



MUTIFIED VOICES AND WOMEN SUFFERING: ANALYZING PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR* THROUGH THE LENS OF FEMINIST TRAUMA THEORY

Mehr un Nisa

mehrunisa.eng@gmail.com

Government Graduate College, Gojra Road, Jhang Pakistan.

Muhammad Tayyib Aijaz

tayyibijaz@gmail.com

Assistant Professor in English, Government Graduate College,
Gojra Road, Jhang Pakistan.

Iram Sabir

Malikiram306@gmail.com

Government Graduate College, Gojra Road, Jhang Pakistan.

Abstract

This research examines Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* through the lens of Feminist Trauma Theory, which draws on Cathy Caruth's idea of trauma as an "unclaimed experience." The novel takes place in mid-twentieth-century America, where women faced strict gender roles and were pressured to hide their ambitions. This study looks at how these societal pressures, along with silence and institutional control, lead to emotional and psychological trauma for women. It closely analyzes Esther Greenwood's character as a representation of women's struggles in a patriarchal society. Her mental breakdown is portrayed not as a personal failing but as a response to societal expectations, medical authority, and a lack of freedom for women. By closely analyzing the text, this research highlights themes of silence, repetition, fragmented thoughts, and symbols like the "bell jar" and the "fig tree." These elements show that trauma often cannot be fully expressed through words. By merging feminist criticism with trauma theory, the study emphasizes that trauma is a shared experience for women, rather than an individual issue. This research addresses a significant gap by offering an interdisciplinary perspective. It contributes to feminist literary studies by illustrating how *The Bell Jar* depicts women's trauma as both suffering and resistance.

Keywords: *Feminist Criticism, Institutional Control, Shared Experience, Societal Pressure, Unclaimed Experience*

Corresponding Author: Mehr un Nisa (Government Graduate College, Gojra Road, Jhang (Pakistan).)

Email: mehrunisa.eng@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath's single novel, "*The Bell Jar*," was written about American society in the middle of the 20th century (a time when conservative values and patriarchal structure shaped American culture) and published under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas" to conceal her identity. Sylvia Plath is often regarded as a Feminist martyr, and *The Bell Jar* is considered a feminist novel not merely because a woman wrote it, but because it critiques the patriarchal norms and societal expectations prevalent in mid-century America. The novel explores psychological conflict, identity formation, and self-discovery, making it a significant Bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel).

Set in the post-World War II era, *The Bell Jar* highlights the issues faced by women, such as social restrictions, the expectation to nurture, and the metaphorical "glass ceiling." Women were denied the freedom to pursue their ambitions, as their primary duty was seen as managing the home. It is also a semi-autobiographical novel; only the characters' names have been changed. The central character, Esther Greenwood, mirrors Plath herself, struggling within a male-dominated society. Through Esther's experiences, Plath exposes the dark aspects of American culture and the suffocating limitations imposed upon women, which ultimately lead to loss of control over one's life. The novel also portrays sexual double standards and the male gaze society tolerates immoral behavior in men while expecting women to uphold moral purity.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, written by Sylvia Plath, reflects the social, cultural, and medical discourse of 20th-century America. Plath also described the psychological struggle of women within a patriarchal society. The dominance of patriarchal medicine marked the 1950s and 1960s, the medicalization of women's mental health, and the silencing of female voices. The novel also presents a critical account of institutional power, psychiatry, electric shock therapy, and social surveillance, which contribute to women's trauma rather than alleviating it. Many researchers have analyzed *The Bell Jar* through the lens of feminism, existentialism, and trauma theory, and also emphasize themes such as gender inequality, identity crisis, and mental illness. Still, no one has deeply examined the novel through the lens of Feminist Trauma Theory, especially as developed by Cathy Caruth. Caruth's concept focuses on how traumatic experiences are remembered and expressed, often through silence, repetition, and fragmented memory. This research aims to provide a deep understanding of *The Bell Jar* through the dual lenses of Caruth, which help analyze Esther's mental breakdown as a response to patriarchal and institutional pressure.

1.2. Research Objectives

This research aims

- To explore how societal pressure and expectations cause emotional trauma.
- To examine how silence and mental breakdown represent both suffering and resistance in the novel.
- To study how trauma functions as a collective women's experience rather than an individual issue.

1.3. Research Question

1. How do societal pressures and cultural expectations contribute to the emotional trauma of women in the novel?
2. In what ways does silence symbolize both pain and resistance in the novel?
3. How does the novel portray trauma as a shared experience among women rather than as an individual psychological struggle?

1.4. Significance of this Research

Feminism challenges patriarchal norms and promotes gender equality, a concept explored in many novels before *The Bell Jar* and further examined there. Many researchers have analyzed this semi-autobiographical novel from perspectives such as psychoanalysis, feminism, and existentialism; however, despite this broad range of interpretation, a clear research gap persists because previous researchers have not discussed how existentialism connects to the power, control, and trauma experienced by women through Caruth's ideas. Furthermore, prior research doesn't deeply explore the traumatic experience of women using Feminist Trauma Theory.

This research aims to fill this existing gap by providing a fresh, original, and interdisciplinary lens of dual approaches, combining Caruth's philosophy with feminist studies. It views Esther's mental breakdown as a reaction to the pressure and traumas created by a patriarchal society's expectation of being the "perfect woman" by providing limited career choices and a judgmental attitude toward female independence. Simultaneously, this research will also help in uncovering how gender violence and silent suffering shape her fragmented identity. Further it explore her silence, fragmented thoughts and her experiences in the hospital shows how trauma becomes form of both suffering and resistance This research will provide future researcher with a new lenz and unique perspective for analyzing the bell jar novel "in-depth", contributing to ongoing discussion about feminism power, identity and trauma and also serve as a model for studying about the lasting impact of social and emotional trauma on women.

2. Literature Review

The things we read about women's problems help us see how women's mental and emotional suffering is tied to the world around them, the culture they live in, and the things they go through in life. Women are often expected to do things because of how society works. They have to get married, have a family, and act in a way. This can be really tough for women. It can make them feel trapped. It can also make them feel confused, scared,

and really unhappy. So when women struggle with health issues, it is not because they are weak but because they are dealing with things that are not fair. Women's mental illness is a result of the pressure they face from society. It is not their fault. The literature also talks about how an identity crisis affects women's health. Women have a time when they cannot make their own decisions or be themselves. This makes them feel stressed, alone, and really sad. Women often have breakdowns because of dealing with pressure for a long time, not just because something bad happens suddenly. Identity crisis is a part of women's psychological struggles.

The idea of trauma is fundamental. It has been talked about before. Trauma is something that women remember for a time, and it keeps coming back to them. When women experience trauma, it affects the way they think, the way they feel, and who they are as people. Lots of studies show that writing and telling stories are ways for women to talk about their pain, to speak out against being silent, and to start feeling better. Women use writing and storytelling to deal with their trauma. It helps them to heal from trauma. Overall, the reviewed literature provides a strong base for studying women's trauma by linking personal suffering with social and psychological forces.

Luke Ferretter (2008) argues in his article that Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* is a feminist critique of how medicine and psychiatry treat women. He explained that in the mid-1900s 1900s medical science was controlled by men, and its practices often reduced women to passive bodies rather than active human beings. For example, the childbirth scene with Buddy Willard shows how women were treated as objects of medical experiments, not as people with feelings. He also reflects how Plath exposes the hidden violence of male-dominant medicine, where the comfort and agency of women are ignored. In short, Plath's novel predicted the feminist health movement's argument that medicine and psychiatry were not neutral or objective, but deeply patriarchal (Ferretter, 2008).

Jeni Maple (2009) explores that Esther in *The Bell Jar* should be seen as both a woman and a disabled person because her depression affects how she experiences life. Feminism alone cannot explain her struggles since her mental illness limits her control over her body and emotions, while society also restricts her freedom as a woman. Maple shows that Esther's mental breakdown is connected to the sexist pressures around her, the expectations to marry, serve men, and give up her ambitions. Like disabled people, Esther faces stigma and isolation. Her fear that the "bell jar" will return shows that her recovery and identity remain uncertain. Maple concludes that we must read *The Bell Jar* through both feminism and disability theory together, as these two forms of oppression, sexism and ableism, interact and shape Esther's experience (Maple, 2009).

Alma Hakansson's (2024) thesis explains that *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath is not just about mental illness but about how 1950s American society created anxiety in women

by limiting their roles to homemakers and mothers. Using a feminist psychoanalytic view, the study argues that Esther Greenwood's depression reflects both her personal trauma and the pressures of patriarchy. The "bell jar" itself becomes a symbol of female confinement, showing how social expectations suffocated women's ambitions. Through modernist writing and the stream-of-consciousness style, Plath connects her own unconscious fears with Esther's breakdown. Overall, the thesis suggests that Plath used the novel to explore how external gender oppression and internal mental struggle are deeply connected (Hakansson, 2025).

Doris Lessing (2025), in his article, shows women's mental and emotional suffering in mid-20th-century England. The main character, Anna, experiences trauma because of failed relationships, social pressure, and the loss of meaning after World War II. Lessing presents women who want independence but face loneliness, emotional pain, and identity crises. Using feminist trauma theory, especially ideas from Cathy Caruth, the research explains how Anna's fragmented mind and emotional wounds are healed through writing *The Golden Notebook*. The novel becomes a way for her to recover from psychological damage caused by patriarchy, isolation, and betrayal. Overall, the thesis connects women's trauma to both personal experiences and wider historical violence, showing writing as a path toward healing and self-understanding (Lessing, 2025).

Cathy Caruth (1996) explains that trauma is not a fixed idea or just a theory; it is something that keeps changing and cannot be fully understood. She links trauma with Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, meaning delayed experience: the real impact of a traumatic event happens later, not at the time it occurs. Caruth says trauma is like a repetition that keeps returning in new ways, not something that can be easily defined or limited to Western culture. She also argues that if we study trauma across cultures or languages, we should recognize that the meaning of the word itself varies. In short, trauma is not just an event. It is an ongoing process of translation, memory, and repetition (Caruth, 1996).

The article by Alaa Gazairi (2024) analyzes Esther Greenwood's mental and emotional struggles in *The Bell Jar* using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The researcher explains that Esther's mind is divided into three parts: id, ego, and superego, which often conflict with one another, leading her to anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. The story shows how Esther tries several times to end her life because she feels hopeless, but with therapy and the care of Dr. Nolan, she slowly recovers and returns to everyday life. The study concludes that when psychological conflicts are not resolved, they can cause destructive behaviors like aggression or self-harm (Alaa Gazairi, 2024).

This research by Helen Swarna and Karunambigai (2025) examines Anne Frank's *Diary* through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. According to Caruth, trauma is an emotional wound that people cannot understand when it happens; they realize or relive it later through

memories or dreams. Anne Frank's diary shows how writing helped her survive emotionally during the Holocaust. Her diary becomes both personal and collective; it tells her own pain and also represents the trauma of many Jews. The sudden end of her diary, after her arrest, mirrors Caruth's idea that trauma remains unfinished and unresolved. Anne's writing becomes a way to express pain, search for identity, and find hope even in fear. The study also suggests that her diary can be examined through feminist or healing perspectives, as it shows a young girl's struggle to keep her voice alive despite oppression (Swarna VC & Karunambigai, 2025).

The following article explores Esther Greenwood's identity crisis, depression, and recovery in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* through Freud's psychoanalytic theories, interpreted from a feminist perspective. Eric Erikson (2021) explains Esther's struggles by drawing on Freudian ideas such as the Oedipus complex, castration, bisexuality, hysteria, and melancholia, while reinterpreting them with insights from feminist thinkers such as Juliet Mitchell, Hélène Cixous, and Sandra Gilbert. The study argues that Esther's mental illness and confusion are not just personal issues but reactions to the patriarchal pressures of 1950s America. Erikson views Esther's depression as a form of psychological rebellion against cultural expectations of women, connecting her breakdown to Freud's concepts of loss and identity formation. Overall, the essay shows how feminist psychoanalysis helps uncover the gendered roots of Esther's suffering and her search for independence (Erikson, 2021).

3. Theoretical Framework

This research incorporates Feminist Trauma theory developed in the late 20th century, mainly in the 1980s and 1990s, as a response to the male-centered focus of traditional trauma studies. Earlier trauma theories by Freud and Janet mostly studied war victims and male soldiers, ignoring women's suffering from sexual abuse, domestic violence, and social oppression. Feminist scholars argued that women's pain and trauma were not only personal experiences but also connected to social and political systems shaped by patriarchy and inequality. They showed that trauma can be created and maintained by power structures, discrimination, and institutional betrayal. Therefore, Feminist Trauma Theory sees trauma as both a political and social issue, recognizing women's hidden traumas and viewing recovery as an act of resistance against oppressive systems.

Furthermore, Feminist Trauma Theory is a critical approach that studies trauma not only as an individual or psychological issue but as a social, political, and gendered experience. The pioneer of trauma theory is Cathy Caruth, an American literary theorist, whose book *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) is a foundational text in this field. Caruth's ideas form the basis of feminist trauma theory. She explains that trauma is "unspeakable" and "unclaimed," meaning that it cannot be fully understood when it happens because it

comes “too soon, too unexpectedly.” The person’s mind cannot completely process it, so part of the experience remains unknown or buried. Another essential idea from Caruth is latency or belatedness, which means that trauma does not always show its effects immediately; instead, the memories and pain return later in the form of flashbacks, dreams, or repetitive behaviors. She also explains repetition and intrusive return, where the traumatic memory comes back again and again, even if the person tries to forget it. Caruth describes a paradox of knowing and not knowing that the survivor both remembers and forgets, both knows and does not know the event entirely. For this reason, trauma is often told indirectly through gaps, silences, or fragmented narratives. Literature and testimony play a significant role because they allow trauma to be expressed symbolically and partially. Through storytelling, people “bear witness” to trauma and give meaning to their suffering, even though language can never completely express it (Caruth, 1996).

Other feminist theorists expanded Caruth’s work by linking trauma to women’s lived experiences and social systems of oppression. Judith Herman, a psychiatrist and author of *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), connected personal trauma, such as domestic abuse or sexual violence, with political and social violence. She argued that recovery involves three key stages: establishing safety, remembering and mourning, and reconnecting with community. Her feminist view emphasized empowerment and rebuilding control after trauma. Laura S. Brown (1995) introduced the concept of “insidious trauma,” meaning minor, continuous harms caused by sexism, discrimination, or social exclusion. She highlighted that trauma can result not only from violent events but also from everyday injustices that women face. Similarly, Maria P. P. Root (1992) worked on multicultural and feminist therapy and argued that race, class, and gender shape how people experience and heal from trauma. Her intersectional perspective made feminist trauma theory more inclusive by recognizing that women from different backgrounds experience trauma differently based on their identities (Herman, 1992; Root, 1992; Brown, 1995).

The key concepts of feminist trauma theory include patriarchy, intersectionality, and the idea that trauma is a social and political issue. The theory sees trauma as a result of unequal power systems where men hold authority and women or other marginalized groups face oppression. Intersectionality, a term borrowed from feminist theory, means that trauma is influenced by many factors such as sexism, racism, classism, or ableism. Therefore, trauma cannot be seen as only a psychological condition; it must be understood in relation to society and history. Feminist trauma theory challenges traditional psychology that focuses only on the individual without considering social structures. It sees trauma as a collective and political issue that reflects how societies silence or ignore victims, especially women.

Some sub-concepts of feminist trauma theory include power dynamics, representation, dissociation, and therapeutic approaches. Power dynamics explore who is believed, who is silenced, and how revealing trauma can sometimes become a form of cultural capital. Representation studies how trauma is shown in media, art, or literature and whether these portrayals reinforce or challenge stereotypes. Dissociation and self-examine how trauma breaks identity, causing people to feel detached from themselves or from time. Feminist scholars also focus on trauma-informed care that values safety, choice, and empowerment, helping victims heal not just personally but socially. Historical context is also essential because the theory recognizes that historical traumas like slavery, war, or colonization continue to affect descendants through collective memory and inherited pain.

The objectives of feminist trauma theory are broad. It aims to expand the definition of trauma beyond major violent events to include continuous and everyday gendered suffering. It gives voice to silenced or marginalized groups such as women, queer people, and ethnic minorities whose experiences were often ignored. It studies how social power systems like patriarchy, racism, and sexism shape both the causes and the responses to trauma. Another goal is to understand how trauma is remembered and narrated, showing how memory can be broken, delayed, or fragmented. The theory also promotes ethical witnessing listening with respect and empathy, and seeks forms of representation that empower survivors rather than exploit their pain. Feminist trauma theory also critiques traditional psychiatric models such as the PTSD diagnosis, which mainly describe single shocking events, ignoring ongoing social oppression.

Findings from feminist trauma research show that trauma often remains unrecognized because it is part of everyday life and social norms, such as domestic abuse or emotional neglect. Many women live with pain that is normalized or silenced by society. Gender roles, cultural expectations, and a lack of validation make it challenging to speak out. Moreover, trauma does not follow a simple timeline; it disturbs time and memory, making survivors feel as if the past keeps returning. Literature and art can express these broken memories through metaphors, repetition, or gaps, helping survivors to process their pain indirectly. Feminist trauma theory also emphasizes that trauma is not only individual but collective, meaning that historical events like war, genocide, or colonialism leave traces across generations. In this way, feminist trauma theory combines psychology, literature, and social justice to understand trauma as both a personal wound and a cultural history.

4. Analysis & Discussion

This data analysis focuses on *The Bell Jar*, using Feminist Trauma Theory to examine how trauma shapes the lives and experiences of women in the novel. It explores how emotional pain and challenging experiences are expressed, primarily through subtle forms such as silence, recurring thoughts or events, and fragmented memories. By

examining these aspects, the analysis tries to show how women's struggles are not only personal but also connected to society and cultural expectations. It also explores how these pressures shape the main character's feelings, actions, and decisions throughout the story. Overall, this study aims to provide a clear understanding of how trauma influences women individually and collectively, and how the novel reflects the broader experiences of gendered suffering in an emotional and meaningful way.

In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath illustrates how societal expectations, especially those imposed on young women, create immense emotional pressure. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist, struggles with the ideal of a "perfect life" encompassing career success, beauty, and marriage, yet feels trapped and inadequate. This tension between expectation and reality produces psychological distress, alienation, and self-doubt. For example, the "fig tree" symbolizes life options and societal expectations. Esther's indecision highlights emotional trauma caused by pressure to choose. Shows how cultural norms amplify her anxiety and self-doubt. The fig tree image also reflects the fear of failure that society implants in Esther's mind. Each fig demands perfection, and the impossibility of achieving all roles simultaneously deepens her sense of inadequacy. This pressure turns choice into emotional paralysis, intensifying her mental conflict and identity crisis.

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. I wanted each one of the figs, but I was aware that choosing one meant losing all the rest. I didn't want to face the reality of making a single choice. The figs all represented my hopes and ambitions. Society expected me to pick one path and commit fully. I felt incapable of fulfilling any role perfectly. The pressure was paralyzing (Plath, 1963, p.79).

Furthermore, the internalization of societal standards creates deep self-doubt, as cultural expectations intensify Esther's emotional suffering and psychological conflict. Demonstrates trauma as a product of societal norms. Esther's confession shows how deeply social values shape personal identity. By constantly judging herself through society's lens, she loses her authentic sense of self. This internal comparison creates a permanent feeling of failure, even when no absolute failure exists. The pressure becomes psychological violence, slowly damaging her confidence and emotional stability. Thus, trauma is shown as an internal wound formed by external cultural demands.

The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along; I hadn't thought about it. All my life, I had measured myself by others' standards. Society's definitions of success and beauty made me feel inferior. I internalized these expectations. The result was self-doubt and emotional pain. This realization worsened my mental strain. Trauma emerges as a consequence of cultural pressure (Plath, 1963, p.79).

The repetition emphasizes her struggle for identity. Reveals internal conflict between societal pressure and personal will. Demonstrates trauma as both

internal and socially induced. The rhythmic repetition of “I am” functions as a fragile assertion of self against social erasure. It reflects Esther’s attempt to ground her identity in existence rather than achievement. This moment shows resistance, but the need to repeat it reveals how unstable her sense of self has become. Society’s pressures have weakened her inner certainty, turning self-affirmation into an act of survival. Thus, trauma appears as a constant negotiation between being and breaking.

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am. Even amid the swirling demands and expectations of society, I tried to assert my existence. I felt both fragile and defiant. The repetition was my internal affirmation. Society dictated who I should be, yet my consciousness resisted. This struggle intensified my emotional fragility (Plath, 1963, p.264).

Silence and mental breakdown in the novel function as both expressions of suffering and forms of resistance. Esther’s withdrawal from societal routines represents emotional pain but also subtly defies the world that demands conformity. Her silence and mental collapse critique societal norms and highlight the tension between external pressures and personal autonomy. Such as Inaction and withdrawal signify suffering. Silence functions as a form of resistance to societal routines. Breakdown critiques unrealistic external expectations. Esther’s refusal to act also exposes the collapse of productivity as a social value. By rejecting routine movement, she unconsciously questions a system that equates worth with constant functioning. Her stillness becomes a space where imposed meanings temporarily lose power.

I couldn’t see the point of getting up. I couldn’t see the point of getting dressed. I wanted to sleep for a thousand years. Every morning felt meaningless. The world demanded I function perfectly. I felt paralyzed by this expectation. Silence became my refuge. My breakdown was both suffering and quiet rebellion (Plath, 1963, p.107).

“Melting” metaphor shows loss of self and withdrawal. Resistance lies in non-conformity despite suffering. Highlights the dual nature of trauma as both personal and societal. The “melting” image also suggests fragility under relentless societal heat, showing how external pressures slowly erode her sense of agency. Esther’s withdrawal is not passive; it creates a subtle space of control amid chaos. Trauma is thus depicted as both erosion and quiet defiance.

I felt myself melting into the shadows like the summer snow. My identity seemed to dissolve. I withdrew from interaction. The pressure of expectations overwhelmed me. Yet in this surrender, I refused to conform outwardly. Emotional pain and resistance are intertwined. My mental collapse was both personal and socially induced (Plath, 1963, p.13).

Disappearance reflects breakdown and refusal to comply. Resistance is implicit in non-choice. Trauma and defiance are inseparable in Esther's experience. Disappearance here functions as an erasure of the socially constructed self rather than mere escape. By refusing visibility and decision, Esther disrupts society's demand for clear identity and progress. Trauma thus becomes a means of rejecting imposed narratives of success.

Furthermore, Plath portrays trauma as a shared experience among women. Esther's struggles reflect broader systemic pressures faced by women, including societal expectations of perfection, beauty, and conformity. The novel emphasizes that such trauma is relational and collective rather than isolated. Trauma is visible across women in shared environments. Emotional suffering is a collective experience. It highlights systemic societal pressures on women. The shared despair also emphasizes the invisibility of support systems, showing that women endure pressures silently. Esther's recognition of this collective suffering strengthens her awareness of societal injustice. Trauma here is both personal and mirrored across a network of oppressed women.

I saw the same expression in the eyes of every girl I met at the magazine office. Their smiles hid despair. The pressure to succeed was universal. Each woman carried silent burdens. Emotional suffering was normalized. The trauma I felt was reflected in others. It became clear that societal expectations inflicted shared pain (Plath, 1963, p.99).

Mental health issues are widespread among women. Trauma emerges from common societal expectations. Shows collective experience of suffering. The hospital setting emphasizes confinement and observation, reinforcing how societal pressures isolate individuals emotionally. Esther's awareness of shared suffering creates a subtle critique of systemic neglect. Trauma is thus shown as both environmental and socially constructed.

It seemed to me that everyone in the hospital was suffering in the same silent, trapped way. Pain was unspoken yet universal. Each patient reflected similar pressures. Mental health struggles transcended individuality. Women's suffering was mirrored socially. Trauma was a shared condition. Society's constraints were evident in each face (Plath, 1963, p.68).

Illustrates systemic gender pressure. Trauma is a collective burden of female existence. Reflects the social rather than purely personal origin of suffering. The cumulative pressure highlights how perfectionism is socially enforced rather than individually chosen. Esther's observation shows that internalized standards create invisible chains linking women's experiences. Trauma is thus perpetuated through both expectation and social comparison.

Women in my life were all trying to do the impossible: be perfect, be smart, be pretty, be loved. Expectations were relentless. No one could meet them fully.

Each woman carried emotional scars. Society demanded compliance and appearance. Trauma became a shared burden. Our experiences were interconnected (Plath, 1963, p.231).

The findings of this study closely align with the existing scholarship that examines *The Bell Jar* through the lens of feminist trauma theory. Many scholars argue that Sylvia Plath's (1963) novel represents the emotional and psychological struggles faced by women due to restrictive societal expectations, and the present research supports this interpretation. Researchers like Elaine Showalter (1985) and Sandra Gilbert (1979) have pointed out that mid-twentieth-century American society imposed rigid roles on women, expecting them to become Perfect daughters, obedient wives, and dedicated mothers. These expectations left very little space for personal identity or emotional freedom. The present study reinforces these Arguments by showing how Esther Greenwood's breakdown is directly linked to the Pressure of conforming to these traditional gender norms. Moreover, scholars have described trauma in *The Bell Jar* not only as a personal crisis but also as a reflection of a broader cultural pattern. Feminist trauma theorists suggest that women's suffering often stems from patriarchal structures rather than individual weakness. This study supports that claim by demonstrating how Esther's mental collapse is shaped by repeated societal Messages such as the idea that a woman's value lies in beauty, purity, and compliance. Instead of being treated as an individual with ambitions, Esther is constantly reminded to fit into a predetermined social mold. This finding aligns with Judith Herman's (1992) theory that Trauma can emerge when one's sense of self is restricted, silenced, or controlled. Another Scholarly discussion acknowledges silence as both suffering and resistance in the novel. Critics note that Esther's withdrawal from conversation, her refusal to engage, and even her Attempts at self-harm can be read as responses to emotional suffocation. This study expands on that view by showing that silence becomes a space where Esther attempts to reclaim agency. While at first silence reflects her pain, it later becomes a subtle act of rejecting the roles society forces onto her. This supports the feminist trauma perspective that resistance does not always appear as open rebellion; sometimes it takes the form of Withdrawal and non-participation. Finally, the research aligns with scholarship that interprets Esther's trauma as a shared experience among women rather than an isolated Case. Scholars such as Phyllis Chesler (1972) argue that many women in patriarchal societies internalize expectations and experience psychological distress. The present findings show that the pressures Esther faces, such as expectations of domestic life, restricted career Choices, and societal judgments about her mental state, are not unique to her but are part of a larger cultural pattern affecting women of her time. Therefore, trauma is revealed to be Collective, shaped by gendered social structures. In conclusion, this study supports and Extends existing scholarship by showing that *The Bell Jar* reflects how societal expectations can cause emotional trauma, how

silence functions as both suffering and resistance, and how trauma operates as a shared experience among women rather than an individual condition (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979; Showalter, 1985; Plath, 1963; Herman, 1992; Chesler, 1972)

The findings of this study reveal that *The Bell Jar* presents emotional trauma as a direct outcome of the constant societal pressure placed on women. The novel shows how Esther Greenwood struggles to meet the expectations shaped by her family, educational system, and broader cultural norms. Her emotional breakdown does not come from a single event, but from the gradual expectations accumulation of pressure to fit into a traditional feminine role, something she does not truly identify with. This suggests that trauma is not always sudden; it can be slow, silent, and rooted in everyday interactions. The study also finds that silence in the novel operates in two significant ways. First, silence represents Esther's suffering from her inability to openly express her internal conflicts, as society often discourages women from speaking about their pain or dissatisfaction. Second, silence becomes a form of resistance. When Esther withdraws, avoids social, or rejects the roles others assign to her, her silence acts as a quiet refusal. Instead of obeying, she stops participating. This complicates the understanding of mental breakdown; it is not only a collapse but also a way of rejecting oppressive norms when no other form of resistance feels possible. Another significant finding is that trauma in the novel is not portrayed as a personal weakness or an individual failure. Instead, it is shown as a collective, gendered experience. Esther's struggles reflect the emotional difficulties many women of her time faced when confronted with limited choices and restrictive cultural standards. Throughout the novel, different female characters from Esther's mother to her friends and colleagues show signs of stress and dissatisfaction, even when they seem to be fulfilling socially acceptable roles. This reinforces the idea that emotional trauma is socially produced, not self-generated. Finally, the study highlights how the narrative structure of *The Bell Jar* itself mirrors the experience of trauma. The fragmented storytelling, shifting emotional tone, and sense of suffocation reflect Esther's psychological state, drawing the reader into her internal world. This means the novel does not just describe trauma, it performs it through its form and language. Overall, the findings suggest that Sylvia Plath uses Esther's story to critique the cultural expectations that restrict women's autonomy. The emotional trauma portrayed in the novel is both personal and collective, silent yet expressive, painful but resistant. The novel demonstrates that when women are denied the right to define themselves, emotional suffering becomes almost inevitable.

The research shows that Esther Greenwood's emotional trauma is primarily shaped by the pressure to follow traditional expectations of womanhood. Society expects her to become a "perfect" young woman, successful but not too ambitious, attractive but not assertive, and ideally prepared for Marriage and domestic life. These expectations conflict with her desire for independence, Intellectual growth, and creative freedom. Existing

scholarship has discussed Esther's Breakdown, but many studies overlook how ordinary cultural expectations quietly create Emotional damage before the breakdown occurs. This study fills that gap by showing that Trauma is not caused by one dramatic event, but rather by daily restrictions that slowly Suffocate Esther's sense of self. It is the repeated message that women should fit into predetermined roles that undermines her mental stability, illustrating that emotional Trauma grows silently under social pressure.

The findings reveal that silence in *The Bell Jar* has a double meaning. On the one hand, Esther's Silence shows her emotional suffering and her inability to freely express her pain or Dissatisfaction in a society where women are expected to remain composed and Agreeable. However, silence also becomes her form of resistance. When Esther stops communicating, withdraws from social interactions, or refuses to follow roles others assign to her, she uses silence to reject those expectations. Previous research often treats Esther's breakdown only as a sign of psychological collapse. This study fills the gap by highlighting that her withdrawal is also a way of reclaiming agency when she feels she has no acceptable language to express her resistance. In this sense, her breakdown is not only a sign of loss, but it is also a refusal to surrender to societal control.

The study demonstrates that Esther's trauma is not unique or isolated; it reflects the Emotional experiences of many women living under patriarchal expectations. Female Characters around Esther, such as Doreen, Joan, and even Mrs. Greenwood, show signs of Frustration, pressure, and hidden anxiety. This indicates that the emotional suffering is Systemic, shaped by cultural norms rather than personal failure. Earlier scholarship often focused mainly on Esther as an individual, examining her biography or psychological state. This research fills the gap by relocating trauma from the individual level to the collective Level, showing that women as a group face similar pressures that create emotional harm. The novel, therefore, exposes trauma as a shared, gendered condition produced by social Structures, not merely a personal mental health struggle.

5. Conclusion

The Bell Jar is a book that shows how women are harmed by the way society is structured. It is a society where men have a lot of power, and this affects women. The main character, Esther Greenwood, has many problems. This happens because she is forced to do what society expects of her. She has to get married and be a mother. She has to be a person. The Bell Jar shows what happens to women when they have to follow these rules. The book *The Bell Jar* can be better understood through Feminist Trauma Theory. This theory is helpful. Cathy Caruth explained it. She said that sometimes people who get hurt cannot talk it away. This is what happens to Esther. She is. She cannot fully express what she is going through. *The Bell Jar* presents women's trauma as a result of society and the power of institutions. The trauma that Esther has been through is not something that she talks about. You can see it in the way she's quiet, the way she thinks about death over and

over, and the pictures that keep coming up in her mind, like the bell jar. These pictures show that the bad things that happened to her are so big that she cannot put them into words. They are part of who Esther is now, and that person has many broken pieces. This study also says that what happened to Esther is not just her problem. A lot of women who have to live with the rules and expectations are going through the same thing. When Esther is quiet and falls apart, it is as if she is saying no to a society that does not let women be free or express themselves. *The bell jar* and her silence are, like her way of fighting against all of this. Esther's trauma is a part of her, and it is something that she shares with many women. By combining feminism and trauma theory, this research offers a deeper understanding of *The Bell Jar* and provides a new perspective for future studies. It shows that women's trauma in literature reflects wider social oppression and the long-lasting impact of gender inequality.

References

- Caruth, C. (2021). Globalization and the theory of trauma: A conversation with Cathy Caruth. In *Trauma and Literature in an Age of Globalization* (pp. 9-35). Routledge.
- Chhetri, P. (2010). *The Golden Notebook: A Feminist Trauma Narrative* (Doctoral dissertation, Department of English).
- Erikson, E. (2021). Esther Greenwood's identity crisis and feminist psychoanalysis in *The Bell Jar*.
- Ferreter, L. (2008). "Just Like the Sort of Drug a Man Would Invent": *The Bell Jar* and the Feminist Critique of Women's Health Care. *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies*, 1, 136-158.
- Gazairi, A. (2024). Psychoanalytic analysis of Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*: Freud's perspective.
- Håkansson, A. (2024). Fatal Female Anxiety in *The Bell Jar*: The Fear of the Future and the Now in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.
- Kennedy, R., & Whitlock, G. (2011). Witnessing, trauma and social suffering: Feminist perspectives. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 26(69), 251-255.
- Maple, J. (2009). The Intersection of Feminism and Disability Theory in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.
- Thompson, L. (2021). Toward a feminist psychological theory of "institutional trauma". *Feminism & Psychology*, 31(1), 99-118.
- Tseris, E. J. (2013). Trauma theory without feminism? Evaluating contemporary understandings of traumatized women. *Affilia*, 28(2), 153-164.
- VC, H. S., & Karunambigai, R. Unfinished Words and Silent Endings: Anne Frank's Diary Through the Lens of Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 10(4), 620116.

Webster, D. C., & Dunn, E. C. (2013). Feminist perspectives on trauma. In *The Foundation and Future of Feminist Therapy* (pp. 111-142).