

VOICING THE UNVOICED: BIPOLAR DISORDER IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *BELL JAR*

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Abstract: Psychological disorders, especially depression is affecting today's world in a great extent. The attitude of people towards people with psychological disorders are quite alarming; they are more or less considered as an outcaste. This attitude must change as it is a mere imbalance of chemicals that creates this disfunctioning which can be rectified with proper medication and care. People with psychological disorders should have equal opportunities in the world rather than being marginalized. This paper, VOICE THE UNVOICED: BIPOLAR DISORDER IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *BELL JAR* thus presents the psyche of a depression patient, how she feels about getting electrocuted and most of all it represents the life and mental agony of a Bipolar patient. The objective of this paper is to create awareness about the mental state of people with bipolar disorder and the need to give a helping hand in bringing back such people to normal life.

VOICING THE UNVOICED: BIPOLAR DISORDER IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *BELL JAR*

Psychological disorders still remain a stigma in today's society. This paper entitled VOICING THE UNVOICED: BIPOLAR DISORDER IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *BELL JAR* tries to provide a clarification to the stigma focusing on presenting what Bipolar disorder is through the characters Esther and Joan and their life through a psychoanalytical study of the novel *Bell Jar*. Sanity is the ability to think and behave in a normal and rational manner. A sound mental health is considered a norm of figuring out whether a person is perfect or not and people who got problems with their mental health are considered outcaste, to be chained and put behind the bars. The number of people with depression are growing tremendously and this marks the need to know what is it all about, how they feel and how they are to be helped with.

Bipolar disorder is a brain disorder which is often referred as manic-depressive illness. The patient will be in extremes- either they will be highly elated and over energetic or they will be very much in a depressed state and shows tendencies to suicide. Patients with manic episodes often lose sleep and their minds will be filled with hallucinations. They may keep talking regardless of time, they won't realize if it is day or night and will be lost in the thoughts and utterings. Patients with depressive episodes are more dangerous in a way as they have the suicidal tendency. The author of the novel *Bell Jar* was a patient of Bipolar II disorder which is this state of depressive episodes.

Sylvia Plath is an American poet, novelist and short story writer who belonged to the literary movement 'Confessional poetry'. She is credited with advancing the genre of confessional poetry. Linda Wagner Martin in her book *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* mentions about the mental health state of Sylvia Plath. According to her Sylvia Plath was clinically depressed for most of her adult life, and was treated multiple times with electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) which is electric and insulin treatment; depression was marked by constant agitation, suicidal thoughts and inability to cope with daily life and she committed suicide in 1963. Wagner Martin in her biography says that Sylvia Plath was thirty years old and found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning with her head in the oven, having sealed the rooms between her and her sleeping children with tape, towels and clothes. Her doctor, Dr. Hoerder seeing the way the kitchen was prepared said her suicide was under irrational compulsion.

The Bell Jar is a semi-autobiographical novel, Sylvia Plath's only novel, published shortly before her death, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, which her mother wished to block. According to her it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown. She has tried to picture her world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar. Plath dated a Yale senior Dick Norton during her junior year who takes the place of the character Buddy who contracted Tuberculosis. While visiting him she broke her leg skiing which is fictionalized in the novel. She described her novel as an autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past.

Plath also used her novel to highlight the issue of women in the workforce during the 1950s. She strongly believed in their abilities to be writers and editors while society forced them to fulfill secretarial roles. The novel *The Bell Jar* focuses on the life of Esther Greenwood who wins an internship on a New York fashion magazine in 1953, she is elated believing she will finally realize her dream to become a writer. But in between the cocktail parties and piles of manuscripts, Esther's life begins to slide out of control. She finds herself spiraling into depression and eventually does a suicide attempt as she grapples with difficult relationships and a society which refuses to take women's aspirations seriously.

In the novel through the persona of Esther Greenwood, Plath shares the experience of being electrocuted. Sylvia Plath underwent Electroconvulsive therapy, formerly known as electroshock therapy, and often referred to as shock treatment, is a psychiatric treatment in which to provide relief from mental disorders, seizures are electrically induced in patients. Immediately following treatment, the most common adverse effects are confusion and memory loss.

Plath in the novel describes the feeling of electrocuted as the feeling of "being burned alive all along your nerves". The daily activities are "like a numb trolley-bus". Esther guesses she should have been excited the way most of the other girls were but she couldn't get herself to react. She felt very still and very empty. Things that usually excite people had no effect on her. The novel is written in a stream of consciousness method. Stream of consciousness is a literary style in which a character's thoughts, feelings and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow and is uninterrupted by objective description or conventional dialogue. The term was introduced by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust are among its notable early exponents.

Plath through the character of Esther Greenwood presents the difficulties that a patient with depression goes through. The character Esther often confronted uncomfortable suspicions she had about herself. She was devastated by the constant breakups. She always wanted more sleeping pills. The strong ones she was having didn't work anymore. She couldn't get sleep nor could she read and was referred to a psychiatrist. People with bipolar disorder are found not sleeping, not eating, not reading. Even their handwriting gets affected. Esther grew angrier and hadn't slept for fourteen nights.

Esther imagined the spirits she learnt of Japan that disemboweled themselves when anything went wrong. She felt it must take a lot of courage to die like that but her trouble was that she hated the sight of blood. The hospital where she took treatment negates the common notion of mental health centers. When she went to Dr. Gordon she says everything about the house seemed normal. There were no bars on the windows no wild or disquieting noises. A short description of two patients are given – the first patient ducked her head crossly and tore the sheets in half whereas the second patient threatened to jump out of the window thinking the windows are barred. The shock treatment is described in the novel focusing on how the patient feels,

“Then something leapt out of the lamp in a blue flash and shook me till my teeth rattled, and I tried to pull my hands off, but they were stuck, and I screamed, or a scream was torn from my throat, for I didn't recognize it, but heard it soar and quaver in the air like a violently disembodied spirit.” (Plath,139)

Suicidal tendency pops up like a person blank in mind. When Esther stands by sea she sees sharks' teeth and whales' earbones littered about down there like gravestones. She feels a mortal ache. Her flesh winced, in cowardice, from such a death. Everything she had read about the mad people stuck in her mind. She often thinks about other possibilities, like blowing one's brain out with a gun. She contemplates on what would happen if one fails at the attempt and ends up being paralysed,

"I'd already read in the papers about people who'd tried to shoot themselves, only they ended up shooting an important nerve and getting paralysed, or blasting their face off, but being saved, by surgeons and a sort of miracle, from dying outright." (Plath,150)

Esther thought drowning must be the kindest way to die and burning the worst. She bought a few paper backs on abnormal psychology at the drug store and compared the symptoms and found that her symptoms tallied with the most hopeless cases,

"The more hopeless you were, the further away they hid you". (Plath,154)

Once while she was on the shore, trying to dive she thought of drowning then and there but the waves beat her and didn't let it happen. Graveyards disappointed her. She had hallucinations of being blind and also had loss of memory. She forgets birthday .The novel also speaks on the rules at the hospital, how one feels lousy, about the insulin injections, group therapy and irritated replies. The sight of the nurse made her sick at heart.The novel also presents the depressed view towards the world.

Esther's suicide attempt by taking sleeping pills and hiding in also mirrors Plath's actions. After Gordon prescribes electric shock Esther becomes more unstable than ever after this terrifying treatment and decides to kill herself. She tries to slit her wrists, but could only bring herself to slash her calf. She tries to hang herself, but cannot find a place to tie the rope in her low-ceilinged house. She attempts to drown herself, but she keeps floating to the surface of the water. Finally she hides in a basement crawl place and takes a large quantity of sleeping pills. From that hospital she becomes friendly with Joan, a woman from her hometown and college who has had experiences similar to Esther's .Joan made a sexual advance to Esther which repulsed her.

A parallelism can be seen between Esther and Juan as we see between Clarissa and Septimus in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The life of Septimus goes in parallel with that of Clarissa and at the end he suicides. Similarly Joan who seemed to be improving hangs herself at the end of the novel. In *Mrs. Dalloway* we suspect Clarissa to end her life but Septimus takes the place and in the same way here in this novel, *The Bell Jar* we suspect Esther to suicide but Joan takes the place. The novel ends with a note that the bell jar of Esther's madness could descend again at any time hinting Sylvia Plath's psyche.

People with bipolar disorder or any disorder can be treated well. It is all the reactions in the brain that gets dysfunctional and the medicines that supplies the chemicals that one lacks can keep one's mind stable. It is this knowledge that today's society lacks which leads to the stigma of considering people with mental problems as outcastes. This paper, through a detailed study of the novel tries to know the psyche of the mentally challenged people, how they feel and also is designed to create an awareness of how the mentally challenged can be helped with and brought to normal state of mind through medications and counselling. Let no one who is mentally challenged be treated like an outcaste. Society should realize that it is not a matter to be stigmatized but rather should come forward, help such people to lead a normal life in the society.

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