an actress who symbolizes white beauty.

Pecola cannot escape the humiliation projected on the black community by whites when she was humiliated by a white shopkeeper, Mr. Yacobowski. Right before entering his shop, she thought the dandelions are "pretty" but when in the blue eyes of this white man she finds the 'total absence of human recognition,'⁵⁰ on returning home she can no longer love the dandelions.⁵¹ Edward Guerro, in his essay, 'Tracking 'The Look' in the

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 127.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 32.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 38.

⁵⁰ Ibid. pp. 35-36.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 37.

novels of Toni Morrison,” explains the incident as a psychological turning point for Pecola, beyond which her self-esteem is increasingly eroded until the novel reaches its melancholy conclusion with her gong completely insane.”⁵² I too agree that this is her first psychological break down.

Till now, she had a place of shelter, that is God, to whom she could pray, asking for blue eyes; but in another incident, she loses this last consolation of her life. When a black boy of upper class directs his frustration at her and locks her up with the black cat, she becomes mesmerized by the blue eyes of the cat; as if she sees her imaginary self in this cat. And, after Geraldine, the boy’s mother, calls her “nasty, little, black bitch,” she no more finds Jesus welcoming, but as “looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes.”⁵³ This shows that she not only accepts that she is ugly and unwanted like a weed, but her ugliness matters to such an extent that even God is not surprised by the humiliation she receives. The loss of faith in God shatters Pecola’s religious belief, learnt from her church-going mother. This is the forewarning that another trauma in her life will disrupt her mental balance incurably as she will no longer be able to seek help from God.

Loss of community values:

School provides the first community life for a child. From this institution a child learns about society and starts evaluating herself. Pecola feels alienated in the northern society when she finds that

⁵²Edward Guerro, in his essay, “Tracking ‘The Look’ in the novels of Toni Morrison.” op. cit. p. 766.

⁵³ Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 72.

Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond. She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, 'Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola!' and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused.⁵⁴

Pecola is rejected in her own little community. While acceptance by her peer group is important for developing a child's identity, its absence makes Pecola lonely. Pecola in her own way feels the same alienation that Pauline felt at the "private snickers"⁵⁵ of the northern black women or Cholly by "[t]he hee-hee-heee's"⁵⁶ of the white men.

Till now she could at least attend school, but after Cholly rapes her and she becomes pregnant, she can no longer do so. She is expelled from the school as if she herself is responsible for this violation. Now the whole society rejects her calling her "foolish" blaming her for not fighting Cholly and all were "disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story"⁵⁷ but none came to help the little girl. When Cholly and Pauline were in the south, they were a part of the southern black community, Pauline could hang out with children of her community and Cholly got the help of neighbors to look after his great aunt, and even when Frieda's parents beat up Henry for molesting Frieda she was supported by her parents. Pecola is totally rejected by society.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 34.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 92.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 51.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 149.

Unlike Claudia and Frieda, she is not even aware of the outside world. Since the McTeer family had a community life, by overhearing the women's talk at their home, both of them knew that Soaphead Church was a fraud. Pecola unaware of this truth believes in Soaphead Church's assurance that she would eventually get her blue eyes. Her insanity is proved when she hallucinates about a friend and becomes obsessed with the idea of blue eyes. Freud says in her essay 'Fixation To Traumas-The Unconscious' that symptoms obsession is "the indication of there being a special region of the mind, shut off from the rest."⁵⁸ So, we can say that Pecola's mind has become fixed in her previous longing for blue eyes and she has 'shut [herself] off' from the reality by retreating to the world of fancy in order to escape all the abuses as she had unfortunately lost the last link to her parents.

A Particular Construction of Mind:

To a great extent Pecola's perspective towards her status and her sexuality makes her unable to deal with life. Unfortunately, in a patriarchal society, few girls can escape sexual abuse, so Pecola is not an exceptional victim of incestuous rape. Still, we must observe that not every sexually abused or racially oppressed girl turns into a neurotic patient. For example, neither Frieda nor Claudia becomes neurotic. So, we can say that the particular construction of Pecola's mind makes her subject to madness.

From the very beginning, we see that though the fights between her parents are regular occurrences, she is not used to the violence and feels tense and sick when these

⁵⁸ Sigmund Freud. *Introducing Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Vol. 1. New Delhi: Shrijee, 2003. p. 321.

occur. Pecola's reaction after her parents stop fighting show the complexities of this little girl's mental state:

"Letting herself breathe easy now, Pecola covered her head with the quilt. The sick feeling, which she had tried to prevent by holding in her stomach, came quickly in spite of her precaution. There surged in her the desire to heave, but as always, she knew she would not.

'Please, God,' she whispered into the palm of her hand. 'Please make me disappear.'"⁵⁹

Pecola is aware of her disturbed feelings, but she represses them and prays to God instead. Another time after being humiliated by the "[t]he total absence of human recognition"⁶⁰ from Mr. Yacobowski, she tries to suppress her tears by eating "Mary Janes."

So, Pecola later consoles herself by imagining the distaste in other's eyes as jealousy. Throughout this paper we have discussed how Pecola is never given any proper education or knowledge about her life, so we can say that she fails to rationalize her ideas about saving herself from the tyranny of the society and gets sealed in her world of fancy forever.

Sexuality:

⁵⁹ Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 33.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 36.

According to Freud, it is quite natural for a child to experience sexual feelings through sucking and this can continue at maturity⁶¹ and infantile erotogenic zones include mouth.⁶² So we can say that in spite of seeing Cholly's nakedness and being bullied by black boys for it, Pecola was going through a normal sexual growth when she experiences orgasm while sucking Mary Janes. However, at the same time, her sexuality becomes a barrier for her to free herself from the violence of her family. While her brother, Sammy could escape from home from time to time, she is "restricted by youth and sex"⁶³ to follow Sammy's path. Again, enduring rather than taking any step to avoid family violence makes her more vulnerable than her brother Sammy, who at least has a way to leave his home.

Conclusion:

Since a young girl has few options for leading her own life, her family and the society that she lives in play a great role in molding her psyche. And most unfortunately, young girls have to pay a greater price for their sexuality in patriarchal society. However, it is not that all girls like Pecola are subjected to madness. But like Claudia, a child has to have some independence and a place of shelter to develop her own individual opinion on the world to escape self-loathing.

⁶¹ Sigmund Freud. *On Sexuality*. Comp. and ed. Angela Richards. England: Penguin, 1977. p. 96.

⁶² Sigmund Freud. "The Sexual Life of Human Being." *Introducing Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. op. cit. p. 360.

⁶³ Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. op. cit. p. 32.

Esther's Conflict with Traditional Gender Roles and Her Madness in

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Introduction:

The previous chapter traced the retreat into childlike imaginations of a sensitive adolescent girl, Pecola, as she becomes conscious of social, class, and racial discriminations. Now, in this second chapter I will demonstrate that a young girl when she does have some control over life unlike Pecola, still becomes neurotic. In her novel *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath shows two young women who turn mentally imbalanced. She reflects deeply on the life of the protagonist, Esther, but shows only a part of the other neurotic character, Joan, who succeeds in committing suicide in the end. I will mainly analyse Esther's madness, but Joan's issues will also be discussed to compare her life with Esther's. Esther's neurotic symptoms are insomnia and obsession with suicide. These result from not only the difficulties she faces as a writer, but is also deeply rooted in her inability to deal with social expectations regarding gender roles, her relationship with her mother, and loss of her father at an early age. All these affect her so much that she loses control of herself. Unlike Pecola, who is still a child, Esther, a young woman, is not only obsessed by present trauma, but also gets disturbed by her childhood losses and dreadful memories of her first boyfriend Buddy. Again, unlike Pecola, who cannot comprehend the nature of sexual changes she is undergoing, Esther is aware of her body and understands the risk of becoming pregnant.

The only way society identifies a woman is through her femininity and by imposing sexual roles on her. This chapter will analyze how an intelligent young woman entrapped in a conflict between her inner and outer self, tries to comply with social expectations, and yet wants to defy that very social imposition, thereby making her unstable mentally and emotionally.

Conflict between gender roles and the creative woman's psyche:

Esther's disturbances regarding the double standards of society comes about mainly because of the deception from her boyfriend. Coupled with his "loose" sexuality, Buddy injures Esther further by looking down on her poems, and creativity. For Esther, to establish her sexual rights and her creativity are equally meaningful. In fact, both of these become interrelated in her life as restrictions on her sexual rights also bar her way to gain experiences of the outside world which is essential for her writing.

Unfeminine attitude:

Plath shows that Esther's creativity gets inhibited by the social restrictions on her sexuality. She is different from other girls because of her unfeminine attitude. She does not comply absolutely with the social expectation and notions regarding the female body. But at the same time she has internalized the social gaze on the female body and sexuality. She does not like Doreen for her promiscuity but at the same time wants to stay with her because when she is with Doreen, she does not have to worry about her complexion or clothes but feels proud of her intelligence. The general notion that women

long for beauty and do not strive for intelligence is proven wrong in Esther's case. As Elaine Showalter explains in her essay "Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers," the expressions of these "unfeminine' feelings may be construed as signs of madness."⁶⁴ So it is no wonder that Esther is not comfortable with her unfeminine attitude and is in a dilemma whether to follow traditional views or to follow her own choices.

Female body and creativity in a patriarchal society:

From an early age Esther has learnt to adorn and at the same time to hide the body. Consequently, she has not yet been able to love her own body. She refuses to undress in front of Buddy Willard, her boyfriend, not because she feels shy or hates Buddy. She refuses because she is worried that her female body won't be graded the best by Buddy. She thinks being undressed in front of Buddy would be like being naked in front of the camera for college gym files where the body was graded as A, B, C or D. This shows that unlike Buddy, Esther is not confident about her body. The confusion in Esther's mind is a general attitude of most women regarding their body as from an early age they learn to adorn and at the same time try to hide it. So being unable to love her body creates a disturbance in a woman's mind.

In front of Buddy, she is also uncomfortable with her poems. Buddy's underestimation that a poem is just "[a] piece of dust"⁶⁵ haunts and hurts her so much that after a whole year, she comes up with an answer to this insult to her creative career.

⁶⁴ Showalter, Elaine. "Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers." *The Antioch Review*. Vol 32. Autumn, 1972. Oct. 2010. P. 344. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4637559>>

⁶⁵ Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: faber, 1966. p. 52.

She thinks she should have said, "So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you're curing. They're dust, as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together."⁶⁶ This remark shows Esther's protest against patriarchal view on women's creativity which is as individual as her body and is not supposed to be judged by males.

Society values a woman's love life more than her creativity:

Esther is a genius who wins lots of prizes and has achieved 'A's throughout her academic career. Her roommates tease her for being a studious girl. Before she was engaged to Buddy, her roommates used to bully her, but after becoming engaged to Buddy, their attitude towards her completely changes and they become respectful to Esther. This shows how a woman's love life is valued more than her intellectuality. Though she is engaged with Buddy, unlike many girls at her college she doesn't allow herself to be exploited by him, which often happens in romantic relationship. Esther breaks off with Buddy when after getting proof that Buddy was pretending that he is innocent when he was actually sleeping with a nurse. She is so afraid of the teasing from her roommates that she feels relieved that she will not have to admit others that she has broken with Buddy when he was hospitalized for TB. Thus, though she dreams of a romantic life like girls in general, because of her self-esteem she searches for the perfect man.

However, she is not passive in her sexuality. She feels utterly disappointed when Buddy treats her in a brotherly fashion and not like an ardent lover. And her love freezes

⁶⁶Ibid. p. 53.

when she finds that Buddy has deceived her love.⁶⁷ This betrayal wounds her so deeply that memories of Buddy on haunt her and creates a crack in her stable mind which allows all kinds thoughts to pop up in her head. Her instability leads her to other awful experiences and failures which bring about her neurotic problems.

Female creativity and individuality:

As giving birth to a child is a part of female sexuality, Esther imagines herself giving birth to a child and disapproves the drug that induces anesthesia.

I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman 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 forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and window-less corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again.⁶⁸

Here, Esther questions the drug that helps women forget their labour pains. She ridicules it by saying that it is what a man would invent as otherwise women would refuse to give birth to children. It reminds me of "Sultana's Dream," a short story by Begum Rokeya, where women scientists created a world which is women-friendly. Perhaps if there were women scientists, then they would have invented drugs that would let women remember the pain they suffer unconsciously. Esther thinks it is better to remember the pain one is going through because the pain that is suffered unconsciously actually leaves a wound in

⁶⁷Ibid. p. 66.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 62.

the psyche. And since she is not aware of the pain she cannot do anything to overcome it or even save herself from the same pain again. Thus, Esther points out another aspect of the psychological oppression of women. Then, according to Esther, since mothers remain senseless while giving birth to children, there is a possibility of the baby being stolen. This fear shows Esther's innate distrust of men. She feels it is better to "see the baby out of yourself to be sure that the baby is yours."⁶⁹ This distrust of other people later turns into paranoia.

This issue of giving birth also shows Esther's fear from a writer's point of view that women writers are bound to follow male tradition of writing which many women are unaware or at least are unable to challenge. Many women had to publish their work with male pseudonym which is comparable to the stolen baby; creativity is denied to its true owner, and given a name of a male like the stolen baby who will not be named after her true parents.

Male domination both in sexual and scholarly relations:

Esther's experience of powerlessness in sex makes her feel rejected. She finds that her intelligence becomes a barrier between her and her partners. While one refuses to have sex with her because she is intelligent, another thinks she is not intellectual enough to be attractive. Esther feels that only if she had an attractive face, or if she was a famous writer, Constantin, the German translator, would have wanted to sleep with her. On the other hand, Eric is the only young man who values and respects her intelligence, and he

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 63

regards her face, which seemed unattractive to many, as “kind,”⁷⁰ yet he too does not think her the right person to sleep with. So, though Esther meets a person who values her intelligence, she feels disappointed because her intelligence and her body could not be accepted by the same man.

It is surprising that though she has desire, she never expresses it to any man. She never takes the first initiative to have sex but waits for her male partner to offer it to her. Unlike, Pecola, the young girl in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Esther gets her first learning about sexuality from her mother. The criticism that Beauvoir makes about the teaching women get from their mothers which quite often is designed to please men follows:

Their mothers enjoin them to treat the boys no longer as comrades, not to make advances, to take a passive role. If they wish to start a friendship or a flirtation, they must carefully avoid seeming to take the initiative in it, men do not like [...] too much daring, culture, or intelligence, too much character will frighten them.⁷¹

If sex is a union of two human beings and especially in Esther’s case between a man and a woman, then the man is in power. Similarly the literary canon, which is supposed to include great works by both men and women, is also dominated mainly by male writers. Women are taught to impress men; they are required to write in the way their male predecessors write denying the female tradition. Joanna Russ says in her essay “Anomalousness” that “[i]n order to have her, *the female writer* (my italics) ‘belong’

⁷⁰Ibid. p. 75

⁷¹ Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. op. cit. p. 359.

fully to English Literature, the tradition to which she belongs must also be admitted.”⁷² While many mediocre writings from female writers who were following the male tradition were published and were even encouraged, great poets like Emily Dickinson were not valued by the publishers. Esther, who wants to be established as a writer, thereby, gets frustrated when she starts questioning the power of traditional patriarchal society over women.

Sexuality and creativity:

Before Esther can surrender her body to any man, she becomes defensive about her right to experience desire. She gets angry that society allows men to live a double life whereas women cannot. She does not think it is worthy to remain a virgin when she has to accept a man who has had physical relationships with many women. She believes that by controlling female sexuality through marriage and childbirth, men “brainwash” women and treat them as if they “lie underneath their feet.”⁷³ Comparing her sexual rights with that of men and finding that Buddy is free to have sex with women, she thinks of her own virginity as a burden. She starts with birth control so that she can have sexual experiences. Esther needs this experience not just to satisfy her cardinal desires but also to use this experience to develop the character of her fiction. She has read many books where “all sorts of people sleeping with each other”⁷⁴ but she cannot write a novel with secondary experiences. This shows, like men, women too need to satisfy their desire as

⁷²Russ, Joanna. “Anomalousness.” 1983. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticisms*. Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991. p. 200.

⁷³ Sylvia Plath. *The Bell Jar*. op.cit. p. 80.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 67.

sex is a normal part of human life and also because like male writers women writers also need myriad experiences in order to create.

A female writer needs the same exposure as a male writer:

Esther has a very inquisitive mind. She does not enjoy the entertainment that has been systematically planned by the prize-giving authority for the contest winners. Instead, she wants glimpses of New York where she can have different experiences for writing. However, by going out with Doreen, she does not really enjoy what she had to experience. Once she was violated by the vulgarity between Doreen and her boyfriend, and the second time she narrowly escaped rape. In two such occasions she uses pseudonym. Earlier we have seen how women writers had to take male pseudonym to hide their female identity. Now, we can say that to gain experience by going out of their way they need to use pseudonyms. Gilbert and Gubar say in their book *The Mad Women in the Attic* that "the fundamental alienation a woman ... feels is from her 'own' name: it is not hers to risk, not hers to publicize, not even hers to immortalize."⁷⁵ Thus, a woman can neither expose her real self nor creativity as it is like men for whom the society is more liberal than it is to women. Since they cannot express their thoughts openly they do not get the feedback for their works.

Esther is also torn between her responsibility to submit the assignments properly to her editor and being carefree like Doreen. Most of the time, Doreen's influence takes over and she fails to submit the assignments. Esther starts slowly to lose control over her psyche. Then, when Jay Cee called her to her office, she felt good that Jay Cee is being

⁷⁵ Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979. p. 555.

like a mother and mentor, and even wished she was her mother so that she could “know what to do.”⁷⁶ (Plath 36). Jay Cee understands that the attractions and dangers of the big city are also disturbing Esther, so she warns her: “don't let the wicked city get you down.”⁷⁷ Esther cannot help herself from being dragged down by the city as her longing to gather information brings her close to a rape, which could nearly have happened if she had not fought back. Esther's helplessness to live a free life can be supported by Suzanne Pharr's observation that

[i]t is not just the violence but the threat of violence that controls our lives. Because the burden of responsibility has been placed so often on the potential victim, as women we have curtailed our freedom in order to protect ourselves from violence.⁷⁸

This ambition of her life which she fails to achieve makes her more and more frustrated and she loses all interest in building up her career. Finally, being unable to do the creative writing course with the famous writer, she loses all her hopes of becoming a writer. She feels so wretched that she does not want to wait for anyone to drop out so that she can enroll instead as Jodie, one of her friends who have been selected for the course, suggested. Finally, when she decided to start a new life, through her writing career, where memories of Buddy will not disturb her, very soon, she realizes that she lacks the adequate experience needed for a doctor. She asks:

⁷⁶ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*. op. cit. p. 36.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Suzanne Pharr. “Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism.” *Feminist Frameworks*. 3rd ed. Eds. Allison M. Jaggar and Paula S. Rothenburg. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993. p. 311.

How could I write about life when I had never had a love affair or a baby or seen anybody die? A girl I knew had just won a prize for a short story about her adventures among the pygmies in Africa. How could I compete with that sort of thing?⁷⁹

Identity other than sexuality:

The total frustration at the thought that she will never be able to write due to lack of experience makes her collapse completely. She can no longer read and is sleepless for weeks, and finally ends up in a mental asylum. She wanted to go to New York, to gather experience through travel, and then she wants to have love, and continue the novel afresh. She even wants to pray in church to calm her mind and ask forgiveness for her sins, but couldn't as she realized even church can't "take up the whole of [one's] life. [...] [O]ne still had to eat three meals a day and have a job and live in the world."⁸⁰ I think for women, the situation is worse, because to live in the world, she also has to fight against patriarchal oppression. She strives to gather experiences which she was deprived of and even if she tries to know things she did not know, she gets exposed to the sadism of men like Marco.

Everyday norms that disrupt a woman's tranquility needed for creativity:

Women are subjected to many social rules. The best career that her mother can think of her is someone who knows shorthand and therefore "who would be in demand

⁷⁹ Sylvia Plath. *The Bell Jar*. op. cit. p. 107

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 158.

among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter” but Esther “hated the idea of serving men.”⁸¹ This shows Esther’s ambition to break herself free from patriarchal hierarchy through a professional career. Then while eating, she is expected to maintain a diet which is designed to keep her slim. Here again, Esther is different from other girls because when other girls are having salad and juice she orders food with cream and butter. She eats quickly in order to avoid attention from other people. Beauvoir comments that controlling women at every step makes them inhibited saying that “... the self-control that is imposed on woman and becomes second nature in ‘the well-bred young girl kills spontaneity; her lively exuberance is beaten down. The result is tension and ennui.’”⁸² All these subtle but domineering gender rules do not allow women the tranquility that they need to keep their mind psychologically stable and concentrate on their creativity or career.

Intellectuality-sexuality-madness:

Joan is another character in the novel *The Bell Jar* who turns neurotic like Esther. Both Joan and Esther are extremely brilliant in different ways. Esther has got A’s at a stretch for fifteen years, had won many prizes, an editor for a literary magazine she has also been selected for a fashion magazine contest in New York. Joan is equally intelligent with a very independent disposition, has chosen physics, a mathematical subject, and is president of her class, and also very good at hockey. Both of these intelligent young women are sexually active which supports the comment on female sexuality by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that “female genius triggers uncontrollable

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 72.

⁸² Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. op. cit. p. 358.

sexual desires, and perhaps, conversely, uncontrollable sexual desires even cause the disease of final genius.”⁸³ Esther’s problem is that she cannot impose her sexual desires on her partners and at the same time she is reluctant to bear the responsibilities of being pregnant. And Joan’s problem is she is a lesbian and faces the taboo lesbianism is associated with. Suzanne Pharr says in her essay “Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism” that

[a]n overtly homophobic world in which there is full permission to treat lesbians and gay men with cruelty make it difficult for lesbians and gay men to maintain a strong sense of well-being and self-esteem. The impact of such hatred and negativity can lead one to depression and, in some cases, to suicide.⁸⁴

So, though Plath does not make it clear why Joan loses her rationality, it can be assumed that rude treatment from homophobic people like Esther destroys her self-esteem and being unable to live with her homosexual tendency decides to commit suicide. Satisfying sexual desire is necessary for women as it is for men. Joan started to recover earlier than Esther perhaps because she could continue her sexual relation with her friend DeeDee. Thus, women with merit and intelligence are more likely to be sexually active and since the society provides little options to acknowledge female desires they are more likely to lose mental balance.

⁸³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979. P. 569.

⁸⁴ Suzanne Pharr. “Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism.” op. cit. p. 314.

Failure in Relationship with men:

Esther's failure in maintaining a stable relationship with both men and women also shows her mental imbalance. The first woman that a girl knows is her mother and similarly the first man in her life is her father. Esther cannot come to terms with the absence of her father and the emotional absence of her mother and therefore finds difficulty in maintaining any stable relation with both men and women. Esther feels that she has never been purely happy since her father's death. This shows the emptiness in her heart which can never be fulfilled. Then, from all the men in her life, she has experienced a kind of rejection as if the rejection that she felt at her father's death gets renewed with every encounter with men in her life. Her boyfriend, Buddy pretends to be innocent and later when Esther discovers that he was sleeping with a nurse for months, she feels absolutely deceived and can never forget or forgive Buddy. Then, she also feels deserted by Mr. Willard, who reminds her of her father when he leaves her alone with Buddy.

When she imagines that Constantin is going to seduce her she feels happier than she had been since her father's death. So we see that Esther is trying to seek the love that she got from her father. Since she was trying to find her father in every man, she was disappointed every time.

Then, Mr. Gordon, to whom she goes for help for her psychological problems, also exacerbates her madness. Esther desires every man she meets whether it's a doctor, prison guard, or just a stranger. Mr. Gordon's good-looking appearance and photograph of his happy married life makes Esther "furious."⁸⁵ She wonders "how could this Dr.

⁸⁵ Sylvia Plath. *The Bell Jar*. op.cit. p. 124.

Gordon help me anyway?”⁸⁶ Then his wrong treatment of shock therapy intensifies her distrust of people, especially of doctors, and also worsens her psychological illness. This shows how a woman's impression of her therapist also plays a part in intensifying her psychological problems.

Relationship with Women

Esther's life becomes difficult because she was not only deprived of her father's love, but also from a supportive understanding from her mother. Before going to New York, she was all right but her stay in New York by herself without her mother's constant concern about her gave her the time to reflect on her thoughts and desires.

Esther has a difficult relationship with her mother, not because Esther's mother is not caring, but her dominance and over-caring turns Esther crazy. Esther's mother never allows her to grieve for her father. She did not even let Esther attend the funeral and thus made the death seem unreal to Esther. So, Esther could never move on, and throughout her life, she felt the loneliness that was created by her father's absence.

Not only that, Esther's mother also tries to influence her career and academic life, confusing Esther about her decisions. This, in one way, made it possible for her to work hard to get A's for fifteen years. On the other hand, she suffers from such an inferiority complex that ever since her father's death, she could never be happy again. She remembers that after her father's death “in spite of Girl Scouts [...] which my mother

⁸⁶ Ibid.

scrimped to give me” she “had never really been happy again.”⁸⁷ Mrs. Greenwood pushes her daughter to be the best in everything, which Esther failed to be.

The way Esther’s mother treats her as a child, and tries to control her dresses and clothes, does not allow Esther to breathe freely as an individual being and she therefore feels mentally suffocated. Even when Esther accidentally breaks the mirror in the hospital, Mrs. Greenwood asks her to behave properly. She feels Esther is just being troublesome and pretending to be sick only to harass her. This also makes Esther completely irritated about her mother and she confesses to Dr. Nolan that she hates her mother. However, at the same in her delirium she calls her mother. This shows Esther’s love and hate relationship with her mother.

Influenced by her mother and grandmother, and believing how “clean”⁸⁸ a boy Buddy is makes her accept Buddy’s offer to see him naked. This experience she regrets throughout her life. If her mother and grandmother had not provoked her, she would not have made herself believe that she has fallen in love with Buddy. Here, we see how a woman is not only subjected to male dominance but is also the victim of women who have internalized the male values.

Now, Esther’s complicated mental state is proven when at very first sight and sometimes without even seeing a man, she imagines a loving, romantic relationship; she finds faults with all the women in her life as if trying to punish them in the way she wanted to punish her mother. Esther wishes Jay Cee, who “looked terrible, but very

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 71.

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 44.

wise,”⁸⁹ was her mother but was not sure whether she would like to follow her busy life as an example.

However, Dr. Nolan is the only woman who helped Esther out of her madness. She is motherly and very accepting. When Esther blurts out that she hates her mother, she was expecting a rebuke. But Dr. Nolan seems considerate and understanding as she smilingly says “I suppose you do.”⁹⁰ Dr. Nolan helps Esther to take birth control measures so that she can lead her sexual life as she pleases without fear of becoming pregnant. Thus Dr. Nolan works as the only door to a healthy, independent life in a patriarchal society for Esther.

Esther’s confusion about her friends also leaves her a lonely person. Doreen is the only girl of her age with whom she feels confident of her intelligence and forgets about her clothes or beauty, as I have mentioned earlier, but she cannot think of Doreen as her friend. Though being with Doreen makes her feel special, it is Doreen who has forced the two dreadful violations in Esther’s life. Doreen’s open and vulgar behavior disgusts Esther and she is able to find peace only after purifying herself from the memory of Doreen’s sexual promiscuity by taking a hot bath. Though in her inner mind she too wants to have a sex life, she cannot accept Doreen’s sexual preferences and she searches for purity and beauty in everything. Esther has internalized the idea that women should not be open about sex and thus prefers to accept Betsy and her friends admitting that “it is with Betsy [she resembles] at heart.”⁹¹ Yet, later Betsy seems to her no more than a

⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 36.

⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 195.

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 21

"Pollyanna Cowgirl."⁹² Thus, her love and hate relationship with her mother reflects in her other relations.

Esther also gets influenced by Mrs. Willard, her mother, and Dodo Conway regarding marriage. Finding them under control of their husbands, she decides that she will not get married ever in her life as after marriage, men keep their women "underneath their feet."⁹³ Esther feels that she cannot be like Dodo Conway who has many children. She believes that if she has to wait on a child, she will turn mad. Esther, whose aim is to be a creative writer, wants all her time to spend to sharpen her creativity. Jeffner Allen agrees in her essay "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women" that

[a] decision not to have children may be because [t]o not have children opens a time-space for the priority of claiming my life and world as my own and for the creative development of radically new alternatives.⁹⁴

However, she wonders: "Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puling baby like Dodo Conway?"⁹⁵ This also shows her internal conflict between what the society expects and what she herself wants. Reflecting back on her mother's marriage she finally decides not to marry to remain independent. In fact, by controlling birth, she feels:

I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the

⁹² Ibid. p. 108.

⁹³ Ibid. p. 80.

⁹⁴ Jeffner Allen. "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women." *Feminist Frameworks*. 3rd ed. Eds. Allison M. Jaggar and Paula S. Rothenburg. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993. p. 383.

⁹⁵ Sylvia Plath. *The Bell Jar*. op. cit. p. 213.

Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been cheated out like me, because what they did, they would do anyway.⁹⁶

This reflection shows that Esther being free from the burden of unwanted pregnancy is part of establishing the right over her own body.

Conclusion:

So, like Pecola, Esther too has many different reasons which generate her madness; but among them female sexuality and the patriarchal social oppression play the major part as villains behind the madness of a woman. But while Pecola is a victim of racial discrimination carrying the same wound as her parents, Esther is fortunate enough to be a part of such class and society where people like Jay Cee, Dr. Nolan or Philomena Guinea are there to help her. Looking at Pecola and Esther's story, we see that women's madness may arise out of a very complex and different situations. No single and direct reason can be isolated as a cause of madness since women are psychologically suppressed in many different ways not only by men but also by other women, religion as well as tradition.

⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 213.

Mary's Lack of Autonomy in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

The lack of autonomy in Mary, a middle-aged woman, in the novel *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) makes her vulnerable and she gradually becomes unable to control her life. In this novel, Doris Lessing shows how Mary's helplessness destroys her strength, and how she is unable to arrive at an understanding of the self. In the last chapter, we had seen that Esther in *The Bell Jar* (1963) could not comply with the socially created gender roles and the social oppression that she felt as a woman. In this chapter I will attempt to show how a married woman is also subjected to social criticism for not playing her expected role. Mary, having been independent for a long time, is crushed completely, when she finds that the role she has played is not something that society considers suitable for women of her age. The idea that she is not what she should be, keeps on haunting her till she is killed by Moses, her native servant, with whom she was almost as intimate as a lover. In this chapter, I will also examine how racial discrimination is equally haunting for a white woman as for a black woman. In fact, women can be oppressed in two ways simultaneously, regarding race and gender. Moses's power over Mary is generated not because of Mary's vulnerability or weakness, but more because she is a white woman and Moses, a black man. To understand the gradual disintegration of Mary we need to analyze the three phases of Mary's life – spinsterhood, married life and sexual awakening. In all these phases, her traumatic childhood memories lurk behind and remain as a barrier between her past and present, making her unable to see the real situation.

Spinsterhood, happiest time of her life:

For Mary, the happiest time of her life was her unmarried, independent life. Lessing shows it to be the only time in Mary's life unaffected by childhood memories, free from all the traces of her past. She was a woman, with a good job and a reputation of a "comfortable maiden aunt"⁹⁷ who was always there to listen to other people's problems. Apparently, it may seem that she was actually the person she projected to the world. But once we listen to her ideas about certain issues such as home, family, marriage and children, we have to look at her life in a different light. Here is her reflection on life:

When Mary thought of 'home' she remembered a wooden box shaken by passing trains; when she thought of marriage she remembered her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled; when she thought of children she saw her mother's face at her children's funeral-anguished, but as dry and as hard as a rock. Mary liked other people's children but shuddered at the thought of having any of her own. She felt sentimental at weddings, but she had a profound distaste for sex; there had been little privacy in her home and there were things she did not care to remember; she had taken good care to forget them years ago.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1950. p. 43.

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 46.

She has created a substitute for everything that she has rejected. She could have lived in a separate house, but she preferred to live in an unmarried girls' hostel. Living in a hostel saves her from the depressive memory of her childhood home, but on the other hand, by living among unmarried young women and listening to all their troubles, she never gets the chance to know about any other stories of married life other than that of her parents. Therefore her ideas about marriage remains fixed. In this way she is like Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), who is similarly protected from outside knowledge. The only difference is Pecola was not a part of the southern social life whereas Mary is never alone for a moment. Despite this, she is not aware of the social gaze. She goes out with boys but never gets involved in any sexual relationship, the way Esther in *The Bell Jar* (1963) wanted to. For her men were like her good friends and never more than that. She is feminine but she prefers to portray herself as a "childish-looking"⁹⁹ heroine as if subconsciously trying to repress her sexuality to save herself from the male gaze. Her opinion on men is "Men! They get all the fun."¹⁰⁰ Her memory of her father laughing at her panic is related to her generalized notions about men. So, she avoids men as sexual beings and regards herself only in the light of their best friend. She is physically very active, playing tennis, hockey or swimming and watching movies almost daily.

Unfortunately, Mary's "free life" is interrupted by society, and the criticism leveled against her. Ann Barr Snitow says in her essay "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different: Radical History Review":

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 44.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 45.

When women try to picture excitement, the society offers them one vision, romance. When women try to imagine companionship, the society offers them one vision, male, sexual companionship, the society offers them one vision, the power to attract a man. [...] When women try to project a unique self, the society offers them very few attractive images. True completion for women is nearly always presented as social, domestic, sexual.

One of our culture's most intense myths, the ideal of an individual who is brave and complete in isolation, is for men only. Women are grounded, enmeshed in civilization, in social connection, in family and in love [...] while all our culture's rich myths of individualism are essentials closed to them. Their one socially acceptable moment of transcendence is romantic."¹⁰¹

Snitow explains Mary's helpless situation. Mary, just because she is a woman, fails to remain free. All her trust and dependence on the friendliness of her acquaintances is shattered when she overhears two of her friends discussing her: "[S]he will never marry. She just isn't like that, isn't like that at all. Something missing somewhere."¹⁰² Thus, Snitow's explanation fits here. Her friends ridicule her for not conforming to social expectations.

The uniqueness of Mary's individuality is that she does not create any image as 'other' to evaluate herself. She does not realize how lucky she is compared to other women, nor did she realize that she lacks the self-awareness of many other women. In the

¹⁰¹ Snitow, Ann Barr. "Mass market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different." 1979. *Feminist Literary theory: A Reader*. Ed. Mary Eagleton. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1986. p. 197.

¹⁰² Doris Lessing. *The Grass is Singing*. op. cit. p. 48.

process of forgetting her troubled past she avoids facing her internal needs. She is happy in the world that she has created, until the comments awake her from her dream-like state. She starts to go to the cinema more and unlike before she “[comes] out feverish and unsettled. There seemed no connection between the distorted mirror of the screen and her own life: it was impossible to fit together what she wanted for herself, and what she was offered.”¹⁰³ Mary’s problem is she lacks self-consciousness. According to R. D. Laing, self-consciousness “implies two things: an awareness of oneself by oneself, and an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else’s observation.”¹⁰⁴ Mary was not aware of what she really wanted and at the same time she was not sure how much she wanted to comply with others’ wishes or expectations. Therefore, when the “idea of herself was destroyed ... she was not fitted to recreate herself.”¹⁰⁵ Mary felt that somehow she has misunderstood her own self and the people surrounding her. She was more troubled and disturbed because her friends never said anything directly and openly to her.

This contradictory attitude sows the seed of paranoia in Mary. She starts suspecting everyone’s affection for her. But there is another reason for the deepening paranoia. The secret sexual advances of her father might have created her distrust of men in her childhood which later turned to women as well. The impact of this lack of trust remains in Mary even after her marriage. She cannot accept Mrs. Slatter’s friendly attitude and feels hostile towards her. Thus, Mary’s state of spinsterhood is disturbed

¹⁰³ Ibid. p. 52.

¹⁰⁴ R. D. Laing. Laing, R.D. *The Divided Self*. Maryland: Penguin, 1959. p. 206.

¹⁰⁵ Doris Lessing. *The Grass is Singing*. op. cit. p. 52.

when she can no longer trust anyone. Simultaneously, she tries to be attractive to men even while feeling uncomfortable around them.

While Mary is in this miserable state, Dick comes into her life. Dick and Mary with complete opposite views marry each other because both of them were badly in need of love. Now, that her married life has started, we will see that Mary still fails to understand her own self which together with Dick's stubbornness makes the marriage a failure.

Married life, a period of reliving the childhood trauma:

Unfortunately, her fear of an unhappy married life comes true when she marries Dick. Her marriage with Dick brings back her memories about her own dysfunctional family. The very day she comes to Dick's home, she

[begins] to feel slowly, that it was not in this house she was sitting, with her husband, but back with her mother, watching her endlessly contrive and patch and mend-till suddenly she got to her feet with an awkward scrambling movement, unable to bear it; possessed with the thought that her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother lead.¹⁰⁶

Thus, from the very first day the memory of childhood paternal oppression keeps haunting her. Again her lack of autonomy leads her to dwell in the memory of her parents. Laing says that "If the individual does not feel himself to be autonomous this means that he can experience neither his separateness from, nor his relatedness to the

¹⁰⁶ Doris Lessing. *The Grass is Singing*. op. cit. p. 66.

other in the usual way.”¹⁰⁷ While discussing the different aspects of her married life in which her rationality is shattered, we will see that it is her lack of autonomy that plays the biggest role in all her actions and reactions.

Frigid sexuality:

Being her mother's confidante, she learnt to hate her father. Furthermore, his sexuality keeps haunting her to such an extent that she becomes sexually frigid. When Dick tries to consummate their marriage, she felt

[it] was not so bad, she thought when it was all over: not as bad as *that*. It meant nothing to her nothing at all. Expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing. She was able maternally to bestow the gift of herself on this humble stranger, and remain untouched.¹⁰⁸

Though, Lessing does not make it clear if this “that” refers to Mary's sexual experience with her father, we have reasons to suspect that memories of incestuous sexuality can freeze sexual feelings, which in Mary's case makes her sexually frigid.

Mary's sexual frigidity becomes the crucial reason for the failure of their marriage. Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman report in their article ‘Father- Daughter Incest’ that a girl usually suppresses her feelings when the incest is actually occurring because “Passive resistance and dissociation of feeling [seems] to be among the few defences available in an overwhelming situation. Later, this [carries] over into relations

¹⁰⁷ R. D. Laing. *The Divided Self*. op. cit. p. 52.

¹⁰⁸ Doris Lessing. *The Grass is Singing*. op. cit. p. 66.

with others.”¹⁰⁹ Therefore, it can be said that Mary’s emotional distance with Dick is the unconscious continuation of the process of protecting herself from the trauma. Thus Mary is relieved when they cannot go for their honeymoon, and she is disinterested in having children. Dick’s touch makes her recoil. Margaret W. Matlin reports in her book, *Psychology of Women* that

A disorder of low sexual desire may be caused by a variety of psychological factors, including a more general problem such as depression or anxiety. A woman, who is not satisfied with her romantic partner or their relationships may also experience little sexual desire.”¹¹⁰

In Mary’s case, her anxiety arose from the traumatic sexual experiences with her father as sometimes it happened openly in front of her siblings in such a way that only she could feel that something wrong is happening.¹¹¹

Though Mary is reluctant to have children, Dick feels the need of children as a bridge between him and Mary.

Children were what he wanted now that his marriage was a failure and seemed impossible to right. Children would bring them close together and break down this invisible barrier. But they simply could not afford to have children. When he had said to Mary (thinking she might be longing for

¹⁰⁹ Herman Judith and Lisa Hirschman. “Father-Daughter Incest.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Vol. 2. Chicago: UP, 1977. p. 750

¹¹⁰ Margaret W. Matlin. *Psychology of Women*. 6th Ed. Belmont: Thomson, 2008. p. 30.

¹¹¹ Doris Lessing. *The Grass is Singing*. op. cit. p. 201.

them) that they would have to wait, she had assented with a look of relief. He had not missed that look, but perhaps when he got out of the wood, she would be pleased to have children.”¹¹²

The above passage shows the distance between Mary and Dick. Later, when out of loneliness and without any true longing for children Mary begs Dick for a child, Dick is unwilling to have children because of poverty. Mary, who never thought of age, becomes aware of the fact that very soon menopause will bring an end to all the expectations of children. Dick's reaction to Mary's pleading seems almost indifferent, though the novel does not really show Dick's negligence towards Mary. It can be said that Dick's inability to realize the importance of fertility in his wife closes the chapter regarding children forever. Since Mary has been never an assertive woman the issue of children is dropped. Once more, we see Mary's dilemma about what she wants. When her distaste of sex makes her disinterested in having children, it is her loneliness that makes her worry about menopause, the end of her fertility to bear a child. So, here we see that while a young girl like Esther was too apprehensive about pregnancy, for a mature woman the end of a woman's fertility can be a reason to be worried too.

Poverty:

Mary and Dick's life is doomed by poverty. She tries to make up for the frigidity of her marriage by decorating her home. She spends all her savings for it and therefore “[t]he house gradually lost its air of bleak poverty, and put on an inexpensive prettiness,

¹¹² Ibid. p. 100.

with bright hangings and some pictures.”¹¹³ However, though she tries to erase the appearance of poverty, she can do nothing to increase family income. She repeatedly refuses Dick’s appeal to help him with the farm, as she is paranoid, when she is away from the house. She feels the native houseboy is either stealing or “looking through her personal things.”¹¹⁴ At the same time she keeps dreaming that one day she will go back to her old job. She even tries to go back once, but unfortunately finds that she is no longer accepted there. She loses her capacity to day-dream. Dick refuses to put a ceiling, bringing in the factor of heat very strongly into the text. She thinks with a frustration that “these rooms added to the house would have made their life comfortable: the money spent on the store, the turkey-runs, the pigsties, the beehives, would have put ceilings into the house, would have taken the terror out of the thought of the approaching hot season.”¹¹⁵ The ceiling which seems absolutely unimportant to Dick becomes the cause of Mary’s dwindling sanity.

When Dick wants Mary to help him on his farm, Mary keeps on refusing until she is obliged to supervise the farm when Dick falls sick. She tries to convince Dick to change his strategies in running the farm. But Dick’s stubbornness adds to their financial problems. Here, we must acknowledge that Mary herself is responsible for the distance between them. Her poverty-stricken childhood keeps haunting her and unconsciously she behaves and speaks like her mother.

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 73.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p. 84.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 114.

It was not the voice of Mary, the individual (who after all really did not care so much about the bath or whether the native stayed or went), but the voice of the suffering female, who wanted to show her husband she just would not be treated like that. In a moment she would begin to cry, as her mother had cried on these occasions, in a kind of dignified, martyred rage.¹¹⁶

The more she becomes like her mother the more she starts losing connection with the present and reality. Laing says “the ‘self’ whose relatedness to reality is already tenuous becomes less and less a reality-self, and more and more fantasized as it becomes engaged in fantastic relationships with its own phantoms.”¹¹⁷ So, the more days pass the more she loses her connection with reality. Now we will see how she goes beyond reality and has hallucinations about the power of nature.

Nature:

Mary was expecting that she will find solace in the natural beauty of the country. The moment Mary comes to Dick’s place she feels eerie. And then when she realizes that Dick will never be able to have enough money to put a ceiling and that she will never be able to bring any changes to her living condition, Mary starts being afraid of nature. For the first time in her life she feels a connection with the environment and the weather, but in a negative way.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 96.

¹¹⁷ R. D. Laing. *The Divided Self*. op. cit. p. 85.

[I]n the town there had been no seasons, really, not as there were here, she had been out of the rhythm of cold and heat and rain. It had been hot, it had rained, the cold weather had come-yes, certainly; but it was something extraneous to her, something happening independent of her. Her body and mind were subservient to the slow movement of the seasons; she had never in her life watched an implacable sky for signs of rain, as she did now, standing on the verandah, and screwing up her eyes at the great massed white clouds, like blocks of glittering crystal quarts sailing through the blue.¹¹⁸

Nature works as a supernatural force on Mary. The cold and rainy seasons become her driving forces. Nature starts to influence the relationship between Mary and Dick. Once after a quarrel over the houseboy, "The tension between them lasted for an intolerable week, until at last the rains fell, and the air grew cool and relaxed."¹¹⁹ But she cannot enjoy the winter which she felt "had been sent especially for her, to send a tinge of vitality into her, to save her from her helpless dullness"¹²⁰ without remembering the dreadful return of the hot season.

She is so much under the control of the seasons that when she realizes the fatal emptiness in her, she decides "When the next cold season came, and stung her into life again, she would do something."¹²¹ Thus, it can be said that nature becomes an

¹¹⁸ Doris Lessing. *The Grass is Singing*. op.cit. p. 85.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p. 97.

¹²⁰ Ibid. p. 128.

¹²¹ Ibid. p. 163.

oppressive force for Mary. Even when she was about to die, Mary feels that the “trees [are advancing] in a rush, like beasts, and the thunder [is] the noise of their coming.”¹²²

In the meantime her relationship with Dick continues to break. It is at this time her marital relationship was breaking completely as various others problems were created between Mary and Dick and her sexual passivity became a serious barrier between them. It is her sexual awakening at this moment that brings an end to the little rationality which she still held in herself. Trapped between her attraction and repulsion simultaneously for a black man confirms her mental disintegration. We will now see how like Pecola and Esther, in Mary’s case too female sexuality plays an important in her madness.

Like Pecola, Mary is also a victim of racial discrimination. In the first chapter of this paper we found how racism oppressed black people. But can we say that it is only black people who feel the oppression of racial discrimination? No, white women like Mary, too become the victims of racism. A man is never or rarely oppressed because he is a man but a woman is oppressed because she is a woman. All the problems in her life are created out of gender discrimination. Let us see how racial and class issues intensify Mary’s problems with Moses.

Confrontation between sexual awakening and social restrictions:

Female sexuality is always under the social gaze and the double standard in attitude towards male and female sexuality restrains a woman from exercising her sexual rights. If a woman does break the “love law,” a term used by Arundhati Roy in her book

¹²² Ibid. p. 254.

The God of Small Things (1997) for social rules of who can love whom and how much,¹²³ then she has to pay a high price often even with her mental well-being. In *The God of Small Things* (1997) Roy shows how Ammu's desire for an Untouchable is equally scorned by the society and her family, while her brother Cholly's relationship with servant girls were accepted easily by Mammachi's consideration that as "[h]e can't help having a Man's Needs."¹²⁴ In the same way white men were allowed to take black women as sexual partners. Ammu's life is a picture of what Mary's life would have been if she had accepted Moses. When the family learnt that Ammu has had sex with an Untouchable, she was kept locked in her room "like the family lunatic in a medieval house-hold."¹²⁵ On the other hand, another character in *The God of Small Things* (1997), Baby Kochamma, who has suppressed her sexuality all through her life, became mentally unstable in her old age adorning herself like a young bride, a life which she has always rejected. Since sex is just one of the fundamental needs in a woman like in a man, when restrictions repress these needs it is quite natural that she will feel imbalanced.

Mary's sexual awakening becomes destructive for her as it discovers itself with the entrance of a black man into her life, a man who is not from her class and who must be treated like an animal. When Dick's respect for Mary's wish retains the barriers between them, the empty place in her heart is taken by a black servant, who in spite of knowing Mary's hatred for him asserts his tenderness, making her feel powerless. Lessing shows that the female gaze can be equally erotic as the male gaze. Mary's need

¹²³ Arundhati Roy. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: IndiaInk, 1997. P. 33.

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 168.

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 252.

for someone stronger than her takes the shape of her attraction for that “powerful, broad-built body.”¹²⁶ Had it not been a black body, she would have been saved from the humiliation of social ostracism. In Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1960), we see that like Mary, Connie happens to be present when Mellors, her servant was bathing and in the same way was attracted by his strong body.¹²⁷ But the difference between Connie and Mary is that Connie is attracted to someone, who though her subordinate, is considered as a human by her society since he is white. But, Mary is attracted by a black man “who is no better than a dog.”¹²⁸ The intermingling feelings of guilt and hatred make her vulnerable, while Connie could remain in a stable relationship with Mellors who is at least physically healthier than her handicapped husband. The omniscient narrator tries to explain Mary’s sense of repulsion:

What had happened was that the formal pattern of black-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the present relation; and when a white man in Africa looks into the eye of native and sees the human being (which it is his chief preoccupation to avoid), his sense of guilt, which he denies, fumes up in resentment and he brings down the whip. She felt that she must do something, and at once, to restore her poise.¹²⁹

To restore that ‘poise’ she becomes harsher to Moses. Her fear of forbidden attraction triggers her hysteric outbursts,

¹²⁶ Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*. op.cit. p. 175.

¹²⁷ D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. England: Penguin, 1960. p. 69.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 176.

¹²⁹ Ibid. p 178.

She heard a strange angry muttering, and realized she was talking to herself, out aloud, as she walked. She clapped her hand over her mouth, and shook her head to clear it; but by the time that Moses had come back into the kitchen, and she heard his footsteps, she was sitting in the front room rigid with a hysterical emotion.¹³⁰

She was delirious and she verbally abuses Moses. Mary is trapped in her own irrational intolerance of the native servants. If she had not fired all the other servants for trifling reasons, she could have now fired Moses for genuine reasons. Being forced by Dick's reluctance to lose one more servant, all her suppressed hatred and anger is expressed through her delirium. After one such outburst Moses wants to resign, which only shows that Moses is not as emotionless as he pretends to be. But even when Moses tries to leave, Mary does not let him go. In fact, she panics dreading Dick's anger. Her panic reaches to such height that it turns into convulsions and "she wept on, repeating over and over again, "You must stay! You must stay!" and all the time she was filled with shame and mortification because he was seeing her cry."¹³¹ This breakdown in front of Moses becomes a turning point for Mary evoking all her forgotten childhood trauma. Moses's humane attitude seems to her "impertinence" and yet fatherly.¹³²

This mixture of repulsion and attraction puts her into a dilemma. Moses's caring touch makes her feel as if she has "been touched by excrement."¹³³ Again when Moses

¹³⁰ Ibid. p. 177.

¹³¹ Ibid. p. 186.

¹³² Ibid. p. 186.

¹³³ Ibid. p. 187.

speaks to her, “easily, almost familiarly, good-humouredly as if he was humouring a child. ... she [feels] the usual anger within her, at the tone he used to her, at the same time she was fascinated, and out of her depth; she did not know what to do with this personal relation.”¹³⁴ Thus, Moses starts looking after her meals, bringing gifts. Because of the racial and class differences Mary cannot see and accept her heart’s desire—Moses’s tenderness.

However, while there is pure love in the affair between Velutha and Ammu in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), the relationship between Mary and Moses is unable to reach a culmination because of Mary’s learned hatred for the Black servant, Moses, and in return his manipulative attitude with Mary, a white mistress. He compels Mary

to treat him as a human being; it is impossible for her to thrust him out of her mind like something unclean, as she had done with all the others in the past. She was being forced into contact, and she never ceased to be aware of him. She realized, daily, that there was something in it that was dangerous but what it was she was unable to define.¹³⁵

The domination of a white woman by a black man reminds us of Frantz Fanon’s insight into the black men’s desire in his book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952),

¹³⁴ Ibid. p. 189.

¹³⁵ Ibid. p. 192.

I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*. ...

By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. ...When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.¹³⁶

In *The Grass is Singing* (1950) Lessing does not make it clear whether Mary and Moses have sex. If Mary complies with Moses's wishes and caring, it is not because she wants them whole-heartedly; it is more because she is completely helpless in front of Moses's caring. The omniscient narrator informs us that "she [watches] her actions from one point of view only; would they allow Moses to strengthen that new human relationship between them, in a way she could not counter, and which she could only try to avoid."¹³⁷ So, even when Mary consents to Moses's offer of help, she does it out of fear. Her inability to take care of her clothes and her hair shows the fatal destruction of Mary's self-control. Moses, by nurturing Mary as if she is not an adult woman but a child, is also destroying Mary's individuality in the same way that white people have done to the black people. In fact, Moses admits that by his manipulating power he has defeated Dick a long time ago and now by killing Mary he has defeated Tony Marston, another white man; who tried to save Mary from his power.

However, it is not only racial issues but the childhood memory of her sexually abusive father that makes Mary a prey to Moses. Mary's first attraction towards Moses's body was devoid of any racial tension or traumatic memories. Out of hundreds of natives,

¹³⁶Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove, 1952. p. 63.

¹³⁷ Doris. Lessing. *The Grass is Singing*. op. cit. p. 193.

his strong body draws her attention. But later, as Moses starts to manipulate her in a fatherly tone, memory of her father's sexual advances towards her makes her imbalanced. For a white woman to be involved in a relationship with a black man is as forbidden as incestuous relationship is. This is the reason, Moses's closeness and tenderness always reminds Mary of her father. The more she gives in to Moses's commands, the more she remembers the suffocating moments with her father. She starts having nightmares about her father and Moses. Linda Schierse Leonard reports in her experiment based book *The Wounded Woman: Healing the Father-Daughter Relationship* that women with "injured relationships to their fathers" dream about a "perverted old man."¹³⁸ This "perverted" image in Mary's dreams controls her emotions more than what is inspired by Moses' direct presence. Leonard explains this as follows:

The perverted man was able to control her and keep her out of meaningful relationship only because she gave him the power through her innocence and lack of feminine assertion, through the fact that she remained passive and dependent, enacting the girl rather than the self-confident woman ... Women who as young girls have been subjected to sexual abuse or even rape by older men have experienced this perversion ... in a most severe way. As a result their self-confidence has usually been severely damaged, and if one looks deep within one can find the perverted old man, a torturing, negative animus continuing that abuse.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Linda Schierse Leonard. *The Wounded Woman: Healing the Father-Daughter Relationship*. Boston: Shamvala, 1983. P. 85.

¹³⁹ Ibid. p. 91.

This finding by Leonard clarifies the relation between Mary's dream images with Moses as real person. She has always remained a girl and never could be self independent woman and thereby the weakness of her heart develops this terrible father image like a Frankenstein killing the owner day by day. During Dick's illness, when Moses was sleeping in Dick's room and Mary in the next room, for the first time sleeping too close to a native; Mary imagines that she can smell the scent of natives, which she associated with the traumatic memory of her father when he "held [her] down in the thick stuff of his trousers- the unwashed masculine smell she always associated with him. She struggled to get her head free, for she was half-suffocating, and her father held it down, laughing at her panic."¹⁴⁰

On the other hand, she also finds Moses different from her father. At one point she dreams that

[Moses] approached slowly, obscene and powerful, and it was not he, but her father who was threatening her. They advanced together, one person, and she could smell, not the native smell, but the unwashed smell of her father. It filled the room, musty, like an animal; [...]. He came near and put his hand on her arm. It was the voice of the African she heard, he was comforting her because of Dick's death, consoling her protectively; but at

¹⁴⁰ Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*. op. cit. p. 201.

the same time it was her father menacing and horrible, who touched her in desire.¹⁴¹

According to Freud, dream is the reflection of the unconscious. So reading the above passage we can understand that Mary finds consolation in the way Moses takes care of her. But failing to resolve the dilemma, Mary becomes more vulnerable. She realizes that

Dick became to her, as time went by, more and more unreal; while the thought of the African grew obsessive. It was a nightmare, the powerful black man always in the house with her, so that there was no escape from his presence. She was possessed by it, and Dick was hardly there to her.¹⁴²

She becomes more and more confused about Moses. With the help of Tony Marston, the Englishman who comes to take the responsibility of Dick's farm, she even fires the boy. Again guilty feelings keep haunting her and she becomes sure that Moses will come to kill her. Pathetically, she understands her too strong feelings for him only at the last moment. She was about to explain it to Moses but at that very moment Moses kills her. This sudden self realization can be compared with Anna Karenina's feelings. When out of her confusion and frustration she wants to commit suicide, at the very last she comes to her senses and feels the urge to save herself. But she could not save herself from the coming train. Anna and Mary's dilemma makes me think that since a woman cannot assert her decisions in her life, it becomes really difficult for her to resolve the

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 204.

¹⁴² Ibid. p. 206.

according to social or patriarchal rules and is rarely allowed to choose her own path. So, both consciously and unconsciously she thinks about how others will judge her action and thereby often refrains from accepting her inner wishes.

Conclusion:

Lack of autonomy can make a woman vulnerable to the social gaze which can destroy her inner strength. In spite of leading a free life for fifteen years, Mary cannot continue with her free life. Her loneliness, sexuality, poverty-stricken married life and her attraction towards a black man make her life so complicated that she does not find a way out of it. So far I have tried to explain how the helpless situations of women in almost all aspects of life destroy their inner self in such a way that they can no longer function as a rational human being.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the last three chapters I have come to the conclusion that it is social oppression that creates madness in a woman. As soon as a girl child is born she is under the surveillance of the society. The domination of males has continued for such a long time that women themselves have internalized the male gaze. And even if they are saved from the internalization of this gaze, society compels them to comply with social norms.

In the first chapter, we saw that Pecola, an adolescent girl, is a victim of racism and class discrimination. This suffering started in the lives of her parents. Cholly and Pauline, her father and mother respectively, had gone through the same humiliation Pecola had to face in her life. Therefore, her parents fail to provide a better life to her. Like her parents she internalizes the white gaze. The wounds in her heart get deeper. Rejection from her school and the people in her neighborhood leave her alone in the world as she does not have any warm and protective bonding with her family. She is completely destroyed when Cholly rapes her. Since Pecola is an adolescent girl, a phase when children have all kinds of fantasies, she finds her imaginary world as the only place of refuge from the problems of identity in the real world.

In the second chapter I have tried to show that when social restrictions hamper Esther's creativity, it makes her lose her self-confidence. Losing her identity as a creative writer meant in her case, losing her identity. losing oneself totally, so Esther becomes obsessed with suicide. She assumes death is better than not being able to write a

to go through for being a woman. I have also tried to demonstrate that since a woman is taught either to devalue her body or to value it according to the male gaze, ultimately she becomes unsure about her own creative works, as we see Esther needed a whole year to come up with an answer to defend her poems to Buddy.

From the third chapter, it can be concluded that when an adult woman lacks autonomy like Mary in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950) she becomes doomed to lose her rationality. This chapter has discussed the destructive impact of racism and class distinction on a woman's sexuality, as a way to oppress the psyche of a woman regardless of class and race. Here also, I have come to the conclusion that a woman's sexuality is one of the main reasons for her neurosis. Sometimes it is sexual abuse that makes her mad and sometimes it is both her sexual abuse and repression of sexual desires that result in mental imbalance.

Thus, I would like to conclude the paper with the remark that madness is a cry for help from women and a cry for freedom. It is a cry to convey the message that they too need to be seen as a human being not merely as a sexual being. She needs the opportunity for sexual expression just as a man does. So, the struggle to establish a better and more equal life for woman has to deal with the complex issue of female sexuality.

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