

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

The status of women has undergone significant changes in the course of the past century thus presenting changes of social dispensation in dire quest of equity and justice. Today, women can achieve what in the past seemed impossible and thus, they have access to all the realms of life like education, working, political activity and others. Schools have taken up the fight for equal rights meaning there are more women going to school and to the workplace. Different policies on equal pay for equal work and policies against discrimination have been adopted in the workforce and thus the women can compete fairly. The political sector has also been improved that such women are now occupying top posts and are involved in policy making.

During the 1950s in the United States of America, women most likely denied the rights when they want to buy or to own properties. Women usually stayed at home to raise the children and to take care of the house while waiting for their husbands to come home. Women staying at home became firmly established expectation, which resulted in few opportunities for women in both the private and working sphere. The absence of education also contributed towards the limitation of opportunity in education as much as women were concerned. According to Jennifer Holt, "due to the ideal woman's ideals, 90% of women were represented in "nonworking roles in the home," which refers to unpaid labor such as tidying up

and taking care of kids. Women have been discovered to be eleven times more probable to be involved in housekeeping than males” (Holt, 2017:3). Few women were encouraged to attend college and even if they did, then there were small and limited fields that they could pursue for instance the field study of science. This resistance was coupled by discrimination even when women pursued college education thus restriction their chances of joining the more competitive and better paid fields. Generally, women in the 1950s had limited role in society, and very little scope of employment and career or gainful occupation. They often did not occupy important decision-making positions in social spaces, both, public and private and their contributions in areas other than marriage and childcare were not well appreciated. Jennifer Holt states further; “according to the first stereotype, a woman belongs in the house with her family: "A woman's most creative potential and primary objective in life is to be a mother and take responsibility for her household and family” (Holt, 2017:3). Gender stereotypes limited their rights and social roles and most of them had little control over their lives and the future.

How women’s grapple against gender inequality in 1950s can be seen in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. The novel was published in England after the author's death in 1966, bearing her own name. In the United States of America, despite the opposition from her mother, it was published in 1971 and it received warily positive reviews. The plot of the book itself has a connection with Sylvia Plath’s life in her struggles with her mental illness.

*The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath follows Esther Greenwood, a talented college student who dreams of becoming a poet but becomes increasingly disillusioned with

her life during a summer internship in New York City. Esther feels trapped between the rebellious Doreen, who embraces her sexuality, and the traditional Betsy, who embodies conventional femininity. Her frustration deepens when she learns her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, lose his virginity while expecting her to remain pure, highlighting the hypocrisy in societal standards for men and women. After a series of mental health struggles and suicide attempts, Esther is admitted to a mental institution, where she undergoes therapy and electroshock treatment. Gradually, she begins to recover, confronting her fears about sex and societal norms. The novel ends with Esther preparing to leave the institution, feeling as though she has been freed from the suffocating pressures of her life.

## **1.2. Research Question**

1. What is the representation of gender inequalities in *The Bell Jar*?
2. What is the cause of Esther Greenwood's struggle against gender inequality in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*?
3. What is the struggle of Esther Greenwood against gender inequality in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*?
4. What is the impact of the struggle of Esther Greenwood against gender inequality in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*?

### 1.3. Objectives of Study

There are three purposes on the writing of this thesis:

1. To analyse the representation of gender inequalities in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*
2. To examine the cause of Esther Greenwood's struggle against gender inequality in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.
3. To study the struggle of Esther Greenwood against gender inequality in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.
4. To study the impact of the struggle of Esther Greenwood against gender inequality in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.

### 1.4. Previous Studies

The first previous study is *An Analysis of Feminism in Sylvia Plath's Novel* by Ria Ristiani (2014), Ristiani emphasizes the novel's continuing significance in concerns of gender and individuality. *The Feminist Perspective in the Novel the Bell Jar* by Pooja Bhatt (2013), Bhatt argues that Plath's work is an analysis of unbending gender norms that define what is appropriate for women.

The second previous study is *A Feminist Analysis of Mental Illness in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar* by Michaela Cedergren (2021). Cedergren observes that Esther eventually seeks treatment from her mental illness; nonetheless, she adds that her recovery does not imply independence from constraints of society.

The third previous study is adapted from an article with the title *Anxiety and Existence in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar (1966) Novel: An Existentialist Approach*.

by Riyan Haryani (2013). The analysis primarily centers on the analysis of the personality's structure, encompassing the elements of being, existence precedes essence, consciousness (cogito), freedom to choose, anxiety, transcendence of ego, and nothingness. Haryani observes that she is constantly struggling against societal standards that aim to define her as an individual. This study has similarity with the fourth study titled *Self-Actualization in Main Character's Life Journey in The Bell Jar* by Muhammad Fadhli Nur Farid (2019). Muhammad argues that considering her brilliant mind and goals, Esther experiences feelings of inferiority and doubt about her identity. The study incorporating Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs theory and New Criticism theory.

Furthermore, the struggle revolves around the protagonist, primarily Esther Greenwood has been depicted on the fifth previous study which is *Analysis of Conflicts of Main Characters in Plath's The Bell Jar* by Febrianti (2020). The objective of this research is to elucidate the research of conflict issues in the novel *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. Febrianti argues that Esther's failure to overcome these conflicts has fatal effects, illustrating the devastating nature of unresolved mental health concerns within a constrained societal context.

The last previous study is taken from *Esther's Problems of Personality as an Impact of Her Failure in Accomplishing Self-Identity: A Psychosocial Analysis to Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar* by Tri Nurlianingsih (2014). As stated by Nurlianingsih, Esther's troubles arise from a deep identity crisis worsened by society pressures and expectations. The individual in question faces two challenges, namely a relationship issue and a sense of isolation.

The difference is this recent study applying the feminism approach method and focusing on the feminism theories. Feminism by Kang, et.al. and Gondal is applied in this research. The recent study is also concentrating on how Esther comes out as a liberal feminist by breaking the norms.

### **1.5. Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on three intrinsic elements of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, including conflicts, characters, and their characterizations, settings in the novel. The extrinsic elements discuss gender inequality. Esther Greenwood is grappling with the gender inequalities manifested in the limited options to career, sexuality double standard, and domestic sphere causing her to develop mental illness, yet she eventually begins on a hard journey of personal growth and independence, eventually dealing with traditional gender norms that limit her.

### **1.7. Thesis Outline**

#### **CHAPTER I            Introduction**

The first chapter will be elucidating the background of the study of the main topic in which gender disparities and feminism in America during 1950's. This section includes research questions, objectives of study, previous studies, and scope of the study.

**CHAPTER II            Theoretical Framework**

It contains of the explanation of the theory of intrinsic elements such as, characters, characterization, conflict, and settings, and the theory used in the extrinsic elements such as the gender inequalities suffered by Esther Greenwood in the book *The Bell Jar*.

**CHAPTER III           Esther Greenwood’s Struggle against Gender Inequality in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar***

The entire discussion and analysis in particular the intrinsic elements including character and characterizations, settings, and conflict. The extrinsic element explains the gender inequalities experienced by Esther Greenwood throughout the storyline in the *The Bell Jar*.

**CHAPTER IV           Conclusion**

In the final chapter, it elaborates the entire research and analysis into an overview.