Individual Mobility and the Sense of “Deadlock”: A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar

Azhar Noori Fejer and Rosli Talif

Abstract

Individual mobility is an outcome of the rapid changes in life; it is revealed in particular literary works within the end of the 19th century. Mobility is clearer in modern time as the individual has become physically freer in his movement. But the individual's freedom is often conditioned by restrictions. Usually, change stimulates individuals to obtain new structure of feeling; the individual mocks or rages against institutions, or he would comply, suffering rapid personal deterioration as he faces effective stability or institutions. There is a continuous sense of “deadlock.” Sylvia Plath’s novel reflects the depression of an intellectual young woman who fails to find her right path muddied by an inconsistent, confusing world around. The opposing ideas and standards imposed on women depress and alienate the protagonist from the world leading her to an eventual attempt at suicide. The variable values the character has to adjust, the protagonist’s reaction toward these values, and her sense of “deadlock” are the subject of the present article.

Keywords

individual mobility, structure of feeling, female character, opposing values

Introduction

The advance of the 20th century witnessed the first leading steps toward change in woman status, with women writers, artists, activists, and workers paving new ways for generations of women to follow, and keeping the struggle for equal rights and recognition going on. World War II had caused significant social changes particularly in attitudes toward proper gender roles, which has vividly changed in some parts of the United States, and it continued to affect women’s lives into the mid of the century. Women redefined their roles in almost every social, political, and cultural sphere. Thousands of women, most of them married, had joined the labor force and enjoyed the new employment patterns. They were convinced—through the media and government propaganda, that they could retain their femininity and still hold men’s jobs. Women's work was considered a national necessity and a patriotic duty. Meanwhile, the war gave women—as a group, a chance for better education as they needed to fill college seats to keep colleges open. This experience enabled them to find a degree of self-definition they had never known before. But when war ended, men came back and desired to reoccupy their roles as leaders and breadwinners, so traditional roles were reaffirmed. Many women were fired and removed from their jobs, and that caused much irritation and indignation.

Social and Historical Effect of the Cold War

The political situation never settled for the Cold War was another war Americans had to undertake during the 1950s. In the years between 1947 and 1953, the “line dividing East from West, Left from Right, was carved deep into European cultural and intellectual life” (Judt, 2005, p. 197). The cultural antagonism and mutual fear had provoked the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union; accordingly, “irresponsible talk by irresponsible people has fanned the flames of fear . . . suspicion has taken the place of goodwill” (Douglas, 1952). George Kennan’s letter in 1946 reflected all these sentiments as he stated that “the internal harmony of our society [will] be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure.”(http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm) The U.S. policy of “containment” began with Kennan’s

Corresponding Author:
Azhar Noori Fejer, Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti of Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: azharnoori63@yahoo.com
letter, and subsequently, an overall fear of communist “spread in politically unstable regions of the world” (Pierce, 2009). Strong efforts were made after the war to root out communism within the United States. Actually communist’s threat has been magnified and exalted to a great degree inside the country.

Political confrontations—the Cold War, was a crucial event Americans got involved in; the tense and dynamic “postwar” period was shaped by the war that had proceeded, and the powerful forces that surrounded it. Pierce indicates that after fighting a war against fascism, Americans began to view communism as another radical ideology which would ultimately become a similar threat.

The United States and the Soviet Union held completely “opposing claims of what freedom meant”; the United States’s Western Democracy was on one side, with the Soviet Union and the Soviet Bloc on the other side. Obviously, they had quite different economic philosophies—American liberalism opposed the Soviet totalitarianism. Eventually, this economic competition has “led to massive military spending by both countries” (“Cold War Influences,” 2009). The Cold War affected largely almost all American foreign and domestic policy decisions, and had both positive and negative consequences on the two countries. For instance, Americans’ involvement in the Korean and Vietnam Wars are significant examples of military interference in the name of stopping communist domination. The dispute between them turned into a global conflict for they were the dominant world powers. Although the two wars had thrown their shadow on Americans’ life, the Cold War’s cultural, political, and economic battles had much longer impact on American domestic and foreign policy.

Americans were living through a “dangerous environment . . . that created an atmosphere of paranoia throughout the world,” clarifies Pierce (2009, p. 1); the situation intensified because of adversary values between the United States’s capitalism and democracy, and the Soviet Union’s communism and authoritarianism. This war evoked a sense inside the United States to build a national community; to naturalize the relation between people and the country. Citizens had to fulfill their responsibilities of civic membership and participation. The unsettled political situation had its influence on society as a whole; however, its weight on women was seemingly more evident.

The Cold War Effect on Women’s Life

Women of the 1950s seemed to be ideally well prepared to enter the world of men having the outstanding example set by the emancipated women before the Second World War; yet, they willingly turned to seek contentment and self-fulfillment in the household with the caring mother at the center, and they were also subject to the massive influence of the media that reinforced the interest of the market. These ingredients gradually had turned into prevailing chains, which fastened thousands of women to resign to their domestic role. While the feminist movement was struggling to liberate women and achieve equity, political and social ideologies of the time were encouraging young women to seek a husband, take care of children, and maintain biological roles.

Americans imposed a particular ideology mainly on women positioning them in domestic sphere for it imagined the nation as home. They believed that once woman is placed at the center of that private sphere, she would “play a major role in defining the contours of the nation and its shifting borders with the foreign” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 582). It was a call for turning back toward home and the family to protect oneself from the so-called “enemy within.” The ideology was regarded a “warfare,” indicates Frances Stonor Saunders (1999) and defined by the government as deliberate “use by a nation of propaganda and activities other than combat”; it intended to transfer ideas and information to “influence the opinions, attitudes, emotions and behavior [sic] . . . in ways that will support the achievement of national aims” (p. 4).

Everything was made easy for women so long they stayed within the domestic sphere. Actually, they were, to some extent, forced to spend their lives at home to protect their children and their families from communist threat.

Although women in the 1950s enjoyed the achievements of First Wave feminism—the right to vote, to dispose her own property, and to have more access to education, woman remained confined to her home. Betty Friedan (1973), in The Feminine Mystique, described the invented “happy housewife heroine” of the 1950s saying, she was a “dream image” of the young women, and women all over the world “envy” her. She was “freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illnesses of her grandmother” (p. 18). The media always showed her to be healthy, beautiful, educated, and as having no concerns except for her husband, children, and home. She has supposedly found true feminine fulfillment. She was respected as an equal partner to man. People believed that this housewife and mother “had everything that women ever dreamed of” (p. 18). Assertively, the book uncovered, publicly and for the first time, that all these ideas were lies.

Friedan exposed that a lot of women who had accepted their prescribed role, ironically, found themselves quite discontented, excessively tired, and with no enthusiasm. Originally, the gradual change to the feminine role with the help of the education and persistent media influence seemed to be the appropriate and only choice. However, this decision bore its expected consequences; by “choosing femininity over the painful growth to full identity,” these women were “doomed to suffer ultimately that bored, diffuse feeling of purposelessness, nonexistence, non-involvement with the world that can be called anomie, or lack of identity” (p. 181). American women were actually worried and suffering and an increasing numbers were fairly not satisfied with the dull routine of their lives.

Few years later, Kate Millett (1970/2000) argued feminist issues academically; she had originated a radical feminism stance indicting that all relationships between men and
women were based on patriarchal power. She clarified that the “mythic version” which attributes “human suffering, knowledge, and sin” to the female was “still the foundation of sexual attitudes, for it represent[ed] the most crucial argument of the patriarchal tradition in the West” (p. 52). She clarified that the new women’s movement was likely “to ally itself on an equal basis with blacks and students in a growing radical coalition” (p. 363). Millett was more political than Friedan and reached further in her stance to include all women.

For years, American women seemed to miss something; there was a hidden problem that was never uttered, indicates Friedan. That problem had no name; “The problem [was] always being the children’s mommy, or [my husband’s] wife and never being myself” (Friedan, 1973, p. 28). Many women proclaimed that they did not feel their “existence.” Apparently, women in the 1950s were no longer able to struggle. The girls and women who were instructed by the feminine mystique, explains Friedan, had rejected the right to grow up and remained stuck in their position conforming to the identity the prominent ideology prescribed to them. This caused sorrow and frustration to many women. The two former books are indication for countercultural change because they express what many women seemingly felt but could not utter. They used counterculture as a means “to help create a new political, economic and cultural society.” They clarify the issues women were challenging and suggested some necessary changes to build a better and fairly equal society (McCauley, 2009). Effectually, these two texts motivated thought and allowed people to talk.

Women were seemingly confined to a scheme that defined proper femininity as little more than domestic liberation. An intolerable conflict went on between their desire to have equal chance to work and the lack of outlets, so they rebelled against an identity that was ascribed to them. Few women preferred career and to go on in life by their own; these were “talented individuals”; however, they were rarely considered successful. Some women tried to balance between the desire to fulfill their female roles in life and their anguish to have their own individuality and career. Frequently, they lost one for the sake of the other, and in both cases, women were miserable.

**Individual Mobility**

Society lives through a changing world; hence, the social function of an individual is to use his resources to assist in making change in the pattern of society so he could face problems that arise daily. However, some individuals might not find the pattern “congenial,” explains Raymond Williams (1961/2011) in *The Long Revolution*, and they might not confirm or confirm at a heavy price to their individual desires. In other words, some would have conformity with society, whereas others show nonconformity. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams (1977) indicates that each individual has a practical consciousness; it is actually social and material kind of feeling and thinking, virtually always different from “official consciousness.” It is practical and precise quality of social experience and relationship. It gives the sense of a generation or a period and historically distinct from other particular qualities. Each individual would form a particular structure of feeling for he would sense life differently.

Mobility in the 20th century, according to Williams, is generally discussed in individual terms, and the writer is so frequently taken as an example; individual mobility is “the individual career,” and it is presented by the writer himself (Williams, 1961/2011, p. 267). A “freely individual mobile” is either “mocking or raging at the institutions which are made available to him to join,” or “he acquiesces, suffering rapid personal deterioration” (p. 268). Here, there is a continuous sense of “deadlock,” the experience of the artists is then mainly perplexing. The individual rejects the institutions of the society, but he fails to make change for he fights alone. Ernest Burgess (2008) describes mobility as the “change of movement in response to a new stimulus or situation” (Abstract) and the character to be moving influenced by different changes around him.

Affecting writers are mainly the result or a combination of individual mobility with the relative stability or institutions, and there are many literary works nowadays that take contemporary mobility as a theme. Art reflects society and acts as a social character through its reality in experience. It also creates elements which the society is unable to realize. When we compare art with its society, we will find a series of real relationships showing their depth and connection with the rest of the general life. We also find, in certain characteristic forms and devices, evidence of deadlocks and unsolved problems of the society; often admitted to consciousness for the first time in this way, indicates Williams. So the author usually reflects his new sense of life in a very realistic way showing many hidden facts about life.

The sense of sorrow, inconstancy, and depression was the general mood of the 20th century. Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), the famous American poet, had lived a comparatively unstable life. She was subject to a number of contradicting values that were imposed on women at that era. It made her, like many women in her generation, obtain a sense of loss. They were shattered between their ambition for education and a life of career and the pressures to fulfill the roles of wives and mothers imposed on them by society. This had intensified a new sense of life; it made her rage against society’s demands and reflected that experience in her sole novel, *The Bell Jar* (Plath, 1963/2005). The book “describes a problematic woman’s subjectivity and cultural positioning that still hunts poststructuralist feminist inquiry” (Cooper, 1997, p. 4). Through Esther’s character, Plath exposes much of her and other women’s worries and anxieties.

The author/narrator represents individual mobility for she is a smart, ambitious young woman living at an age when
these qualities were real liabilities for women; her problem is how to combine between being a woman and a writer at the same time. She rages against society’s restrictions imposed on her in a desperate attempt to prove her subjectivity. Her frustration to find the right path in life makes her attempt suicide when she reaches a deadlock. She is kept in a medical asylum for some time where she could be cured from her dreams of career and accepts her life as a normal woman. Seemingly, Plath had accepted the ways of her society and her chosen place in it at whatever violence to herself. Her approval turned her into a “subject.” She did so for it is her only way to maintain herself. It was through this kind of obedience that she could “eat, sleep, shelter or escape being destroyed by others.” Although it was not her way of life, she had to conform to it to survive (Williams, 1961/2011). She had confined to society’s commitments and was welcomed back to it. Yet, she later ended her life for she could not endure living so.

The main focus of this article is the heroine’s means of struggle to find identity, as well as the differences, shifts, and similarities in the description of women’s experience in relation to the changes in the social climate. It reflects women’s struggle during first wave feminism; their entrapment between their own desires on one side and political and societal commitments on the other.

The Text’s Significance, Style, and Narrative Technique

The novel is regarded as one of the most significant literary texts in American literature during the 20th century; it sets the political, social, and psychological traumas and facts of America during the Cold War. It presents brilliantly “the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and the soul-destroying effect this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high-minded young woman like Plath” (Bonds, 1990, p. 49). It views the world through Plath’s own eyes and exposes her thoughts and feeling; her fear, disgust, delight, and shock. This signifies *The Bell Jar* as an important cultural product of its age for it exposes the writer’s experience and sense of life.

In his evaluation of the text, Frederick Jameson (2002) emphasizes that “there is nothing that is not social and historical” in the text “that everything is in the last analysis political” (p. 5). The key to the writing style of Plath, which is political, comes through understanding the significance of the text and interpreting its meaning. It is a novel “that has become an exemplary work for Plath’s generation and is an intensely political novel”; it became obvious that Plath is a master of cultural critique (Kumlu, 2010, pp. 134-135). The novel signifies society that destroys the female character. The book deals with the heroine’s humanistic struggle for self-determination and power in the face of antagonistic social forces.

The novel was interpreted by generations of critics; viewing it once from a psychological perspective as a story of the writer’s mental breakdown and recovery; other time regarding it as a feminist manifesto—for feminists have taken Plath as a cause; while others saw it as a guide to her brilliant and difficult *Ariel* poems. Similar to her poetic works, many critics have related the novel to her biography.

Actually, the novel is a semi-autobiography entirely narrated in first person by Esther Greenwood; it enables us to read through the mind of the protagonist and the narrator. It deals with the transition phase of Esther from a naive adolescent to an experienced woman facing terrible experiences of life. Past memory slips into the narrative stream whenever something in the present time of the narrative causes the recollection of an associated moment. The story contains a single point of view as it is regularly adapted in this technique; however, depending on Esther’s mental condition, one must accept that there are a variety of points of view given to the reader because of Esther’s nervous breakdown, her indecisiveness, and lack of confidence. Although the novel has much similarity with Plath’s life, like any other literary work, it undoubtedly has fictitious elements presented in things that the writer has added or concealed.

Plath adopts two patterns of novelistic structure in writing the text; the plot follows “the story of confession, conversion, and healing,” as Gayle Whittier (1976) explains in his essay “The Divided Woman.” These three experiences are usually connected to each other. The subject in such kind of novels is often literally of health (mental or physical), and the “body and the psyche are both commonly regarded as cosmetically or medically perfectible,” he indicates (Whittier, 1976, p. 129). There are also elements of the mad vision, which is another subgenre of prose work; where “the vision of the insane is given full expression”; the mad, in such stories, does not hallucinate but usually envisions (Whittier, 1976, p. 129). Whittier explains that this leads to hybrid account which gives the reader the feeling of unsettlement. Esther could not be “consistent” or “monolithic”; relatively her conflicted identity is a product of her social and historical circumstances (Walker, 2000, p. vii). There is a struggle between mind and body; between the encouragement of teachers, editors, and intellectuals to build a career, on one hand, and the opposition of her counterparts and society toward woman’s intellectuality on the other.

Plath presents a combination of different female characters ranging from the highly educated intellectuals to ordinary housewives showing the daily elements of women’s ordinary lives. They are subordinate to Esther and her developing consciousness and are shown only through their effect on her as a central character. Plath places her main female character, Esther Greenwood, in circumstances parallel to her own experience in New York during the summer of 1953. The obvious similarity made Plath hesitant to publish the book in America because it would upset those whom she had caricatured (Butscherb, 1976). As a young intuitive woman, she has lived many contradictions and changes that stimulated her to sense life differently, so she obtained a new
structure of feeling. In her *Journals*, Plath (2000) reflects her state of mind saying,

My greatest trouble, arising from my basic and egoistic self-love, is jealousy. I am jealous of men . . . it is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life—his career, and his sexual and family life. I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter, it is there, insidious, malignant, latent. (September 1951)

Hence, Sylvia Plath’s focus in *The Bell Jar* is not on mental illness, but on the relationship of Esther’s personal obsession with her larger social situation; Esther is Plath’s persona. During her life, Plath was searching for happiness which she could not find. The choices she had were either marriage or career. To accept the idea of marriage, she said, “I could hold my nose, close my eyes, and jump blindly into the waters of some man’s inside,” then “One fine day I would float to the surface, quite drowned, and supremely happy with my newly found selflessness.” Finding a “Cause” was her other choice, but again ironically she imagined herself following these women in their obsession with founding clubs and organizations for “they got to feel emancipated and self important [sic] somehow” (Plath, 2000, pp. 98-100). We can say that the writer reflects certain principles of youth growing up, struggle for identity, alienation, and gradual self-discovery.

Certainly, Plath’s “dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject” (Perloff, 1972, p. 511). Plath’s book is about her family and her life, yet, it implies much larger social and political influences of her culture. The book parallels the ideology that was imposed on American culture by the Cold War. It shows that the only probable way to survive was through containment. It should rightly be known that containment was domestic more than political. Actually, an echo to the Victorian notion of the perfect ideal woman appeared again during the 1950s; a powerful image of the supportive and loyal housewife who was vicarious and selfless devoted completely to her husband and her children. Consequently, women were captivated at home, and they lost their political and social voice. Understanding the society’s concept of an ideal feminine image is crucial to comprehend Plath/Esther reaction as it thoroughly shaped the lives of both the author and her character.

**Fresh Esther Greenwood**

Esther is an attractive, talented, young woman; she has spent her life running after “good marks and prizes and grants of one sort or another” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 27). For 19 years, her main concern is confined to studying, reading, writing, and working “like mad.” She has got numerous awards and a scholarship at a prestigious women’s college. Finally, she wins a fashion magazine contest and gets a month-long job in New York. There she launches into that “civilized” society as a guest editor of *Mademoiselle*, where she goes through different experiences of urban life.

Esther is from a poor family; as a child, she lost her father who was a university teacher. Her mother teaches shorthand and typing to support the family ever since her husband’s death. She “secretly” hated the job and hates her husband too “for dying and leaving no money,” declares Esther (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 36). Here, there is an indication of Mrs. Greenwood’s dissatisfaction with the sort of life she is leading, though she hates it, she hides her feeling and keeps silent just like all other American women mentioned in Friedan’s book.

Mrs. Greenwood insists on teaching Esther shorthand; a skill learned by most scholarship girls to earn money for their study, and to support themselves after college. This skill does not meet with Esther’s aspiration, and she cannot adjust the idea totally. Conversely, Esther’s big dream is wider than an ordinary job. She seeks to win a scholarship to graduate school or a grant to study all over Europe. She wishes to be a professor, or an editor writing books of poems. Esther desires to prove her individuality. She desires to build her own career, watching distinguished female figures like her boss, Jay Cee, and her benefactress, the wealthy novelist Philomena Guinea. Esther, simultaneously, wishes to imitate her counterpart’s in their dream of falling in love from first sight, getting married and having a home.

Previously, Esther had suffered for being neglected and not favored by young men for being intellectual. When she was at the dormitory, the girls kept mocking her for she was not favored by young men for being intellectual. When she was at the dormitory, the girls kept mocking her for she was treated according to the general social values where the excessive mind in a woman was associated with defective body in a man. Usually, “the two misfits [were] then paired off as the partners of an arranged marriage, for they [were] judged as suitable for no one else” (Whittier, 1976, p. 134). Esther remembers how she hated coming downstairs sweaty-handed and curious every Saturday night and having some senior introduce me to her Aunt’s best friend’s son and finding some pale, mushroom fellow with protruding ears or buck teeth or a bad leg. I didn’t think I deserved it. After all, I wasn’t crippled in any way, I just studied too hard, I didn’t know when to stop. (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 54)

She had to reverse this idea; otherwise, she would have ended up with a crippled husband. Therefore, she decided to date Buddy Willard and, henceforth, life changed at the dormitory. The senior on her floor started speaking to her, and no more “nasty loud remarks” were made outside her room. Esther loved Buddy for 5 years before he had even noticed her. At the beginning, she was very fond of him because he was known in their town as a “fine clean boy.” He was from a fine family and he was kind to his parents and to old people in general. He was “a model person”; an athletic, handsome,
and intelligent too (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 64). Hence, he was a dream to all girls in town. Later, Esther discovered Buddy’s hypocrisy for he pretended purity while he had experiences with women; consequently, she rejected the idea of marrying him. The notion of sexual equity is brought up to discussion in the text. The author calls for equity between both genders; through Esther’s refusal to Buddy, she acclaims her right to marry a pure husband as long as she is still virgin.

Esther lives in a culture where women are encouraged to move beyond the private sphere of home, yet it puts many limitations to these options that would hinder that movement. Mass media and newspaper’s articles keep warning young women against losing chastity, and emphasizing the importance of keeping virtue. As an instance, the film Esther and the other girls watch shows how the “nice blond girl” is rewarded at the end by marrying the man she loves, while the “sexy black-haired girl” ends up “with nobody” (Plath, 1963/2005, pp. 38-39). An implied message is sent through the film; a warning to young women to disregard their physical side and emotions. A girl has two choices either to be good or bad; “she is either loved for denying her needs, or she is abandoned as punishment for exploring the world on her own, for using her unprecedented emotions and desires as a guide” (Leonard, 1992, p. 70). It is a message that Esther seems to ingest in terms of society’s view of women.

Similarly, Esther’s mother affirms this ideology when she sends her a newspaper article titled “In Defence of Chastity” written by a married woman lawyer, highlighting the differences between sexes. The woman lawyer says that man’s world and emotions are different from that of woman. It is only through marriage the two worlds and emotions can come together. A man wishes to be pure so he would deserve his pure wife, but even if he is not, he wants to be the first man in her life. A man never trusts a woman who accepts to have sex with him because he believes that she would do it with other men. The article upsets Esther for it actually does not consider sincerely “how the girl felt” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 77). It puts much emphasis on what men desire in women, but nothing is mentioned about what women wished and desired in men.

Evidently, there is also a strong echo of the mixed message conveyed to readers of women magazines shown in the text as a whole, indicates Caroline J. Smith (2010) in “The Feeding of Young Women,” as she has surveyed many magazines of the era, concentrating particularly on Mademoiselle. Plath was familiar with this magazine and many other magazines. Actually, the magazine presented its “readers with conflicting messages about their place in relation to the home” (p. 4). Garry M. Leonard (1992) also asserts that Mademoiselle contained “socially distracted guidelines for femininity,” and they might have had great impact on Plath and her fictitious female character (p. 5). These inconsistent messages confused the author, and thus her character, regarding where her proper place to be; inside (or outside) home.

Actually, the contents of that year, adds Smith (2010), were embodying conflicting messages about a woman’s “proper” place in society: “Women were, on one hand, encouraged to travel to Mexico while, on the other hand, they were admonished to stay home and learn the best way to cook a chicken,” the articles “often provide their readers with dual messages” (p. 6), sometimes encouraging women to be independent, in the meantime, present to them limited choices for achieving self-sufficiency. The magazine, in fact, contained articles and advertisements that encouraged women to pursue the traditional role of wife and mother, whereas other articles were stimulating women’s movement beyond the private sphere of the home.

Apparently, during that period more than one concept of the domestic world has been disputed and expanded. The historical situations in the period from 1940 to 1960 added to the conflicted domestic ideologies set up by women’s magazines. Esther’s experience reflects “a problematic of women’s subjectivity and cultural position” (Cooper, 1997, p. 4). Society kept putting restrictions on young women freedom; a young woman had to keep her chastity; otherwise, she would end up making her life miserable. Meanwhile, magazines every now and then encouraged women’s main role as homemaker and at other times undermined the ideology.

However, that ideology was contradicted by intellectual women. While marriage was considered a priority to most families and young women; conversely, it was treated with contempt by women like Jay Cee, the magazine’s editor in New York who wanted Esther to work seriously for her future life. She pushed her to more hard work saying, “You’ll never get anywhere like that,” repulsing Esther’s indecision about her future. She also warned her saying, “Hundreds of girls flood into New York every June thinking they’ll be editors. You need to offer something more than the run-of-the mill person. You better learn some more languages” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 31). Similarly, the famous woman poet at college encouraged Esther to build a career; she forcefully rejected Esther’s notion of getting married and having kids. She “stared” at her in horror and said, “But what about your career” (p. 211). These women urged Esther to follow their steps through forsaking domestic life and building one’s own career.

The famous poet woman is probably a symbol for the “new woman” who emerged within the beginning of the century. These intellectual women refused the idea of marriage, preferred living in women colleges, and demanded for sexual freedom. They were accused of lesbianism. Plath does not favor this model of women and she reflects that through Esther’s reaction toward Joan. Esther feels disgusted and forcefully rejects this lesbian girl who confesses to her during their residence in the mental asylum that she never liked Buddy, but she likes her:

“That is enough, Joan,” I said, picking up my book. “Because I don’t like you. You make me puke, if you want to know.” And I walked out of the room, leaving Joan, lumpy as an old horse, across my bed. (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 211)
Esther reacted vehemently toward the girl; this incident reminded Esther also of the scandal once they had at the college dormitory and of the woman poet’s odd relation with “a stumpy old classical scholar” who had “a chopped Dutch cut.” She could neither comprehend nor accept the notion, and fairly declares to her woman doctor that she cannot “see what women see in other women” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 210). Esther detaches herself from these women for she figures them as quite unpleasant models to follow. These indications focus our attention on the involvement of Plath/Esther in the “pervasive heterosexism of [American] culture” (Bonds, 1990, p. 10). The writer’s focus is to clarify that Esther is creative, intelligent, and has professional ambition, yet, as a woman is interested in finding the right man. Although the text implies some feministic trends—such as women freedom, equality, and search for identity, one may not say that Plath is a feminist for she rejects particular new women’s trends.

Esther’s main problem is her uncertainty about her “proper” place in society. She lives in a world that combines contradictions of every sort. Some praise and reward her for being intellectual, whereas others ridicule and estrange her for the same feature. She has to sacrifice intellectuality for the sake of marriage otherwise she would be treated as an odd person. However, she finds the range of domestic activities that a woman could pursue to be rather limited. It mostly comprises of managing the household, breeding the children and being an affectionate and loyal companion to her husband.

Being a woman meant being completely dependent and inferior to man. This notion is rejected deeply by Esther; “The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 72). Her dilemma continues out of her indecision and fear; she cannot determine which path is better to her, and she also fears failure once she chooses. She has all the elements that might enable her to possess a perfect life except her depressed soul. Undoubtedly, inherited cultural restrictions contradicted the “new woman” demands and ideas of freedom and individuality. The social ideology remained looking at woman as deficient, immature, unreasonable creature that needs care and incessant watch over.

Esther’s world is full of rapid movement of contraries; sometimes opposites that might be unified; she, eventually, obtains such tendency toward things around her; when Buddy calls her “neurotic”:

If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one And the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days. (Plath, 1963/2005, pp. 89-90)

Esther has a very unconventional way of dealing with reality. Her speech identifies division; the character articulates the inner conflict in the role she is expected to play, but uncertainty plagues her. There is “Doubleness” in her social definition by others (Whittier, 1976, p. 133). She is expected to be chaste inwardly for men do not marry impure women; at the same time, she should be seductive outwardly to get a marriage chance.

Esther discovers that Buddy is not the only hypocrite and pretender; most young men fake purity, meanwhile, they demand purity from their future wives. The problem is that whenever she “would catch sight of some flawless man off in the distance,” she “immediately saw he wouldn’t do at all,” as she moves closer (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 79). Consequently, she makes up her mind not to marry a man unless he is virgin like her. This notion reflects her intellectuality; but it is considered sickness by Buddy who regards marriage to be the killing cure that will make Esther’s physical part overcome the intellect. Esther says that she does “remember Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn’t want to write poems anymore” (p. 81). It seems that women’s intellectuality and ambition are regarded diseases that have to be cured, the healing comes through marriage for it would make the woman mostly busy with domestic physical affairs and disregard all other mental activities.

**Fighting Against Restrictions**

Many images of self-mutilations concerning marriage hunt Esther’s mind; in marriage, a woman usually gives up her career to stay home and cook, clean and bring up children; it is woman’s task to provide emotional warmth and security, whereas man fulfills his ambition in the world. Intelligent women suffer indeed because men, generally, are not interested in women’s intellect. Esther feels rather perplexed, “May be it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 81). But Esther does not want to be in such condition, so she rejects marriage for it would erase her individuality.

Esther refuses the Angel’s world of feminine mystique, where she would enjoy a bright future of a happy suburban housewife, an anxious mother of four or five children. To Esther, marriage means leading a dull life; waking up early, preparing breakfast for a husband, washing up dirty dishes, making up beds; and at the end of the day, preparing a big dinner and washing up more dishes. She hates the routine life of traditional wives and mothers, and shows discontent with domestic activities as a reaction to a society which gives no chance to talented women to “combine a career with homemaking” (Wagner-Martin, 1992, p. 38). She does not know how to cook and does not want to learn cooking. To a young, intellectual, ambitious woman such life seems empty and useless, but when she looks around she sees nothing but this vexing image:
Because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy's Willard's mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private teacher herself. (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 80)

Actually, most images of marriage around Esther are not encouraging. Esther knows that man's care and affections before marriage would vanish within the end of the wedding service: “In spite of all the roses and the kisses . . . what [a man] secretly wanted when the wedding services ended was for [the wife] to be flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat” (p.34) (Plath, 1963/2005). She also mentions how Mr. Greenwood informed his wife in their honeymoon that pertinence should stop and they have to be themselves; eventually, from that day on, Esther's mother “never had a minute’s peace” (p. 81). Esther rejects both her mother’s and Mrs. Willard's ways of life because she wants to preserve her identity; she does not want to be like some trodden rug in a kitchen.

Her forceful reaction is shown against Dodo Conway her neighbor who got married and now is pregnant with her seventh child; she mockingly describes her to be: “not five feet tall, with a grotesque, protruding stomach . . . Her head tilted happily back, like a sparrow egg perched on a duck egg” (Plath, 1963/2005, pp. 111-112). Bringing up a child is another problem to Esther for she considers it a heavy task; it is another reason she holds for refusing marriage. She tells Doctor Nolan that “A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 212). She worriedly watches most women enjoying their motherhood; but it is hard for her to accept the idea of being a mother, taking care of children:

> How easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why was I so unnatural and apart? Why couldn’t I dream of devoting myself to a baby after fat puling baby like Dado Conway? (Plath, 1963/2005, pp. 212-213)

Esther rejects marriage so she would not end up looking like Dado, or have a miserable life like her mother.

Contradicting ideologies haunt not only unmarried young women but also married women. Through presenting Mrs. Greenwood’s life, the writer displays another contradiction in marriage. Mrs. Willard and Esther’s mother are both schoolteachers and are married to university professors. While the former is a housewife, the latter has to work to earn living for she has lost her husband and supporter. Plath hints here to the double role women keep performing during the early decades of the 20th century; how women are reduced to domestic life during peace and summoned to take men’s vacant jobs during war. Socially, women live the same paradox; they have to give up career within marriage, and if the husband dies or gets seriously ill, they have to find a job to support the family.

Esther cannot adjust these contradictions, nor endure the sense of being without individuality. Although women know well these facts, they still accept the social commitments. To have a conventional marriage, by choosing someone like Buddy, the interpreter, or any of those around her, Esther would have no good prospects: “This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s” (p. 80). She watches these women in misery and does not want to end up like them for she is different; simultaneously, she feels desperate for not being able to accept that ideology, while most other women do. She speculates concerning woman in her milieu; a woman should be pure and virgin so she could win a good husband, while man is offered total freedom. Society treats women unfairly; it puts many restrictions on her, overburdens her with responsibilities, meanwhile, deals with her as inferior creature in comparison with man.

However, Esther refuses the other available choice; it is the more painful one as it is not favored publically but still open; it is the choice to become a career woman. The choice of a woman to look less feminine and somewhat suspicious; this choice affords her experiences, testing, failures, and successes in various spheres of activity. It would assist her to achieve maturity and individual identity. However, women who followed this path are not quite happy or satisfied. Friedan (1973) describes these career women’s position in the postwar society saying,

> None of these women lived in the warm center of life as I had known it at home. Many had not married or had children . . . I never Knew a woman, when I was growing up, who used her mind, played her own part in the world, and also loved, and had children. (p. 75)

But Esther wishes to live a normal life and have a career at the same time; she wants to look perfect and win people’s admiration. People around Esther have many expectations with regard to her behavior and her future. Above all are the societal expectations that Esther feels concerning decisions about a career and family. Esther is uncertain about which path of life to pursue, and not quite sure of her success in whatever she chooses. She observes women accepting men’s rules set for them and that compounds the problem for she is left with no model on which to base her life. Esther’s character contains unusual strength to challenge society, but she cannot have any action. In her attempt to make her own character, she feels lost among the many stereotypes around.

**Reaching the Deadlock**

The New York experience increased Esther’s depression and eventually led her to the sense of deadlock. Her peers, there, belonged to opposite worlds; at the beginning, Esther was fascinated by Doreen because she was an attractive young woman with “bright white hair standing out in a cotton candy
fluff around her head” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 15); she seemed also to be more independent and liberated than the other girls. However, Esther’s admiration soon vanished when Doreen got drunk and had affairs with Lenny Shepherd in their first date. This made Esther feel disgusted and leave the place at once. Esther went back immediately to her room in “that hotel for-women-only, high up over the jazz and push of New York”; she laid in the tub for she wanted to “[feel] growing pure again” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 19). She felt herself higher than such common desires, and she wanted to remove every one she had met that night from her disturbed mind, including Doreen, her boyfriend, and even the city, New York. She said to herself,

I don’t know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure. (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 19)

Doreen’s character is meant to contradict a Victorian assumption, which categorized the blond woman as good and the dark-haired one as bad. Doreen’s immoral behavior alienated Esther from her once and for all.

Eventually, she turns to another friend, Betsy, who stands for the image of the innocent country girl; she is the opposite of Doreen. Esther finds herself caught between these stereotypes at the end of her New York visit. She casts her clothing from the top of the building over the city; this action indicates her first desire for suicide. Forgetting to save one for her travel back home, she had to trade her bathrobe with a blouse and skirt from Betsy. So she goes back in Betsy’s clothes, but the marked blood of woman-hating Marco is still on her face. Although she returns home pure and save, but the wild effect of the experience is quite evident on her.

It is Jay Cee’s question to Esther about her plans for future that makes Esther frustrated for she fails to give an answer. The perplexing effect of the city makes her draw back as she realizes, for the first time, how she has let the chance “run through [her] figures like so much water” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 4). Now she got the sense that her era of winning prizes and scholarships “was coming into an end” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 4). She felt her self higher than such common desires, and she wanted to remove every one she had met that night from her disturbed mind, including Doreen, her boyfriend, and even the city, New York. She said to herself,

Eventually, Esther reaches a deadlock for she fails to find contentment with any model of women around her—neither the dutiful housewives nor the liberated intellectuals; her attempt at suicide is an outcome of her failure to find a way out. It seemed to be the only solution to end up her bewilderment. Being rescued, Esther has to go through medical treatment, she receives electroshock therapy, and finally learns how to disregard her intellectual capacity, and adjust her biological role as a woman and mother. That is her certificate to be accepted in the world. The individual mobile fails to make change because the protagonist finally bends to society’s commitments to be accepted as a normal individual.

Analyzing Esther’s character reveals that she is a woman who really experiences confusion for losing identity in a world demonstrated by “conflicted, historically rooted messages” (Smith, 2010). The author situates her protagonist in a world full of contradicting choices that would cause bewilderment to any sensitive, intellectual person like Esther. The government policy during the Cold War has kept women at home, so they would take care of and protect the family from the enemy within. Victorian ideology still haunted the American society; a talented woman is considered a defect or sickness and such woman should be cured by marriage. Esther intellectuality is appreciated by teachers and women of career, paradoxically, it is regarded a defect by society. If the young woman rages against marriage and other institutions, she will be considered abnormal.

The state of puzzlement and indecision is an outcome of her experience in New York which she suddenly finds herself indulged into; it causes diversion in her way of thinking. Plath uses the metaphor of the fig tree to show Esther’s yearning and aspiration for future; the tree becomes symbol of the many available choices she has:

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and the other fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor . . . and beyond and above these figs were many figs I couldn’t quite make out. (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 73)

She imagines each fig to represent a different life and she, sitting under the tree, starving to death for she cannot make up her mind and choose one. She wants each and every one of them. She can only choose one fig yet, because she wants all of them, she sits indolently with indecision, and the figs “wrinkle and go black,” rot, and “one by one, they plopped to the ground at [her] feet” (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 73). Her dreams are vanishing and wasting away because of hesitation, and this indecision caused more depression and alienation.

Conclusion

All feminists’ attempts to push women into the public sphere during the first half of the 20th century were constrained by political, economic, and social ideologies of the era. To reflect her own sense of life and expose a lot of women’s worries and anxieties, Sylvia Plath created her female character in American society of the 1950s. The Cold War overshadowed American’s life for many years; however, its impact on women was overtly depressing. Plath/Esther could not conform to the world assigned to her; her aspiration was
distracted by the society that saw woman’s intellectuality as a disease and politics that overburdened women with the task of protecting the nation from the enemy within. In addition, her society had double standards in dealing with men and women. She could neither make change nor adjust the situation, so she finally reaches a dead end. Subsequently, she goes through a mental breakdown for failing to find a way out of that confusion. A mobile character either ends up his life or resigns to his community as he fails to make change; hence, depression became the general mood of the era. The Bell Jar has proved its value as a cultural product of its age for it evidently exposes how the different intercourses in life have formed a new sense of life inside Plath. She shows non-conformity with the life imposed on her because she had a practical consciousness which gives a sense of generation that is historically distinct from other particular qualities.

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**Author Biographies**

Azhar Noori Fejer is an associate professor of English literature in College of Education, University of Baghdad. Now she is a PhD candidate in University of Putra Malaysia (UPM). Her main interests include issues in literature and culture, feminism, postcolonial studies, and comparative literature.

Rosli Talif is an associate professor of English teaches at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, UPM. His main interests include issues in literature and gender, gender roles in literature and the media, gender concerns in children’s literature, and language policy and planning in Malaysia.