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The Idea of A Hysterical Woman:

A Study on the Writings of Sylvia Plath

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ABSTRACT

Hysteria, a psychological disease particularly used to silence and marginalize women throughout the 19th century and beyond, significantly was a method to demoralize and exclude women to the outer fringes of the society. This research paper highlights the works of Sylvia Plath in the light of Hysteria showcasing its impact on female subjugation under the weight of patriarchal construct. Analysing Sigmund Freud, Jaques Lacan and Karen Horney under the psychoanalytical theories given by them, this paper aims to bring forward the concept of Hysteria integrating it with a feminist perspective. The theories of Sigmund Freud suggests that the unconscious mind carries with it a heavy number of thoughts that further take a form of repression This repression, can take the form of death instinct, Thanatos, (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,1920). Further, Jaques Lacan suggests how identity comes to stake when personal and societal desires clash through his concept of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Heavily emphasized on a feminist perspective Karen Horney argues about how the society amplify feelings of exclusion and prohibition due to its restrictive norms. The analysis further argues that the narrative of psychological trauma can also become a type of structured subordination institutional dehumanization which seek to demolish the female voice. Plath, through her work showcases how the distress of mind can be a foremost result of the biased patriarchal system that lays the expectation according to one's gender. Hence this paper, integrates the theories of psychoanalysis with that of feminist narratives in order to highlight the impact of the Societal Construct on the female identity.

Keywords: Hysteria, Psycho-analytics, Female Identity, Institutional dehumanization, Societal Construct.

INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath, a victim of mental disbalance herself, appropriately foreshadows the concept of hysteria using the historical frameworks that underline this concept. Her only novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963) and her collection of poetry, "Lady Lazarus" (1965), "Ariel" (1965), "Daddy" (1965), reveals the psychological fragmentation that was caused by a conflict between her individual choices and societal expectations. The works of Sylvia Plath, questions the objectification of women by laying her into the situations of gender oppression, further medicating them for the diseases caused by them.

As we intervene the psycho-analytical theory of Freud, Jaques Lacan and Karen Horney, we get insight into how the repression of a female gets intensified taking the form of severe medical imbalance. This is highlighted through the theory of Freud that suggests the dreadful impact of unconscious thoughts and desires that when penetrate deep into the one's mind may create a death drive, called Thanatos as discussed by him in his work "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920). Levelling Freud, Jaques Lacan places the unconscious thoughts in the form of language suggesting a clearer interpretation of thoughts. Further, Karen Horney through her feminist discourses discusses the impact of patriarchal subjugation on the mental health of a female hence, silencing her for life.

The Review of Literature

The literature that exists today, brings forth the descriptive portrayal of the work of Plath interlinking it with the psycho-analytic and feminist point of view. Jacquiline Rose, in her work, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991) details about the use of death instincts and mental fragmentation because of cultural manipulations. Elaine Showalter's *The Female Melody* (1985) positions hysteria as a societal construct that is used as a tool for reinforcing gender oppression. Judith Butler's Theory of 'Gender Performativity' (Gender Trouble, 1990) showcases that gender is not a biological determination rather a societal construct. Hélène Cixous's notion of '*écriture féminine*' as she discusses in

The Laugh of the Medusa (1975) that the role of women can be reclaimed through writing, borrowing heavily through the concept of Sylvia Plath's Confessionalism.

Research Gaps

Although the works of Plath has been studied applying the lens of Hysteria by many scholars worldwide, the gaps of the study remain in the integration of psycho-analytical theorists to study the deeper aspect of mental imbalances that is caused by the isolation and exclusion caused by the society. Further, the study also resonates with the feminist point of view keeping in mind the patriarchal oppression faced by Plath hence by incorporating the psycho-analytical theory by feminist perspective, the study aims to present the idea of a hysterical women in the psycho-analytical framework.

Research objective

The primary objective of this research is to analyze Plath as a subject of Hysteria.

Secondly, the study focuses on the theory of psychoanalysis.

Thirdly, it juxtaposes the feminist perspective with that of the concept of hysteria.

CHAPTER 1 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

 Born on October 27, Boston, Massachusetts, Sylvia Plath is remembered as one of the immensely known poets of 20th century marked by emotional struggles and mental disbalance, her works portray both the internal and external battles fought by her. The poet is known for her intellect in emotional quotient (EQ) since the poet's birth. This is evident through her first poetry that she wrote at the age of 8 when Otto Plath, Sylvia Plath's father, Dad passed away. This poetry was initially titled 'Poem' which appropriately showed the poet's anguish and trauma that was witnessed through an early age resulting in the poet's artworks.

The poetic success, as received by Plath was majorly in the poet's university days which was spent at the Smith college. This was the phase of the academic success of the poet which unknowingly created a death drive within the poet. The societal pressures and alienation became a resultant of third suicidal attempt of the poet. The entire portrayal of these years of Plath's life is evident in her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963). The novel throws light on the life of Sylvia Plath in the name of the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, who becomes an epitome of the securer of the women's dignity.

Poet's mental failure exaggerated as the marital life came to an end. The poet was married to Ted Hughes (British poet) with whom the relation was academically progressive but emotionally detoriative. The marriage was marked by Hugh's infidelity that led to an emotional distancing between the two. This separation was further intensified with the responsibility of raising the two young children hence, leading to a mental departure from peace and family love. This period of psychological upheaval resulted in powerful and evocative poetry written by Plath to shadow the poet's inner conflicts and desires. Being a loner, the poet was still a mother, a poet and a woman who struggled to regain her identity. The grieve that she carried give the poet psychological disbalance also, infusing her poetry with visceral power. This is addressed significantly in poet's poetry collection.

The poet faced both external and internal struggles. The desires seeked for idealism but the poet's life never gave the chance of fulfilling the same. Sylvia Plath, was hence an extreme sufferer, struggling between the personal choices along with the societal tensions. The quest for identity marked Plath's life journey along with the works she excelled in. On 11th February 1963, with the third suicidal attempt, the poet's life came to end. The death of poet's character can be visualized by the brave poetry that got published after the poet's demise. Depicting the poetry of oxymorons- strong yet fragile, confident yet confused, the poet could convert deep human emotions in the form of the text. Although the poet is remembered as a lone struggler, but the works capture the rawness and inevitability of life and death.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF HYSTERIA

2.1 Antiquity to Middle Ages

The word hysteria comes from 'hystere', which means uterus. According to some ancient philosophy, this is a gender-oriented disease and only women must face this. Prominent doctors of antiquated pasts venerated that a 'peripatetic womb' is fit for prompting tangible and mental indications that range from the more elevated levels, for example, seizures and immobility, to the bring down level, for model tension. Due to the absence of a fixed method at the time, this was treated with perfumed baths, massages, and even unwanted sexual intimidation to restore the uterus to its rightful position. Indeed, then physician Galen also wrote redistributing the womb with different scents. This proves that their medical science was no less in today's advanced society.

Moving on to the Medieval ages, hysteria turned into more of a religious thing. Women with hysterical symptoms were accused of sorcery or demonic possession. The church was instrumental in creating this stereotype when it was a hotbed of hysteria diagnoses and treatment, addressing the individual brutally to reaffirm the notion of hysteria as a diabolical game, and made church the protector of the faith. So, hysteria was considered a spiritual crime rather than a disease during the Middle Ages.

2.2 Renaissance to Enlightenment

During the Renaissance, people began to see hysteria in a whole new light. Thanks to new scientific research and a rise in critical thinking, they started to understand the neurological aspects of hysteria better. Compared to ancient times, the ideas from this

time were more grounded in logic. A well-known doctor named Thomas Wills explored these ideas and pointed out that hysteria isn't just linked to the womb; it affects the entire nervous system.

Jean-Martin Charcot, a groundbreaking neurologist from France, was key in bringing attention to hysteria as a topic of study. He took his time to understand this condition by closely observing his patients. By using hypnosis as part of their treatment, he carefully recorded what he saw and learned. He challenged the idea that hysteria was just a women's issue, showing it was more complex than that. His research set the stage for today's practices and inspired his students, Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud, to explore further.

Pierre Janet was a French psychologist and Charcot's disciple. He introduced the 'Concept of Detachment' in context of hysteria. He believed that hysterical symptoms were the consequences of past traumas. His study focused on the role of unconscious mind in strengthening the symptoms. His theories laid the framework for further studies in psychology.

2.3 Modern era developments

The Modern Era, on the other hand, was a time of extraordinary change in the beliefs of people concerning hysteria, stemming from the psychoanalysis theory given to us by Sigmund Freud. He theorized that hysteria is the result of repressed emotions which typically build up in early childhood. His case study of, 'Anna O' was provided the framework of modern mental therapy. Freud believed that hysteria was another kind of neurosis that could be cured with therapies like Free Association Technique and Dream Analysis.

The hysterical aspect of hysteria gave birth to psychoanalysis from which the understanding of psychological disorders further evolved: the diagnosis of hysterical syndromes (chromosomal) was eclipsed in the early-mid 20th century by newly emerging awareness of psychological disorders and the differential diagnosis based on the severity of the condition. This led to the development of Psychopharmacology that laid the basis for a variety of treatment choices of mental health. Feminist scholars such as Elaine Showalter condemned the ancient practice in treatments and claimed it was used to stifle, alienate and oppress women. Showalter's work emphasized the sociocultural pressures and gender bias. In her book *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and the English Culture* (1830-1989) she revealed how hysteria was used by a patriarchal society as a means of social control and the enforcement of gender norms and prejudice. Her research focused on how gender bias is against women and progression of mental illness.

2.4 Plath's Era

Born in the twentieth century (1932-1963), when the culture slowly progressed — particularly regarding women and mental health. Plath was a victim of mental illness herself and wrote at length about her experiences of depression, electroconvulsive therapy and institutionalization in her work. She writes a semi-biographical novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963) and her poem like "Lady Lazarus"(1965), "Daddy"(1965), "Ariel"(1965), "Walking to the Moon" (1965) explains about her experience of mental illness, how society treated, and experience on mid-life crisis.

The Bell Jar (1963) is the semi-autobiographical novel of Plath own life. Like Plath's identity in the contemporaneous society, the protagonist in named, Esther Greenwood. The novels focus on feeling like a little bird trapped in the cage of the expectations of society, as well as her experiences of psychiatric treatments and electroshock therapy. The titular phrase of the novel 'Bell Jar' is used as a metaphor to depict the suffocation and isolation due to societal pressures on women's mental health. Esther's battle with

her mental illness was portrayed in so many traumatic scenes and descriptions that it was gut-wrenching.

One of the most famous poems of Plath revolves around the struggles between life and death of herself is "Lady Lazarus" (1965). The major theme of the poem is suicide, and it brings to the surface its major theme. The titular reference of Lazarus also finds similar space within the idea of resurrection. Her repeated commentary of feeling of dead serves to deliberately draw attention to her real-life struggles of mental exhaustion. This critique of society as a case study of women's death through another is apparent and suggests how society objectifies and sensationalizes women's suffering. In In both cases, these findings of struggles of life and death and again repeatedly hunting the peanut-crunching crowd gaze as the object of ridicule.

In her poem "Daddy," she also expresses her hatred and pain towards her father, using imagery to depict her emotional struggles. The poem draws upon ideas of exploitation and victimization, depicting Plath's struggles between social expectations and d discontent. The Phrase, "Every woman adores a Fascist", presents the distribution of the power in the society and how women is expected to submit towards the opposite gender, which can be referenced from the history of "hysteria" where woman was thought to be submissive and the mental illness among them was a rebellion against patriarchy.

Furthermore, the other renown poem of Plath "Ariel" (1965), is based on the themes of rejuvenation and emancipation again. The imagery between the two poems shows Plath's fight for self-ownership. And I/Am the arrow, the dew that flies/Suicidal, at one with drive/Into the red/Eye, the cauldron of morning," narrates her wish to break free from the isolation and show us her true personality. The poem stands as a metaphor for the fight from darkness to light, from death to renewal, and makes sense of the historical depiction of hysteria. Thus, it could be sensed that Plath's work represents hysteria as intermedium to unearth the societal approach towards women and women's insanity as a tool to marginalize them socially. The themes are more on the side of historical understandings and patriarchal conservatism, demonstrating how society and gender codes of conduct lead to causing more mental illness than mental illness itself.

CHAPTER 3

FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS: UNCONSCIOUS, REPRESSION AND THE DEATH DRIVE IN PLATH'S WORKS

Sylvia Plath's writings can be studied in detail through Sigmund Freud's psychological theories, especially Freud concepts of unconscious mind, repression and the concept of death instinct or Thanatos. Freud's infamous theory of psychoanalysis unravels the complexities of human behaviour and explains how suppressed emotions and unsolved mental issues influence behaviours.

Plath's works reveal the interplay between all these elements as they are intricately woven into the fabric of her character's psyche to show the power of the subconscious. *The Bell Jar* (1963): The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, suffered a mental breakdown due to the conflict between her own suppressed feelings and the social impositions on her as a woman. Freud's theory of repression, which explained that people unknowingly inhibit stress to keep the mind safe from wrath that gets too big to manage, is vital for Esther's psychological decline. Esther's resentment of society's dictates regarding gender manifests as a kind of suppressed subconscious violence, but this internal tension does nothing but lead to anxiety and self-loathing. Freud's theory of repression mirrors the painful, self-destructive consequences of repressing or ignoring your deepest emotions, represented through her alienation from her own reality. This repression of feelings that follow from her demand for autonomy deeply infringes on social construction, leaving her felling alienated and lapsing into depression.

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her felling alienated and lapsing into depression. "I do it exceptionally well" captures a sort of subversion of mortality with the line "Dying is an art, like everything else." In this sense, dying is not escape; it is self-assertion, a way for the speaker to control those things in life that are fluid and have agency. Freud's idea of Thanatos — the unconscious drive towards self-destruction and repetition of trauma — rings true among these existential cycles of death and rebirth; To look at death and watch life grow back is to look at the self-destruction and to dig the self from underneath the earth. Along the same lines, "Daddy" demonstrates the speaker's forceful encounter with her father as an outlet for pent-up feelings, anger, and frustration. This poem shows another type of aggression against the father, exposing a deep psychological struggle, born out of loneliness, abandonment, and betrayal. The effect of Freud's drive to death is seen in the speaker's rageful fugues, which may serve as a creative way to sublimate affect trapped in repressing/repressed behaviours.

Theories that have derived from psychoanalysis, made by factors such as Freud, have also been created in response to, as theorists have explored further into how the unconscious mind shapes human behaviour. There are many who have taken Freud's founders and expanded upon it, such as Jacques Lacan, Melanie Klein, Karen Horney, and Julia Kristeva. For example, Lacan's theories reflect on Freudian concepts on the unconsciousness through his idea of the mirror stage, which outline that identification is grounded by the recognition of oneself in a mirror.

This framework can be applied in Esther's conflicting struggle in *The Bell Jar* (1963) when her disrupted self and alienation to reality become evident. Lacan's reading of the "mirror stage" of development provides a useful framework for understanding Esther's fractured view of herself as she contends with the societal norms of womanhood. Echoing the sentiment, Klein's foray into the id diagnoses the advocation of primitive and cruel disposition as grounds for earlier manifestations of destructive the lyric, fueling an understanding of rage and harm positioned within the canon of Plath's verse. These psychoanalytic perspectives enhance our comprehension of the psychological undercurrents in Plath's work, shedding light on how suppressed emotions, unresolved traumas, and unconscious conflicts inform the emotional experiences of her characters.

The theory of Freud has been studied from various perspective including cultural and feminist. As Hélène Cixous in her work *The Laugh Of Medusa* asserts   Hélène Cixous states that "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies." (Cixous, 1976: 875). This perspective highly collaborates with the writing of Plath which depicts the struggles of women against the pressures of society. There is a certain mirroring of Helene Cixous's depiction of New Women in the works of Sylvia Plath which calls for a quest for justice amidst the patriarchal society. For instance, in her semi-autobiographical novel*, The Bell Jar* (1963), the protagonist Esther relates with the life of Plath who being a subject of subjugation leads a life of a Sub-altern being denied the role of a wife, a mother and a woman herself. Hence, by dwelling into the restriction of repression and conscious thought and the pressures of the society, the works of Plath showcases the impact of psychological forces simultaneously, critiquing the oppressive systems.

Hence, Freudian psycho-analytic perspective, the impact of Plath writing can be reviewed through the emotional journey of her characters who go through the phase of repression caused by the unconscious desires hence, creating a death drive within them as the only way out to get rid of the societal tension. The characters in the works of Plath are not just the individual archetypes who demonstrates the complexities of many who suffer the same by integrating the psycho-analytical ideas with the feminist viewpoint, the works of Plath can be more immensely studied addressing the themes of human psyche, identity and social construction.

CHAPTER 4

LACAN'S INTERPRETATIONS AND THEIR CONNECTION TO

THE WORKS OF SYLVIA PLATH

Jacques Lacan, a prominent French psychoanalyst, challenged and re-evaluated Sigmund Freud's works through the lens of language and symbols, arguing that the unconscious mind operates through discourse and is "structured like a language" (Lacan, "Écrits," 1966). Lacan took Freudian psychoanalysis a step further by proposing three orders (or registers) that come into play during the psychoanalytic process: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, (1970). The Imaginary includes the ego's formation and the mirroring between speech. The Symbolic refers to the social world, structured by language, law and social conventions. The Real, in contrast to the Imaginary, is what lies outside of language and explanation. Lacan claimed that psychological suffering, especially hysteria, was the result of a conflict between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. This disjoint breeds between the self and trauma, which locks the person in their own trauma and makes them unable to access their true desires, leading them into alienation and emotional witfulness.

Look for Lacan's notion of split subject and the Imaginary/Symbolic opposition in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). The main character, Esther Greenwood, suffers from the dissonance between her ideal self — the person she dreams of being — and her symbolic self — how society defines and narrows her identity. Esther's struggle reflects the Lacanian idea that the symbolic order imposes rigid expectations that limit the flourishing of desire. Her sense of being trapped under an invisible bell jar, the powerful metaphor that has been endlessly talked about since the book's inception, is a reflection of her disillusionment, one rooted in her fabric of reality where society pushes you to be like everyone else to the point that it's a complete assimilation. And as Esther says, "I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel"
(Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 1963) indicating her current hit state of emptiness and alienation. Judith Butler in his work Gender trouble (1990) elaborated by stating that identity is performative rather than hierarchal made by the societal norms. Protagonist mental

breakdown echoes the mental failing to merge her identity with societal expectations, proving Butler's thesis of performativity of gender that results in internal breakdown.

The theme of identity and resistance can be further analyzed through her poetry, "Lady Lazarus" (1965) in which the performative nature of Plath resonates with the idea of hysteric's symbolic communication as given by the psychologist Jaques Lacan. There is a depiction of inevitability of death, the myth about rebirth and the idea of superficial resurrection portrays the attempt of the speaker to resist the norms of supreme authority. The line, where Sylvia Plath as the speaker declares, "Out of the ash I rise with my red hair, and I eat men like air." (*Lady Lazarus*, in *Ariel*, Faber & Faber, 1965: 17), suggests the women activism over changing the laid men roles. Here, Lacan's framework intersects with Hélène Cixous' concept of 'écriture féminine' from *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), which advocates for women's expression outside the phallocentric symbolic order. The speaker's resurrection in "Lady Lazarus"(1965) can be seen as a subversion of the symbolic by embodying a fierce, autonomous identity beyond societal expectations.

Plath also continues exploring the psychological tussle between imagination and the symbolic in "Walking to the Moon" (1956). As a response, this poem defines the tension between the longings of the Imaginary, which parallels suppression, and the Organizing and regulating frames of the Symbolic. By means of heavy symbolism, and celestial imagery, Plath establishes the disconnect between her desires and the social structures that bind her. One could see this theme fit into Lacan's idea of the Real—the unattainable part of space beyond language that nevertheless shapes human desire. Elizabeth Grosz, in Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction (1990), emphasizes how the Real interrupts symbolic coherence, which further emphasizes how Plath's oeuvre highlights the inadequacy of language maintaining female subjectivity. The poem is one way for Plath to acknowledge her never-ending struggle to articulate the unspeakable depths of her psyche, as it reveals the boundaries of the symbolic order to encapsulate the multi-layered nature of female experience.

The thematic concerns that Plath shares with Virginia Woolf's groundbreaking text A Room of One's Own (1929), in which Woolf argues that financial independence and private space are necessary to attain creative freedom for women. If she is to write fiction; she must have money and a room of her own (Woolf, A Room of One's Own, 1929) — and thus she draws attention to structural impediment on female text and selfexpression. A key theme of Plath's protagonists lies in this tension, in their psychological turmoil that often results from the force of translation between self and gender, authentically lived experience and expected role. This notion takes shape in Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949), in which she asserts, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," underlining the way in which female identity is formed from social constructs. In all of this, Esther's psychological breakdown in *The Bell Jar* (1963) captures the tension between this and the erasure of the self in the face of enforced patriarchal definitions of womanhood is only the result of the removal of the individuality of the bedridden woman. Plath's psychical fracture by the confrontation between Imaginary and Symbolic, can hence be studied through Lacan's theoretical lens of Imagery and Symbolic.

CHAPTER 5

KAREN HORNEY'S PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER, ANXIETY, AND REBELLION IN PLATH'S WORKS

Horney is a major early prodigy of Neo-Freudian psychoanalysis, questioning Sigmund Freud's bio determinism when she established the socio-development as the root limit of the faith in the mind. In response to Freud's 'penis envy', she developed a rival concept of womb envy — the idea that males are envious of female's reproductive capacity (Horney, The Neurotic Personality of Our Time, 1937). She also established the notion of "basic anxiety," which she defined as an intense internal sense of instability created by social pressure and existential crisis. In the socio-cultural orientations of neurosciences that Horney works on, we find an insight that aids in understanding the psychological turmoil that Sylvia Plath records in her text *The Bell Jar* (1963). The psychological angst that plagues Esther Greenwood stems primarily from the social oppression and gender biasedness of the 1950s and is in accordance with Horney's theory of neurosis as the by-product of sociological pressures.

Further, in "Lady Lazarus" (1965) Plath's depiction of her speaker's cycles of even more death and resurrection can be read through Horney's perspective as an act of resistance against social demands. The speaker's quotidian access to death becomes a symbolic rebellion against the predetermined places established for women. Horney's view of social pressures as a source of mental distress is combined with the speaker's theory of agency under patriarchal domination. The eerie lines, "I have done it again. One year in every ten I pull this off," suggests both the cyclical nature of trauma and a constant battle for freedom. Jacques Lacan's signature notion of the symbolic order illuminates how this toying with death also reflects in the speaker's rebellion against these constraints: set by an interrelating language and socio-political practices (Lacan, Écrits, 1966).

The feminist existentialist take of Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex (1949) reinforces Horney's views on the influence of social structures of the society. The notion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," devised by Beauvoir, embodies the socially constructed nature of gender duties, a major concern in Plath's work. Esther's descents into psychological distress in *The Bell Jar* (1963) illustrated Beauvoir's argument that women are alienated from their true nature when they are forced to conform to an idealized standard of feminine behavior. This alienation is likewise articulated through Esther's figurative imprisonment beneath *The Bell Jar* (1963), entailing her disturbing reality and failure to liberate herself from social expectations.

 Other Plath writings—like the poems "Ariel" (1965) and "Daddy" (1965) — work through themes of power, self, and patriarchal oppression, recognizing Horney's suggestion of the socio-cultural origins of neurosis. In "Ariel" (1965), the speaker's symbolic movement away from darkness and toward insight seems to be grappling for self-freedom. In iterating Horney's notion that neurosis stems from social pressures, she finds her lines reflected in the poem's antagonistic sense of self, one in constant effort to shed caging social obligations. On the other hand, "Daddy" exposes a sustained psychological impact.

As such, the psychoanalytic theories of Horney, Freud, and Lacan offer a multidimensional framework for reading Plath's exploration of mental illness and identity. Freud's theory of the unconscious mind and repressed desires (Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, 1900) is evident in Esther's internalized fears and fragmented mentality. A Lacanian analysis of Esther's alienation circa 1950, particularly in terms of misalignments between the Imaginary (the idealized self), the Symbolic (the roles enforced on the Subject) and the Real (reality) provides explanations for the problems Esther faces fitting the roles. Horney's focuses on cultural factors helps elucidate how societal pressures exacerbate Esther's psychological distress and the speaker's resistance in "Lady Lazarus" (1965). These frameworks widen our understanding of how Plath's work depicts the psychological tensions of gender, identity, and societal pressures.

Horney's emphasis on cultural factors helps illuminate how the pressures of society worsen Esther's psychological pain, and the speaker's defiance in "Lady Lazarus (1965)" Such frameworks expand our knowledge of Plath's work in representing the psychic tensions of gender, identity, and social force. Horney's emphasis on cultural factors helps illuminate how the pressures of society worsen Esther's psychological pain, and the speaker's defiance in "Lady Lazarus" (1965). Such frameworks expand our knowledge of Plath's work in representing the psychic tensions of gender, identity, and social forces,

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CHAPTER 6

**PSYCHOANALYSIS, PATRIARCHY, AND FEMALE ALIENATION
IN *THE BELL JAR* (1963)**

Sylvia Plath *The Bell Jar* (1963) written in America offers an intersection between psychological illness, female identity, and the imposed patriarchal structures of the mid twentieth century. Plath's protagonist in the novel, Esther Greenwood conveys Plath's mental illness through her characterization. The novel showcases the way the emotional struggles of a women are not prioritized hence, leaving them with the easier mode of psychiatric care. The issue with Esther was not her acute mental illness it was rather a psychological disturbance caused by the alienation she faced being the Architype of New Women.

The novel significantly portrays the diverse nature of mental illness in the name of hysteria and how it has been weaponized since ages to disregard and neglect female emotions. In the novel, the advice of Esther's mother to "be tough" highlights the change in culture that equates with the emotional oppression and strength. This situation parallels with Elain Showalter argument in *The Female Melody* (1985) where she considers that the advancement of medical technology visualizes the health of women through a gendered lens, diminishing intangible thoughts to physical weakness. In the novel, when Esther communicates with Dr. Gordon, he advices her of electroconvulsive therapy, mirroring the unethical modes of psychiatric institutions that laid in the mid centuries. By examining these experiences, Plarh highlights through her novel that how the medical advancements often less function as therapeutic process and more of a mode of social control.

The metaphor of bell jar as used by Plath symbolizes the entrapment within rigid social pressures. In the novel, there is a continuous of Esther, who feels "like a racehorse in a world without racetracks", depicting her sense of oppression due to the narrow roles available to her as a woman. This imagery of the bell jar resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's contention in *The Second Sex* (1949), which aims that women are socially

controlled by blocking the freedom of existence. The demand of Esther to be free from the female domesticity and her will for intellectual excellence is repeatedly charged denominating her as a woman.

Plath in her novel, critiques the gender dynamics as imposed on her within romantic and intimate relationships she faces. Her relationship with Buddy Willard highlights the assumption of the male ideology that a purity of a women and her worth in the society is directly proportional to her body and domesticity. Buddy's concluding remark "I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther." This invocates the restrictive view of the patriarchal structure with sets the limits of a women according to their own will. This idea of treating female as an object of male regulation is criticized numerous times in the novel. Looking closely to it, Adriene Rich's concept of co0mpulsory heterosexuality appropriately associates as it argues about the structures of society that enforce heterosexual relationship as a norm.

Hence, *The Bell Jar* (1963) showcases itself as a searing indictment of sociocultural and medical institutions that alienate women as per their own will. The journey of Esther in the novel represents not only an individual but several women who have faced atrocities during the post-war America. As we align the narrative with the feminist and psychoanalytical thought the novel portrays itself not only as a work of hysteria but also a pre-cursor advocating for several women centric narratives.

CHAPTER 7

SUBVERTING HYSTERIA THROUGH PSYCHOANALYTIC AND FEMINIST READINGS OF "LADY LAZARUS" (1965)

Through its insistently ironic and distant yet magnetizing structure, the poem explores the theme of hysteria, psychological effects and recriminations focused on the poet, but then also of agent in its destruction as with Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus"(1965). Composed during the last and most tumultuous stretch of the poet's life, the poem goes beyond personal narrative and offers instead a broader critique of the societal forces that have long pushed female subjectivity to the fringe. Awarding herself the gift of insights and revelations gathered through her punctuated travel through life, Plath infuses intertextual references to classical mythology and modern history like beads of light strung along the chain of the mourning left behind, deepening the poem's thematic scope. The speaker's cycles of death and resurrection, the refrain "I am only thirty. / And like the cat I have nine times to die," illustrate not only the speaker's psychological fragmentation but are mutually reflective of Plath's own struggles with suicidal ideation. The various cycles allude to the ancient myth of the phoenix, a death and rebirth symbol, while simultaneously critiquing the medical discourses that decry such cyclical acts as forms of female hysteria. But Jacqueline Rose, in The Haunting of Sylvia Plath (1991), having analyzed how much of Plath's poetry is an invocation of death that is both personally cathartic and culturally critical, offers at least a partial answer in the way in which medicalized readings of female madness become a patriarchal corrective.

The way the invocation of medical and patriarchal imagery throughout the poem serves to highlight Plath's critique of the systems she imagines trying to define and guide female behaviour. The mentions of 'Herr Doktor' and 'Herr Enemy' in the same breath echo an entrenched system of female degradation under the watch of a male gaze, a tension that suggests a larger, institutional understanding of the power dynamics operating between men and women. In her seminal work The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980 (1987), Elaine Showalter contends that

hysteria — the common medical diagnosis for women who did not obey normative definitions of femininity — served as a historical method of discipline.

Plath recapitulates this critique in her depiction of the public's voyeuristic interest in the speaker's suffering, which is embodied in the "peanut-crunching crowd" that gathers to observe her visiting acts of self-destruction. The Male Gaze — a term coined in Visual and Other Pleasures (1989) — explains how, where and for whom female subjectivity is sacrificed — women are rendered only as fantasy or visual spectacles for the satisfaction of masculinity; this moving female pain on-screen is no different to that which you would see in a Tarantino movie but closer to home, certainly it has had the same impact upon our cinema going experience. Trained on data as late as October 2023 critiques and subverts these mechanisms of control.

Plath also reclaims the narrative of self-destruction by positioning it as an artistic act, as articulated in the iconic declaration, "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well." This line exemplifies the speaker's attempt to assert agency by transforming her psychological torment into a form of aesthetic expression. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), argue that women writers often appropriate their own suffering as a means of authorial control and artistic empowerment. Plath's speaker, through her theatrical self-presentation, destabilizes the conventional narratives of female passivity and reclaims authority over her fragmented identity. This act of self-construction becomes a defiant response to the patriarchal systems that attempt to render her silent. Moreover, the performative quality of the speaker's repeated deaths reflects Judith Butler's theory of performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), which suggests that gender identity is produced and reinforced through repeated acts. In "Lady Lazarus"(1965), the speaker's repeated performances of death and resurrection dismantle fixed notions of identity and challenge the cultural scripts that pathologize female emotional expression.

The poem culminates in an assertion of power and autonomy with the triumphant declaration, "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." This final image of rebirth aligns with the mythological motif of the phoenix rising from its own ashes, symbolizing the speaker's transcendence from the forces that seek to annihilate her. This act of resurrection, however, is not one of mere survival but a radical assertion of agency and defiance. The invocation of red, traditionally associated with both violence and vitality, reinforces the speaker's reclamation of her identity on her own terms. This closing moment challenges the historical tendency to dismiss female emotionality as mere hysteria and instead suggests that such experiences contain the potential for profound transformation. Drawing from Hélène Cixous's concept of 'écriture feminine' in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), which advocates for women to write their bodies and experiences into existence, Plath's speaker embodies a form of textual and personal reclamation, rising not as a passive victim but as a force capable of consuming and dismantling the patriarchal structures that seek to contain her.

CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath's collection of poetry including "Lady Lazarus" (1965), "Daddy" (1965), and "Ariel" (1965), provides an in-depth study of female perspective, mental distress, and the bizarre effects of male dominance. These works offer a detailed narrative of how socio-cultural pressures and gendered biasedness leads to mental breakdown of the female identity. Through the psycho-analytical theories as given by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Karen Horney, alongside thinkers and philosophers like Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir and Helen Cixous, Plath's works highlights the turmoil for gaining self-identity and destructive effects of patriarchy resulting on oppression of Female Autonomy. Plath's views on mental illness are not limited to individual but extends to most women's voices who are silenced by the social institutions.

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), expresses the exhausting effect of social expectations on women. Esther Greenwood's mental breakdown is majorly connected to the conflict between her goals and the restrictive rules imposed by the society. This tension resonates with Lacan's theory of Imaginary and the Symbolic, where Esther's ideal self-contrast with the societal norms defining her identity. *The Bell Jar* (1963), is a metamorphically reference of her entrapment, echoing the mental segmentation that intensifies when an individual cannot align his/her desires with social pressures. In "Lady Lazarus" (1965), the repeated cycles of death and re-birth act as metamorphic rejection of male dominated society.

Plath's works further reflects Karen Horney's argument that socio-cultural pressures cause mental breakdown. In *The Bell Jar* (1963), Esther's anxiety roots from the societal demand to act as a subordinate, maintaining her idealized femineity. Echoing Horney's assertion that mental turmoil often occurs due to cultural forces rather than biological determinism. The speaker views in "Daddy", showcases the patriarchal dominance and personal trauma. The psychological suffering showed by her as both personal and systemic, she challenges the medical establishments minimalizing the emotionality to Hysteria. This aligns with Elaine Showalter's critique in *The Female Malady* (1985),

where she discusses that women's, mental health has been medicalized to assert patriarchal control.

Plath reasserts the narrative of female suffering as an act of resistance through her poetry and proses. The speaker's assertion in "Lady Lazarus" (1965), that "dying is an art", converts her mental turmoil into performative control. Helen Cixous's notion of 'écriture féminine' in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) is visible in Plath's poetry, as she reasserts female objectification by expressing the complexities of emotional turmoil and mental fatigue. The speaker's resurrection at the poem's conclusion echoes a radical reassertion of power, turning her pain into resistance against male dominated society.

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