

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Patriarchy is a social structure where men were given power in the economic, political, and domestic lives in society. It is defined by Sylvia Walby (1990) as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.” This domination is not limited to the laws and institutions. It operates via culture, social norms and the daily interactions between people. Patriarchy influences women’s self-perception, their self-confidence and their expectations. It is based on the idea of submission, domesticity and self-sacrifice as values that women are taught to adopt, not as values imposed upon them from the outside. In a male-dominated society, the value of a woman is determined by her willingness to serve others, her husband, her children, her family. Her dreams, her intelligence, and her wants are not important, if they are considered at all.

Patriarchy is not made with a force. It spreads from one generation to the next. Each generation passes patriarchal values to the next through the most intimate relationship, and that is the one between a mother and her daughter. Mothers are often the main perpetrators of patriarchal norms, not because they are bad, but because they are created by the system of patriarchy themselves. They have

learned to deal with the world of men, and the way to do so is to be misogynistic. Misogyny, as Kate Manne (2018) defines it in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, is not simply hatred of women, it is the enforcement arm of patriarchy, a system that polices and punishes women who deviate from patriarchal expectations. They have come to understand that conformity brings safety and resistance brings punishment, and so the path of least resistance is the one they teach their daughters. They encourage their daughters to prioritize marriage over career, to conform to traditional roles, and to suppress intellectual or creative desires. They do this out of love, and love corrupted by an environment that is rigged to corrupt them. Misogyny, in this manner, is not only enforced from above. It is handed down from woman to woman, mother to daughter, from generation to generation.

Daughters closely monitor the lives of their mothers. They witness how their mother gave up on everything that once was their mother's dream and the repressed emotions that was never spoken aloud. They witness women who were once full of potential. They love their mothers, but they are afraid of their mother's fate. This fear is not just personal or psychological. It is a response to patriarchy that is reflected in the image of the mother. The mother is made to represent what patriarchy does to women and the daughter recoils from such. She does not want to be like her mother. This is the conflict at the core of the mother-daughter relationship in a patriarchy: one that is not only love or simple hatred, but guilt and resentment, fear and a desperate need to avoid a seemingly inevitable destiny.

The conflict is theorised by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Rich makes a very important distinction

between women's experience of motherhood and motherhood as a patriarchal institution, one has been "designed" and as she claims "to ensure that the potential—and all women — shall remain under male control" (Rich, 1976, p. 13). Motherhood as experience refers to the relationship between the mother and the child being a true and complex one. Motherhood as institution is that collection of rules, expectations and limitations which patriarchy values. Mothers are pressured to conform to this institutions at all times. They were not cruel, but they passed on the values of the patriarch to their kids because they believed it was for safety and survival. Rich labels the resulting fear as "matrophobia", a fear of becoming the mother, not of the mother as a person, but fear of being the mother's constrain, her silence, her diminished life. Matrophobia, then, is a direct consequence of internalized misogyny. It is what happens when a daughter sees, in her mother, the full cost of living under patriarchy.

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) is a literary rendition of this dynamic. Esther Greenwood is a young woman of late 1950s in America, a time when women were expected to behave in a certain way. Women were expected to marry young, to keep house and to express their wants according to those of their husbands and families. Esther does not accept these expectations, but she cannot get rid of them. Her mother, Mrs. Greenwood, steers her away from her literary ambitions and toward practical, traditionally feminine skills, dismisses her intellectual aspirations, and minimizes her depression. Mrs. Greenwood is not a bad person. She is a woman whose whole life is a product of patriarchy; she does what she thinks is best to keep her daughter safe and respected. To Esther, however, her

mother embodies exactly the future that she fears: a life constraint, of sacrifice, of loss of self. Esther's attitude towards her mother is not a rebellious teenager's attitude. They say what Rich calls "matrophobia," meaning that she does not hate her mother because of her, but she does know the brutality of patriarchy, and she fears it will inflict the same treatment on her.

This fear further contributes to Esther's psychological breakdown throughout the story. The more Mrs. Greenwood pushes her toward conformity, the more Esther feels trapped. The conflict between love and terror, between the person and the symbol of the mother, drives Esther toward her breaking point and contributes to her suicide attempt. *The Bell Jar* is not just a story about mental illness, it is a story of the ways that patriarchy works on a young woman who refuses to accept the life it has prepared for her.

The study examines how matrophobia is portrayed in *The Bell Jar* through Rich's framework. It argues that Esther's fears of becoming her mother is not a personal failing or a symptom of psychological disorder. It is a response to patriarchy, transmitted through mother-daughter relationship, and it can be seen in the novel through Esther's rejection of everything her mother represents.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How is Esther Greenwood's matrophobia portrayed in *The Bell Jar*?
2. How does Mrs. Greenwood's trigger Esther's matrophobia in *The Bell Jar*?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To identify and describe how Esther Greenwood's matrophobia is portrayed in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.
2. To examine how Mrs. Greenwood triggers Esther's matrophobia in *The Bell Jar*.

1.4 Previous Studies

The first journal article is "Deviant Motherhood and Matrophobia: A Postfeminist Reading of Charlotte Keatley's *My Mother Said I Never Should*" By Sijo Varghese C. which examines how matrophobia can be seen in dramatic literature by looking at four generations of women who express fear and resistance towards motherhood. In the post-feminist world, Varghese claims that motherhood is seen "no longer a desirable goal, but rather a burden to success" (116) and uses an additional term for describing the concepts of women seeking other forms of motherhood, such as surrogacy and/or and/or the success of their career over family life. The concept of matrophobia that Adrienne Rich uses to describe the fear of becoming like their mothers is used to describe each generation in the play, as they

try to overcome the limitations they saw in their mothers' lives and bury their doll as a symbolic act of rejecting motherhood.

Many of the quotes in Varghese's book are taken from Rich's theory that matrophobia is a daughter's fear of becoming the same victim that she sees in her mother, the unfree woman, the martyr (Rich, 1976, p. 235-236, Varghese). Although Varghese's analysis shows that Rich's matrophobia theory is transferable to the field of dramatic literature, his work concentrates on women's rejection of motherhood through "deviant" practices, but he is not analyzing a novel. It explores the life of several generations and not an in-depth relationship between mother and daughter.

The second of the previous studies is a journal article titled "Disorder Female Identity in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*" by Cyntia Kálmánová, which examines the fragmentation and distortion of the identity of Esther Greenwood in the light of gender theory in the context of 1950s society. Kálmánová examines how in this period women were required to wear "masks" to comply with the norms of their gender, resulting in the creation of a dichotomy between their true selves and the role they played in society. This duality, seen symbolically in Joan Gilling as Esther's "shadow self", has profound psychological repercussions and depression, the study says, and "the mask they wore each day was not easily removed and so became part of their identity" (133).

Building on Beauvoir's assertion "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 273, quoted in Kálmánová 122), Kálmánová argues

that femininity is not a natural condition, but is socially constructed, thus generating internal conflict for Esther. The relationship between mother and daughter is not a primary focus of analysis nor is Mrs. Greenwood a character, although Kálmánová briefly labels her a “damaging factor” who “led her own daughter into a world of depression” (127) through “constant passivity and contradictions” (127). The study is largely about Esther's journey through the process of identity formation in the context of the wider socio-cultural and political arena, the relationships between the male characters (i.e. Buddy Willard), and Esther’s psychological alter-ego, Joan. “Mrs. Greenwood is cited as the sole “bad element” in the novel that is explicitly described as a bad element” (127). However, the maternal relationship is not explored, nor are the psychological dynamics developed, in this observation.

The third previous study is a journal article, called Existentialism in the Postwar American Novel: A Feminist Existential Study of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, by Raja Rezzag Bara and Hanane Saihi, which explores the aspect of Esther Greenwood's break down as an example of feminist existentialism, focusing on the issues of freedom, choice and identity formation in the post-war American society. Using *The Second Sex* and Sartre’s existentialism as a lens, Bara and Saihi place the novel in the context of the 1950s and American political conformity and symbolic patriotism in the role of a domestic mother and wife. This study is centered on Esther’s anxiety, which is the result of her conscious realization of “crucial freedom” and the burdensome weight of self-determination, specific here in the arena of career, marriage and motherhood, as well as others. Bara and Saihi suggest that the well-known scene of Esther’s famous fig tree is a scene of

existential paralysis in the face of multiple life options, and that Esther then goes into a depression because “the fear of change and the fear of stagnation at the same time” (248). The study is able to illuminate the individual psychological crisis of Esther in a manner that is effective through existentialist philosophy. Explores the idea of women as “the Other” in patriarchal society, and how women are treated in “bad faith” when they embrace the narrow confines of gender roles in the 1950s. Though Bara and Saihi briefly reference the possibility that Esther will become “brainwashed” by marriage and motherhood, the study does not focus on the mother-daughter relationship as a contributing factor to Esther’s breakdown, nor does it look into how parental influence contributes to Esther’s anxieties.

However, although the scholarship on *The Bell Jar* has its merits in terms of an exploration of matrophobia in dramatic literature (Varghese, 2022), distorted female identity formation (Kálmánová, 2024), and existential anxiety (Bara & Saihi, 2024), there is a clear lack of analysis in relation to the mother-daughter relationship as the locus of psychological conflicts in the novel. While demonstrating the applicability of Rich’s matrophobia framework to literature, Varghese looks at a different kind of literature, one that is a play instead of the closer dyadic relationship of *The Bell Jar*. Kálmánová and Bara & Saihi both look at *The Bell Jar* from a feminist perspective, but do not analyze the maternal relationship in any great detail, only Mrs. Greenwood is brought up as one of a number of oppressive forces. These studies do not discuss at length the ways in which Mrs. Greenwood is the transmission of patriarchal values, which are oppressive and shape the institutional motherhood’s ideology, while embodying the

very constraints that Esther is afraid to inherit. This study aims to fill this void by applying Rich's matrophobia framework to Esther-Mrs Greenwood relationship, and prove that the mental breakdown of Esther is in fact manifested in matrophobia, the fear of becoming like her mother. This study focuses on the relationship between mother and daughter and how Mrs. Greenwood is the primary carrier of the patriarchy, which is the reason for Esther's psychological breakdown.

1.5 Research Method

The research used method of feminist literary criticism in the analysis of the mother-daughter relationship in the work of Sylvia Plath *The Bell Jar*. The main thrust of the analysis is to consider how matrophobia is present in Esther Greenwood as a direct result of her mother as a subconsciously instilled agent of patriarchal values. The writer states that Esther's psychological crisis is not just a result of the oppressive environment of society. It is based in a more specific fear: that she will end up like her mother; that she is now beginning to know that the self-negating, constrained life of Mrs. Greenwood is what the institution of motherhood has handed her.

This research is based on the theory of Adrienne Rich (1976) *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. The novel focuses primarily on the mother-daughter relationship through the lens of Rich's concepts of matrophobia and the institution of motherhood. In the light of this framework, the writer examines the roles of Mrs. Greenwood as an unwitting perpetrator of oppressive gender ideology towards her daughter, whether through deliberate

cruelty, or through the enactment of values which are so deeply internalized that she is not aware of them as ideology.

The major scenes of the analysis will be those that reveal the nature of this mother-daughter relationship. These include Mrs. Greenwood's treatment of Esther as a traditional female role model, her rejection of Esther's intellectual aspirations, and her reaction to Esther's mental illness, which sees her depression as a personal problem rather than as a problem of the life being offered to Esther structurally. The author's use of these scenes to show that a mother who has been thoroughly indoctrinated with patriarchy can oppress her daughters and love them at the same time. The study also considers how the internal conflict which arises as Esther resists her mother's expectations comes about; she is afraid to be her mother, yet she feels guilty for not being the woman her mother expects her to be. In conclusion, matrophobia is found to be the force behind Esther's psychological decline, which can be seen as a criticism of the intergenerational transfer of internalized misogyny in patriarchal motherhood as found in *The Bell Jar*.

1.6 Scope of Study

This study is based on the novel *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, on the character of Mrs. Greenwood and her relationship with her daughter, Esther Greenwood. The focus of the analysis is on how Mrs. Greenwood's attitudes and actions lead to Esther's matrophobia. More specifically, the focus of this study is on dialogue, interaction, and meaningful moments between Mrs. Greenwood and Esther that carry the message of patriarchy and internalized misogyny.

The theoretical basis is based on Adrienne Rich's idea of "matrophobia" as seen in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Rich's analysis of the mother-daughter relationship and Esther's psychological crisis. Other characters and subplots are mentioned only as they pertain to the larger character relationship of mother and daughter and Esther's developing matrophobia. Unless themes of mental illness, sexuality, and professional ambition are specifically related to the mother-daughter relationship and the internalization of misogyny, they are not explored extensively.

1.7 Writing Organization

This research proposal is divided into four chapters to ensure a structured and coherent analysis of matrophobia as depicted in *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath. The chapters are organized as follows:

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents five sub-chapters including background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, scope of the study, and previous studies.

CHAPTER II

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the theoretical framework and research method used in this study. It outlines intrinsic elements, including character and characterization, setting, and conflict, as well as extrinsic elements focusing on Mrs. Greenwood as

a trigger of Esther's matrophobia based on Adrienne Rich's theory of matrophobia and institutional motherhood. The chapter also describes the method of collecting and analyzing data used in this study.

CHAPTER III

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter evaluates the depiction of matrophobia in Plath's work by examining the intrinsic elements of character, setting, and conflict, and by analyzing Mrs. Greenwood's role as a trigger of Esther's matrophobia through her patriarchal values, her construction of ideal womanhood, her regulation of Esther's behavior and sexuality, and her transmission of patriarchal values, as well as the resulting impact on Esther's identity formation and psychological state.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This chapter synthesizes the research findings derived from the analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. It evaluates Mrs. Greenwood's role as the primary carrier of patriarchal values, the ways her attitudes and actions trigger Esther's matrophobia, and the resulting impact on Esther's identity and psychological well-being, providing a comprehensive overview of how matrophobia functions as a consequence of internalized misogyny within the mother-daughter relationship.