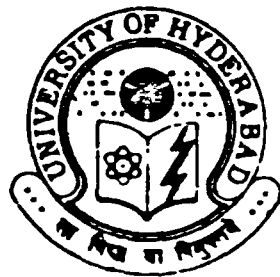


Dream Narratives: An Analysis of the Prose Works of Sylvia Plath

**A dissertation submitted to the University of Hyderabad
in partial fulfilment for the degree of
Master of Philosophy**

By

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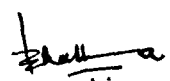
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Declaration

I declare to the best of my knowledge that the dissertation titled *Dream Narratives: An Analysis of the Prose Works of Sylvia Plath*, carried under the supervision of Dr. Afeefa Banu has not been submitted for a degree or diploma elsewhere.

Hyderabad

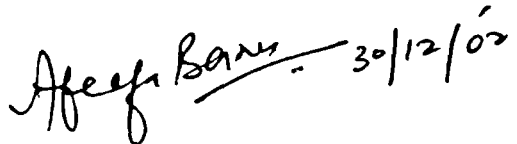

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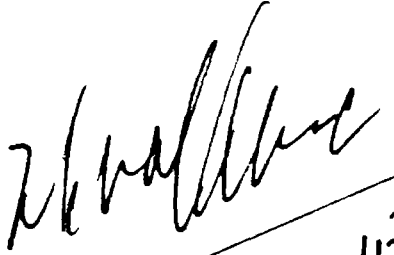
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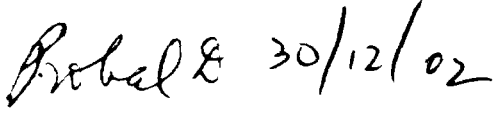
Certificate

This is to certify that Ipsita Bhattacharyya worked under my supervision for her M.Phil Degree in the Department of English. Her dissertation titled *Dream Narratives: An Analysis of the Prose Works of Sylvia Plath*, represents her original work at the University of Hyderabad and it has not been submitted for a degree or diploma elsewhere.

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Introduction

I felt if I didn't write nobody would accept me as a human being. Writing, then, was a substitute for myself: if you don't love me, love my writing and love me for my writing.

Sylvia Plath.

Writing/narrating the life through the works had been a prominent factor in literature. The process of recounting the lives of the writer himself/herself or of the people around him/her has a lot of significance in the realm of writing. The factor of gender renders a lot of difference to the way a piece of writing is looked at, as the body of writing by women is still a marginalized presence and a mystery still surrounds them. The silencing of the writings by women have always isolated their expressive power and led to a generation of deprivation that is still to be overcome by the revival of the spirit that is specifically feminine. Women who entered the field of writing consider the place as the platform through which they can gain entry into the world largely dominated by the male counterparts and be given a place in the history of humankind. The urge to convert the dreams and aspirations of their lives to the literary arena conjures up the kind of narrative that is supposed to be women specific. They are the chronicles of the dreams untold and expressions unrevealed. Narrating becomes a kind of dream come true for women as they tell the story of their whole world through writing, whether it borders on personal experience or experience in general. The need to term them as dream narratives rests on the fact that the writings are generally the expression of the intriguing phenomena of the mind and they spring directly from the well of creative imagination of the writer concerned.

The dream like quality of the writings of women always creates an aura of ambiguity and this factor has intrigued my mind at several levels. The curiosity aroused by the writings of several women writers culminated in my interest in Sylvia Plath's writings for more than a single reason. This interest became a constant passion as more of her poetry and prose came my way. But a mere liking for the works of a writer may not sound as a valid reason to embark upon the task of looking into his/her work. In case of Plath the interest rests more on her poetry and that is her strong mode of expression as far as the views of the critics are concerned. "Daddy" was the poem that generated my interest in Plath and the interest resulted in my urge to look not only into the poetry but also the other works of the poet. The publication of the unabridged journals in 2000 was the triggering point of reading her prose works instead of her poetry. The narration of her dreams and anxieties in the journal entries that she kept from a very early age and the stories and poems that resulted out of the incidents connected with her life urges the readers to look into the writings from the vantage point of linking them to the dream narrative mode. The limited time span has restricted my study to only the published prose pieces, the only novel and the journals of Plath. Though the reading of poetry alongside prose will give a complete picture, I focus my study to her prose pieces only concentrating on their quality of being a kind of dream narrative.

Life of Sylvia Plath revolves around her writing, be it prose or poetry. Writing gave her, as no human relationship in her life gave her--- a sense of coherence to experience and an assertion of her self. Though we know Plath as a poet, she also wrote a considerable number of prose pieces. Plath wrote seventy short stories, out of which only twenty are published till date and finally a novel *The Bell Jar*¹. Besides fiction, she

continually wrote journals, starting at a very early age and these journal entries stand next to her poetry in their merit. The journals published in part in the beginning and then recently in its entirety, lend to the reading world the knowledge of Plath's life that is very personal and at times misunderstood in several ways. The journals covering her life since 1950's till a few months before her death in 1963, are essential for the understanding of the talent that mesmerized the world. Over the years the literary critic and the general reader has been reading Plath with a biographical interest as well. The life of Plath has been told and retold so many times that it has achieved a status of a legend. There are as many as five comprehensive biographies on Plath and other numerous critical articles and collections of these. The story of her suicide and the effect it had on her writing is discussed at length and all the time a different story is told. No other writer had become as famous posthumously as Plath even though she published only a little bit of her poetry and prose before death. The whole interest is generated by the act of suicide so to say and the kind of ideas she had regarding the position of women in the war torn society of the 40's and 50's—more so about the difficulties of the position of women in the setup created by men. She became a cause of discussion at various levels and till now the kind of response her works get is really amazing. The legendary position of Plath comes from the rare kind of lifestyle and writing style she had. There had been a marked duality in the life of Plath, which was not so evident to all and sundry and only after her death this duality started getting the attention of critics and readers alike. The biographers have taken different stands from each other and it is difficult to accept all that has been said about her by any of the biographer, yet we have to carefully look into the kind of criticism she gets from all of them. This fact affects the

reading of any written word that belongs to Plath. Moreover, treatment of her prose invariably leads to a comparison with her poetry. Therefore, a careful dealing is necessary to bring out any argument regarding the prose narratives.

The interesting thing about Plath's prose writing is the consistency with which the same materials and themes are dealt throughout her fiction and the journals. A very strong voice speaks through them, which reflects the ideals of Plath in various ways. While talking about ideals, it is not easy to assign something concrete to any author as to be the ideals followed by him/her. The recurring ideas in the works of any creative artist form the core of his/her ideal. Plath was not consciously writing with a feminist viewpoint. She was, we can say, voicing her own woes and conveyed to the world the constraints of her time. She was writing with a mind that felt the oppressive force of the age and declared about it in all the forms of her writing. As for the prose writings Plath seems to write and rewrite the same story, over the period of ten years that reaches its culminating point in *The Bell Jar*. Plath devoted her life to create narrative styles that will suit her temperament. According to her, prose is a better medium as it gives a lot of freedom and space to develop ideas. She could never imagine of including day-to-day objects like toothpaste, a doorknob, and a flannel nightgown in her poetry. Plath in her essay "Comparison" claims "I have never put a toothbrush in my poem."² Here we can debate her ideas and reject them to be too restrictive, but the point is that it was her view regarding the two modes of writing. She explains her preference for prose by bringing in the analogy of a door closing and says that the door of poetry closes fast compared to a novel, which does not shut "with such manic, unanswerable finality."³ In such a sense prose writing, especially novel gives a lot of space to develop. Plath, in her interview with Peter Orr admitted that: "...I was always interested

in prose. As a teenager, I published short stories. And I always wanted to write the long short story, I wanted to write a novel.”⁴ The Plathian critics reject this obsession with prose as a wasted effort; yet, the prose pieces show equal brilliance with poetry as regards the themes and treatments. The short stories, collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose and Diary Excerpts*⁵ are incredibly distinctive as the novel *The Bell Jar* and the finer poems.

The conscious life plan of Plath included her longing for journalistic writing. According to Ted Hughes, British Poet Laureate and Plath’s husband, she declared her ambition about two things: “The first was to become a proficient short story writer, of the high-power practical, popular American type...The second was to become a proficient freelance journalist...”⁶ If we take these words seriously we can observe the kind of mindset Plath had in spite of being a successful poet. “For me,” wrote Plath “poetry is an evasion from the real job of writing prose.”⁷ But the popularity of the poems drowned the ambitious prose of Plath, which is still a rung behind her powerful poetry in terms of technique. Poetry of Plath is applauded by the critics for its innovative quality and the unending curiosity every word generates regarding her life and art. In such a sense, the prose writings of Plath do not reach that height, yet we should not forget that these are relative terms. The prose pieces are equally brilliant as far as the opening of the door to the recesses of Plath's mind is concerned. Be it poetry or prose, the works stand by themselves to lead the reader to a world not known to many and not cared for at large. But those who deal with the works of Plath and dismiss them just as an image of the psychosis of a woman who killed herself, does a disservice to them. The body of her writing: 170 published poems, short stories, a novel and a verse play, suggests her achievement as a

creative genius who does not need any rescue from the hands of a destructive psyche. Her writings are too powerful in their own terms and explain the real nature of the philosophy of life she followed. Despite the popularity of Plath's poems, this fact cannot be denied that the need of looking into her prose narratives is still there, as it helps a reader to understand the powerful female voice in these writings. After the publication of the unabridged journals in 2000⁸, the interest in the Plath legend has been renewed again. Almost after a gap of eighteen years (the first journals were published in 1982)⁹, the world is aware of various unknown facts about the life of Plath. One has to agree with Karen Kukil, the editor of the Journal, that they illustrate the "zest for life" of Plath and they would change the view of the reader and the scholars who study Sylvia Plath. On the whole, we can go forward with the argument that the strange psyche of Plath is well reflected in the stories, prose pieces, the only novel and the scores of pages of the journals; which talks at many points about freeing the self of the "bell jar" of "stifling distortions".

Prominent Plathian critics like A. Alvarez, Stephen Gould Axelrod, Edward Butcher, and Jacqueline Rose, have looked at the myth and legends of the poet who died so young. Their criticism concentrates on the mesmerizing poetry of Plath, which was much ahead of her time in their poetic voice. These critics have looked into the poetry from a biographical angle, a gendered angle and a historical one. Somehow, the prose pieces are not so extensively discussed as the poems. Now, at the wake of the *Unabridged Journals* where the writer's work, life and search for identity are almost indistinguishable, it appears to be a good idea to look back at the prose writing as well as the poetry of the enigmatic Plath. The stories, the passages of *The Bell Jar* and almost all the poems pop out from the journal entries. Plath writes in a very uninhibited style in her journals, talks more freely

about her dreams and aspirations. Hughes writes that Plath “strove to see herself honestly and fought her way through the unmaking and remaking of herself. And the Sylvia Plath we can divine here is the closest we can get to the real person she was in her daily life.”¹⁰ Though Hughes sometimes contradicts himself while talking about Plath, we have to accept this view as far as her journals are concerned. Along with the journals, we can take all the short prose pieces and short stories and look at them as dream narratives of a poet who transcends her being not only in her poetry, but in her prose as well. The prose narratives of Plath were a conscious effort to write in a diction, which suits the feminine voice she represented.

To term the prose pieces of Plath as “Dream Narratives” brings in a bit of controversy as the term can have several implications. It is better to do away with such kind of confusion at the very outset. Here we can take the help of Robert Scholes’ definition of narrative:

By narrative, we mean all those literary works, which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a storyteller... For writing to be narrative no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required.¹¹

If we go by this definition, Plath’s narratives, were it short stories, prose or diary excerpts; fulfill the requirements of a teller and a tale. Now the question arises why term them as “dream” narratives? The word dream here is used, as the works of Plath show a flowing perception of creation/destruction in a dream-like situation. Dreams are always an intriguing phenomenon of the mind. D. H. Lawrence aptly comments: “I can never decide whether my dreams are the result of my thoughts or my thoughts are result of my dreams.” This kind of Lawrentian undecidedness runs through Plath’s narratives. We can here include Joseph Campbell’s idea: “Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths.”¹² Plath’s narratives,

which border on her biographical details, have a mythical aura around them and we can very well term them as “dream narratives” for their uncanny blending of dreams and reality.

According to Patricia Kilore,

Dreams are intriguing phenomena of the mind. There seem to be certain shared processes, for example, that are important to both dreaming and language. Some of these have been well explored in the century since Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*.¹³

Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, mainly points out that dreams and other mental processes contrived by writers for literary purposes, when drawn as directly as possible from the inner spring of the creative imagination, present the same picture of psychic life that psychoanalysis does. Freud holds the view that writers possess a heightened sensitivity that enables them to apprehend their own psychic process more rigidly than most people can. The dreams they invent come from the same sources as real dreams and are therefore subject to the laws, which govern the latter, with the single and important qualification that such invented dreams are at the same time subject to the laws of artistic necessity:

For when [authors] cause the people created by their imagination to dream, they follow the common experience that people's thoughts and feelings continue into sleep, and they seek only to depict the psychic states of their heroes through the dreams of the latter. Story tellers are valuable allies, and their testimony is to be rated high, for they usually know many things between heaven and earth that our academic wisdom does not even dream of.¹⁴

Following the description of Freud, we can easily distinguish that the narratives of Plath definitely had the streak of that special touch that made her writing so unique with the psychic insight. C. G. Jung also pointed to the same direction regarding dreams and said: “Even though dream refer to a definite attitude of conscious and a definite psychic situation, their roots lie deep in the unfathomably dark recess of the conscious mind.”¹⁵ In the case of Plath, we can surely claim that the writings that narrated her dreams are related

to her conscious mind that finds its outlet in the printed pages. These deep rooted desires of the poet finding the outlet through not only poetry but also prose tries to tell the story of the generation of women who were practically left with no voice of their own but with the voice that speaks through a discourse that is definitely male.

The act of looking into the written words of a poet who died almost forty years ago might seem a bit far-fetched. As a lot of critical work has been done in this regard, going through the same material may not bring any fruitful result. In the outset of the dissertation, I would like to restrain myself from making any tall claims of saying something very innovative. Yet, the claim stands as far as developing a different approach is concerned. This act of looking and re-looking into writings, specially works by women writers will, go on till a time arrives when the difference between men and women's writing won't be so obviously visible. The same texts are looked at from a different angle as the reader changes and this is necessary to sustain the link between the ages as far as women's writing is concerned. We have to know the past to proceed further in the present and this act is not so easy. Adrienne Rich is of the opinion that:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves.¹⁶

The comment is very valid as regards to this work as the social milieu is very different. In search of our own self, we tend to read the texts from the angle that suits us better. Though Plath did exist in a world devoid of the fiery support extended by different feminists to the cause of women, not much has changed since then. We still find a part of us, that repressed part that we are unable to express to the public eye, addressing us through the narratives of Plath. The process of entering an old text helps us in having a better view of the present

world as we become aware of the similarities and the differences between the two. And to quote Rich again, this process becomes “an act of survival”, without which it is difficult to understand how much progress we have made in the field of liberating the female creative mind from the clutches of the ‘disquieting muses.’ Plath belonged to an era when the debate over a feminine language and narrative had not gained prominence. Now, when we judge her writing keeping all the debates in mind we find that her narratives are powerful representations of the cause of women though they have the autobiographical touch in almost all of them. The time, during which Plath wrote, very little concern was given to develop a language, that is genuinely feminine. The strange co-incidence is that, when we read Plath, we enter a kind of narrative that has been stressed by the modern feminists:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetoric, regulations and codes...¹⁷.

We find Plath present in her writing, voicing her emotional, physical desires and refuting the social norms that deter her from speaking out her mind. The presence of the strong female voice is enough to mark the existence of the non-male voice. Throughout the ages, we find different discourses full of male voices and the silences on the part of women. Plath was herself a victim of this silencing and the posthumously published works are enough testimony to establish the fact that the silencing corrupted the feminist discourse until the middle part of the 20th century. Even now, we cannot claim that the critical juncture is over and we are free to express ourselves. In that context the probe into the lesser-known prose narratives of Plath might shed a light into the kind of voice that the writings portrayed. They are more than a few pages of prose written with a definite aim. They tell the dreams that Plath had as a revolutionary of her time and a spirited soul who had great difficulty in

accepting the social norms without a question. The explorations of the relationships, which are mostly personal, illustrate the kind of problems a woman faces as she adjusts to the surroundings. The urge to explore the so-called strange psyche of Plath has resulted into numerous works on her writing. The newly published *Unabridged Journals* of Sylvia Plath brings forward the passages that were concealed for the fear of upsetting numerous close associates of Plath including her mother and husband. As these reveling pages are there in front of us, it helps a new reading of the whole bunch of her writing.

With the dream of writing successful prose, Plath penned down numerous poems and short stories, establishing herself as the first major American poet. Be it the journals or the stories, they are a chronicle of the dreams that Plath had throughout her life. They kept her creative capability intact. Any effort will fritter away if we treat the prose writing of Plath as a mere biographical record. Ted Hughes in one of his poem "The City"¹⁸ has talked about her writing:

Your poems are like a dark city center.

Your novel, your stories, your journals,

Your letters are suburbs

Of the big city.

This comparison of her prose work to the city "suburbs" holds a lot of meaning in it. Though they are not the central point yet they are a visible entity whether one likes it or not. The power of these narratives is felt even after the presence of the mesmerizing poetry. The publication of the *Unabridged Journals* has renewed the undying interest in the mythical poet Sylvia Plath. This volume of work has given a clearer picture of the poet who became a legend only after her death. A lot of editing gone into the journals and only twenty out of

the seventy existing short stories are available in print. This factor does not deter one in probing into the powerful voice that spoke through these pieces. The prose works, as they are free and relaxed narratives of a troubled poet, reflect the powerful voice which is capable of churning out an intellectual history and a philosophy of life. They give a cleverer picture of the poet who became a legend only after death.

The story of Sylvia Plath is a much-told one with people looking at it from as diverse angles as possible. The fact of her suicide decides many views on her. A. Alvarez, in *A Savage God* simplistically talks about it as:

“...when her death finally came, it was prepared for and in some degree, understood. However wanton it seemed, it was also in a way inevitable, even justified like some final unwritten poem.”¹⁹

But such a clear dismissal in a part unfair towards a voice, which not only spoke about her inner self, but about a lot of other stronger issues. The suicidal death is not the end and deciding factor in Plath criticism. An analysis of the prose pieces may give another angle to Plath’s writing- that has almost been neglected by the reading community. Critics like Margaret Atwood has dismissed the short stories as insignificant prose work of a poet. Atwood calls them as:

“*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* is a minor work by a major writer, and it's the contrast that causes niggling. Whom does such a publication benefit? Not the author, and not the author's reputation, which is doing very well without it. Not the general reader hitherto innocent of the Sylvia Plath opus and myth who may stumble upon it and wonder what all the shouting is about.”²⁰

Yet, it is not so easy to dismiss the writings of Plath, which have a lot of connotative meaning replete in it. They are not mere ‘shouting’, but a voice that speaks for itself. Like most readers of poetry of Plath, the readers of her prose also tend to look at them from a standpoint, which directly hits at the psychology of the poet who died at the peak of her

creative ability. There is nothing wrong in looking at them in such a perspective. The problem arises when they are dismissed as mere biographical and psychological details. The short stories, some of which gradually developed into a novel and incidents that are recorded in the journals, form the parts of a big whole, which we can call as the organic unit containing the basic tenets of Plath's psychological framework. These works have suffered a lot of editing and omissions at different levels and yet they stand out to project the powerful voice, which does not need a patronizing attitude to show where it stands. The voice itself is powerful enough to find a place of its own. As there are numerous ways of looking at the works, the best way to do it is to do an analysis that is devoid of any kind of bias against the writer and the mode of writing. The narratives have their own place in forming the so-called canon of Plath that talks about her as a poet who committed suicide at an early age defying all norms. But the aim of this work is not looking at the biological importance of the stories and journals but to find the kind of dream narratives, which Plath talked about. These works are a pathway to the complex psyche of the poet who is mostly discussed on the terms of her suicide.

The first chapter of the dissertation is a direct stepping into the private domain of Plath as it deals with the journals kept by her since 1950's till her death. The journals are not only private details; they are the intellectual history of a girl growing up in America with all the advantages and disadvantages of the time. They are not isolated descriptions, but a linking force between the poems, stories and the novel of Plath, and the practicing ground of most of her writing. Similar passages, lines, expressions appear and re-appear in all the modes of writing, establishing the beliefs and complexities of Plath more deeply and firmly.

There is a direct tone of dismissal in the criticism of Hughes regarding Plath's prose that "Her ambition to write stories was the most visible burden of her life".²¹ Taking this remark as a point of departure the second chapter deals with the short stories and prose pieces published as *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose and Diary Excerpts*. This small collection of twenty short stories and ten short pieces is the only readily available material on prose. The difficulty of getting the rest of the unpublished stories collected in the archive of Lily Library, Indiana University restricted my work to these available stories only. The short stories are written basically targeting the audience of popular journals of the time, yet the tone is much more complex than any other story published in those magazines, aimed mostly at women audience. Through an analysis of the stories, and short pieces an attempt has been made to locate the narrative as telling the dreams of Plath that she sometimes spelt out in her poetry and sometimes left them untold. There is a peculiar sort of detachment in all the stories, inspite of the fact that they are so close to the incidents that took place in Plath's life. She writes with the meditative clarity of someone who dares to spell out the innermost thoughts however unsettling they are. The chapter is an attempt to bring out all the issues that Plath brushed upon most of the time and formulated into stories and journal entries in the narrative that she felt closer to her heart, "Prose sustains me. I can mess it, mush it, rewrite it, pick it up any time..."²²

Without a discussion of the only novel of Plath the discussion of her prose narratives will remain incomplete. Moreover, the novel *The Bell Jar* is not only important as a mere narrative, but this a chronicle of a girl who tried to commit suicide at the peak of her successful academic career. The novel presents the double of Plath and the ultimate rescue of the protagonist belies the ultimate death of its creator and adds to the confusion

whether Plath was defeated by the complexities of life or she took a chosen leave from the atrocities of life in order to maintain her self-supremacy. The novel has got similar passages with the stories and the themes of a few stories developed into the novel with smooth transition. The dissertation ends with a conclusion.

Notes

¹ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*. (London: Harper and Rowe, 1971).

² Sylvia Plath, "Comparison," *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories and Prose Pieces*. (London: Faber and Faber Edition, 1978).

³ Ibid. 63.

⁴ Peter Orr. "The Poet Speaks - Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Moorish, Peter Orr, John Press and Ian Scott-Kilvert." Oct. 30, 1962. (1998), 22 Nov. 2001.
<<http://stinfwww.informatik.unileipzig.de/~beckmann/plath/orrinterview.html>>

⁵ Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. (London: Faber and Faber Edition, 1978).

⁶ Ted Hughes, "Introduction." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* by Sylvia Plath . (London: Faber and Faber Edition, 1978). xii.

⁷ Ibid. xiii.

⁸ Sylvia Plath, *Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1963*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. (London: Faber and Faber, 2000). I refer to this journal as *Unabridged Journals*, henceforth, to avoid confusion.

⁹ ____, *Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Francis McCullough. (New York: Dial Press, 1982). This edition is heavily edited and introduced by Ted Hughes.

¹⁰ Ted Hughes, "Foreword." *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Francis McCullough. xii.

¹¹ Robert Scholes, *The Nature of the Narrative*. (London: Oxford UP, 1968), 4.

¹² Joseph Campbell, *Hero With A Thousand Faces*. (Princeton University Press : 1972).

¹³ Patricia Klore. "Introduction", "The Dream as Text, The Dream as Narrative." *Dreaming* Vol. 10, No. 3, 2000.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Delusion and Dreams*. (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1917), 123.

¹⁵ Carl Gustav Jung, "On the Nature of Dreams". *Dreams*. (London: ARK Paperbacks, 1974) 96.

¹⁶ Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. (New York: WW Norton and Co,

¹⁷ Susan Sellers, Ed. *Helen Cixous Reader*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996)

¹⁸ Ted Hughes, "The City" , *Ted Hughes Homepage*, (1999), 24 June, 2002.
http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~angl/hughes/news_1999.html.

¹⁹ A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Silence* (New York: Random House, 1972). 243.

²⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Poet's Prose*. January 28, (1979). 15 May, 2002.
[http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/01/home/plath-johnny.html\(16/02/02](http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/01/home/plath-johnny.html(16/02/02)

²¹ Ted Hughes, "Introduction." xii.

²² Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath. 1950-1960*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil.

Chapter- I

“There was a silence!”: *The (Unabridged) Journals of Sylvia Plath*¹

The journals are cause for celebration...given the intensity and rawness of their writing, at moments, it feels like walking straight into someone else's dream.

---Jacqueline Rose.

The journals kept by Sylvia Plath are a record of her inner life and portrait of her growing voice. It is a kind of intellectual history of the fifties, what she read, admired, and more importantly her philosophy of life. Plath is someone who reacted against her time---sometimes ahead of it, sometimes as a real spectator and finally with her writing transcends time.

It was almost 40 years ago that the poet took her life, and this life is still in dispute. A cottage industry has sprung up around the various retellings of its facts, trying to get it straight, to assign blame, to decide whether or not she really meant to die. Shortly before his death in 1998, Plath's husband, the poet Ted Hughes, unsealed her journals--which were to be kept private until 2013, seemingly to protect their two children--in order to publish them in unabridged form. Well, not completely unabridged: one journal, according to Hughes, has “disappeared,” and one--the one that contains entries written during Plath's separation from Hughes, up until her death--Hughes has allegedly destroyed. Even from the grave, Hughes maintains a modicum of control over how the story is told, so that we may never know, as if we could ever know (and as if these were the only two options) whether Hughes drove

Plath to suicide, or whether Plath was on an inevitable road there, driven only by herself.

The Journals of Sylvia Plath, originally published in 1982 (in the United States only) and heavily edited by Ted Hughes and Francis McCullough, and the *Unabridged Journals*, published world-wide in 2000 to a critical acclaim universally considered long overdue, and brilliantly edited by Karen V. Kukil, have always generated controversy. The *Unabridged Journals* is a colossal book and in the words of Karen V. Kukil, these journals show the “zest for life” of Plath. The journals need a close re-reading, and it is for sure that over the course of time, change the ways readers and scholars study and teach Plath. Throughout these 700 pages, Plath assumed many different personas -- overachieving co-ed, tortured victim in an uncaring, superficial world, bohemian graduate student, American expatriate and perfect wife. She was fascinated by these conflicting selves and sought to unearth the origins of each one in the hopes that she might find the “authentic” one. But Plath was never more productive, never less troubled, and never happier when she assumed her identity as a writer. A fearless critic of her own work (“CAN A SELFISH EGOCENTRIC JEALOUS AND UNIMAGINATIVE FEMALE WRITE A DAMN THING WORTHWHILE?”(99)), she was ceaselessly dedicated to creating the best work she could. “What a poet I will flay myself into,” she triumphantly wrote her mother. This journal offers no tidy answers, just hundreds of glimpses into the life of a complicated young woman who not only knew what she wanted to accomplish but also how difficult it would be to achieve.

Sylvia Plath began writing in a journal at quite an early age. Sylvia's mother Aurelia Plath used to slip dated journals into her stockings at Christmas. In 1945, Sylvia requested that she be given an undated journal because: "When the big-big moments come, one page is not enough."² There have been many conflicting opinions about publishing her private journals. Some questioned if it is right to publish them and others praised these journals for the kind of writing they portrayed. However, one vital fact remains that two of the journals—written during the last days of her life got lost. With these journals, the most significant resource of the last days of Plath's life became non-existent. Ted Hughes, in the "Foreword" of the edited journals gave the only explanation available for the disappearance of the journals:

Two more notebooks survived for a while, maroon-backed ledgers like the 57-59 volume, and continued the record from late '59 to within three days of her death. The last of these contained entries for several months and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival). The other disappeared.³

This loss of journals is like a big blow to any Plath lover. Steven Gould Axelrod talks about this destruction as:

What was in those manuscripts, the one destroyed like a Jew in nazi Germany, the other lost like a *desaparecido*...I need not belabor the value of the manuscripts as historical record, since it is obvious. What may be less obvious is the literary value of those lost and destroyed pages.⁴

The literary worth of the lost journals are significant because that was the time Plath fully found her literary voice and produced some of the finest poems. The last months of her life was free from the oppressive shadow of Ted Hughes and she found the voice to liberate her thoughts through poetry.

Even when the lost journals created a void, the publication of the *Unabridged Journals* brought back some of the lost hope. This edition is quite bold as all the omissions made in the 1982 edition appear here and gives us the true picture of Plath's writing. Plath, in her formal writing, always tried to please a certain section of audience and they are self-conscious writing. However, in her journals we encounter the real Plath, uninhibited, bold and in an ever-changing mood. Her private writing fluctuates between bursts of radiant well being and paralysing depressions. It is not only a self-revelatory narrative, but also work which reflects her dreams and aspirations. Plath's writing: *The Bell Jar*, the poems and the stories just bubble on the surface of every page of the journals. Ted Hughes writes that Plath

strove to see herself honestly and fought her way through the unmaking and remaking of herself. And the Sylvia Plath we can divine here is the closest we can now get to the real person she was in her daily life.⁵

So, the journals, whatever is available now, prove to be the "most important work" after Plath's poems. The journals lead us through a journey, which is painful yet mesmerising. The narration of the writer's dreams and aspirations, happiness and sorrow lead us to a different world where all the readers are at the mercy of the powerful narrator.

Thirty-seven years after the death of Sylvia Plath (she gassed herself to death on a cold February morning in 1963), the unabridged journals are published. This delay in publication indirectly suggests the kind of injustice done to a writer. Before discussing the journals, we can go back again to the earlier version of the edited journals. The 1982 edition, heavily edited by Francis McCullough does not serve the purpose projecting Plath in her true self. Yet, Ted Hughes in his "Foreword" to this

edition says, "Ariel and the later poems give us the voice of that (real) self...All her other writings, except these journals, are the waste products of its gestation."⁶ Here, Hughes's explanation itself fails to clarify the notion of an emergent real self. The editions and omissions done to the journals is a stab on the selfhood of the creator. Now, a question arises, who defines the 'real' self. If an edited journal has to portray self, then this becomes a clear instance of Plath owing nothing of herself. Ted Hughes called everything else as 'waste' apart from *Ariel*. The journals were offered "in the hope of providing some ballast for our idea of reality behind the poems."⁷ This statement clearly shows the lack of reference to anything other than the poetic writing of Plath. All the remarks by Hughes, though they try to project Plath in a certain light, surely restrict her usual flow. Over the centuries women had faced problems in expressing their thoughts and somehow or the other they are subdued. Helen Cixous, in "The Laugh of Medusa" describes a woman's difficulty in voicing and she evokes a crucial aspect of Plath's situation:

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, grounds and language slipping away---- that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak--- even just open her mouth --in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in a language only that which speaks in the masculine.

It is by writing, from and towards women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence.⁸

Plath in her writing struggled against this silencing, but could not avoid it herself, as after death her writing became mere instruments in other people's hand. The publication of the journals in its unabridged form has at last lifted the restrictions put

on Plath's voice. In these journals, we encounter a woman whose struggle of self with self creates an enthralling narrative. The journals portray Plath in an understanding light, which helps in recognising her self and her writing.

The writing of the journals is a very private process. Yet, when we read the journals of Plath we feel that at times they are specifically written for others to read. They show a kind of narrative, which is supposed to be read by others not only by the writer. Whatever is the case, in the journals, we encounter a Plath, who does not have any inhibitions in freely sharing all her experiences, aspirations and depressions. This is a free flowing narrative that brings out the dreamer in Plath. The writings of Plath, though she projects an image of an American girl, are not restricted to that image only. She thinks and writes ahead of her time. She projects the American women of the Fifties with a shattering clarity. Above all the journals are remarkable for the depiction of her inner being and for translating her dreams.

The *Unabridged Journals* contain Plath's adult journals from 1950 to 1962. This collection of twenty-three journals documents Plath's student years at Smith College and Newnham College, Cambridge, her marriage to Ted Hughes, and two years of teaching and writing in New England. A few fragments from journals of 1950 to 1960 complete the edition. We encounter an eighteen-year-old Plath in the beginning, who noted down her feelings in the journals in an almost day-to-day basis. From the beginning until the end of the journals the writings comprises both brilliant happy passages and depressingly sad narratives. That is the real Plath, with an ever-shifting mood.

In the journal entry of July 1950, Plath pens down her feelings on a moonlit night, “What is more wonderful than to be a virgin, clean and sound and young, on such a night?”(8). Here we can hear the echo of the value systems strongly recommended by the society: to be pure, virgin and happy. Later this happy expression becomes a burden on Plath as she realises that the society conforms to two different norms in case of men and women. Expressions that are more passionate take over from this point in Plath's life. Plath's zest for life is what strikes a reader in the journals, as we always associate her with the idea of death. Love for people, her friends and acquaintances, leads her to creativity. Therefore, she says:

I love people. Everybody.... I would like to be everyone, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then come back to write about my thoughts, my emotions, as that person. But ...I have to live my life...And you cannot regard your own life with objective creativity all the time. (9)

The contradicting emotions are a part of Plath and in a sense they help her create the powerful poems and narratives that always surprise the reader by their uniqueness. Even while having love for life, Plath's philosophy borders on death: “I feel the weight of centuries smothering me. Some girl a hundred years ago once lived as I do. And she is dead. I am the present, but I know I, too, will pass...And I don't want to die.” By the time Plath reaches the end of the passage, the tone shifts its focus and life becomes dearer than death. This urge for living even after feeling the burden of life is what everyone overlooks. In the poems and other writings, this urge does not become clear. From that point of view the journal entries are the narratives closer to the reality called Plath.

The journals of 1950 to 1956 narrate Plath's days at Smith, where she is the American girl full of life. Plath here talks about her dates, how she loves to have

company and her desire for having someone to lean on. The journal entries of this time show Plath in her best expressive mood. Though there are conflicting thoughts in between she expresses herself freely. She expresses her desires: sexual, emotional, and paints her dreams clearly. Her relationship with different boys like Eddie and Bob- is translated into paper brilliantly. All the time she seeks someone to love, to be loved- but the individuality that is so striking in her is never lost. She is clear about what she needs and all the relations she accepts on the basis that they won't harm her creative self. She clarifies her stand by saying, "Before I give my body, I must give my thoughts, my mind, my dreams..."(20). Even when Plath, as any average eighteen year old, craved for male company, she had a clear idea where to draw the line. Her creativity is the most vital concern and she is not ready to compromise on any situation, which can pose a threat to it. She makes it clear in this way—while going out on a date with Bob, she remembers another friend Eddie and explains:

I love you because you are me ... my writing, my desire to be many lives. I will be a little god in my small ways...How can I tell Bob that my happiness streams from having wrenched a part out of my life, a piece of hurt and beauty, and transformed into type written words on paper? How can he know I am justifying my life, my keen emotions, my feeling, by turning it into print? (22)

Some reviewers of the journals try to project Plath as an average girl hungry for company, love and sex and nothing more. However, a closer look reveals that even in seeking a mate she gives priority to her creativity. She does not feel fulfilled until and unless the partner can share her intellect and ideals. Plath makes no bones about her desire for security in the form of a partner:

How we need that security! How we need another soul to cling to, another body to keep us warm. To rest and trust; to give your soul in confidence: I need ...someone to pour myself into. (21)

After such an outburst on the need of a company, she is ready to face heartbreak easily. She feels that as long as she can create, she can write, she won't feel defeated: "Perhaps some day I'll crawl back home defeated. But not as long as I can make stories out of my heartbreak, beauty out of sorrow". The desire for a partner at times is overpowered by Plath's self-love: "I do not love; I do not love anybody except myself... I am capable of affection for those reflect my own world." Plath is very sure about having her own self, which is individualistic—sometimes bordering on egoistic ground. However, she is not ready to lose her own identity in her longing to have a soul mate. Her desire for an active life creates feeling of envy for men, as they are capable of leading a family life as well as having a career. In the early 50's, though women worked outside the home, her individuality was not taken care of so seriously. But Plath was sure of her role in a family and voiced it clearly:

I will not submit to having my life fingered by my husband, enclosed in the larger circle of activity, and nourished vicariously by tales of his actual exploits. I must have a legitimate field of my own, apart from his, which he must respect. (98-99)

These are the words coming out of an eighteen-year-old college girl who thought deeply about the kind of future she will welcome. Her self respect is more dear to her than any other relationship. Plath was of the opinion that when she was capable of certain things why should she give in to a masculine domination, be it in family life or creative life. In an early journal of 1950's, Plath made her intentions clear: about the man she will welcome in to her life: "...the man who will be intelligent, yet physically magnetic and personable. If I can offer that combination, why shouldn't I expect that in a man?" (21) All these ideas are inherent in the being of Plath— yet

we should not forget that she is very much like any other eighteen-year-old craving for unconditional love. “Someone, somewhere, can you understand me a little, love me a little? For all my despair, for all my ideals, for all that— I love life.”(25) This longing for life and love is as true for Plath as any other desire. In spite of the image of death hovering over her persona, the love for life flows intently in her veins as lifeblood.

The next dominant aspect that floods the journal entries is the question “Who am I?” (26) The idea of being a non-entity haunted Plath and in some cases led to a feeling of depression. During her Smith years, she was very much concerned about her identity: “I sit in the library tonight... And I sit here without identity: faceless.” (26) Then she talks about her own room, her space, her engagements and feels that these factors indicate that she “...is a whole person, not merely a knot of nerves without identity.”(26) These contradicting emotions continue throughout her life and these tormenting thoughts at times tear Plath. She explains: “ There is so much, and I am torn in different directions, pulled thin, taut against horizons too distant for me to reach.”(27) The tormenting times in which Plath passed her youth also catered to the feeling of ‘living on the edge’ and having no identity. Plath gives a catchy description of the time that contributed to her search for meaning:

...looking over, looking down into the windy blackness and not being quite able to make out through the yellow, stinking mist, just what lies below in the slime, in the oozing, vomit-streaked slime; and so I could go on, into my thoughts, writing much, trying to find the core, the meaning for myself. (33)

In her journals, we see a lot of introspection to her inner being, to the time she lived in. This is a trend, which continued from the beginning of the journals. Plath never

ceased to think about what life means to her and what she is going to do with it. Even when she is striving to live life, sickness and sadness of the mind overpower her. Though we do not have any explicit explanation of these feelings, the dilemma of life is enough to torment a sensitive mind like Plath's. She herself claims that she is a "victim of introspection". For her, to be creative, one has to come out of one's own restrictive shell so as to be a "magnanimous creative person". Even then Plath is mesmerised by the power of the individual, "Yet I am hypnotised by the workings of the individual, alone, and am continually using myself as specimen." This using oneself as a specimen results in Plath's powerful poetry and writings, which is so close to the creator. The transition from self-doubting to creating and translating her self into poetry covers the whole of Plath's life.

Now, we can look into the two currents most vivid in her life. Plath, in her June 20, 1958 journal entry writes:

It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative—whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it. (395)

These two altering currents influence her writing also. Even the feelings of depression are not isolated from her creative persona. Sometimes it affects her writing and sometimes it enhances it. Depression comes to Plath from being in contact with people and sometimes by lack of it. When Plath is exposed to the best kind of life (joining Smith College was one of her dreams), she feels depressed:

My mind is ...like a wastebasket full of waste paper; bits of hair and rotten apple cores. I am feeling depressed from being exposed to so many lives, so many of them exciting, new to my realm of experience.

Then she snaps at herself and writes:

You are sacrificed by your own limitations. Your blind choices cannot be changed...You are wallowing in original sin; your limitations...You have lost all delight in life. Ahead is an array of blind alleys. You are half-deliberately, half-desperately, cutting off your grip on creative life. (145)

Whatever happens to Plath's emotional life directly hits her creativity. And she is half-dead when she is not able to create. The inability to create leads to a feeling of panic in Plath. The fear of not succeeding intellectually troubled her all the time. Whenever she failed to write, she felt that she is "A purposeless woman with dreams of grandeur." (142) The depressing feelings are created by her strenuous relationship with her mother and later with Ted Hughes. Plath never liked her dominating mother and held her responsible for her father's death. These negative ideas about her mother never let Plath to have a cordial relationship with her. Instead, it suffocated Plath and led her to depression at times. Plath felt insecure with her husband also, for many reasons. The breaking up of the relationship was responsible for many depressive bouts.

The first attempt of suicide by Sylvia was during her Smith college days when she took an overdose of sleeping pills on 24 August 1953. Plath did not keep a journal from that time until the end of 1955. So, we have no clue as to what led her into taking such a drastic step. The unavailability of any explanation does not mean that we are to grope in the dark to find out the lines that Plath followed in her life till she thought it fit to end it. At a very early stage of her journals, Plath talks about the force called life and what it means to her. These lines are more than enough to make the point that she was very much aware of the priorities of life and the end is as deliberate as the act of taking a breath is. Plath muses that,

Cats have nine lives...You have one; and somewhere along the thin, tenuous thread of your existence there is the black knot, the blood clot, the stopped heartbeat that spells the end of this particular individual which is called "I" and "You" and "Sylvia"(63).

This picture of the ultimate end hanged before the eyes of Plath from the beginning and she was aware of the death wish within herself, as she was largely disappointed with life by all means. However, some journal entries indicate her tendency towards suicide, which is mostly influenced by the feeling of depression. A kind of insecurity gripped her even when she was in the best of her form. She herself admits that: "Hundreds of dreaming ambitious girls would like to be in my place." But Plath doubted her potential and wanted to seek help— at least from a psychiatrist. However, in the same journal entry she abandoned the idea and wrote: "I won't take advice, even if I want it. I'll kill myself. I am beyond help. No one here has the time to probe, to aid me in understanding myself." (151) The feelings of despair fill the pages of journals during the late 1952 and early 1953. The main cause behind all these depressing feelings is her inability to find her true worth. "I feel behind my eyes a numb, paralyzed cavern, a pit of hell, a mimicking nothingness...I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility...I don't know who I'm, where I'm going." (149) Nevertheless, this urge to kill herself is justified by her in the following words, "I am absolved of all personal responsibility and can sacrifice myself in a "splurge of altruism" on the altar of the Cause with a capital "C""(150). These feelings of depression and suicide fill the pages of the journals. They reveal to the readers what a tormented life Plath lived— only because she wanted to be sure about herself. Her identity, her creativity, her purpose of life—all these questions troubled her and whenever she failed to find the right direction of her life she wanted to end it than to

drag on with an insignificant life. The journal entries are filled with the expressions like, “I am afraid. I am not solid, but hollow” (149). The feeling of ‘hollow’ existence bothered her a lot. This hollowness of being comes from the age she lived in. The unfulfilling surroundings lead the mind to concede that life is a burden. The disturbing thoughts regarding the futility of life led Plath to believe that her existence is a mere encumbrance. At the age of twenty Plath felt:

My life up till now seems messy, inconclusive, disorganized....I’m drowning into negativism, self-hate, doubt, madness...afraid that the blank hell in the back of my eyes will break through...(150).

The ‘blank hell’ is the hell containing all the self-doubts and all the unanswered questions that remain unresolved till now. Had there been some respite from this hell, the suicide that led the artist in Plath to strangle her own voice would not have been necessary. The strange thing is that the success of her college days never lifted her spirit as the height that she wanted to reach was still a far cry in the age she lived in. She continuously referred in her journal entries to the fact that she is a failure in all the senses, with no hope of succeeding. At this point the question may arise that the kind of pessimism that the entries showed, leads a reader to believe that Plath was weak in her fight of life. The fact which we have to admit here is that the so called defeat of life is actually a kind of victory she wanted to achieve that was so new to the age that started realising the potential of a woman as an individual being. The entire negative thoughts came to her mind because she wanted to break away from the monotonous, burdensome existence of the warring fifties that left very little space for a woman to breath freely. The following lines are a fine example of the insecurity Plath felt at every step of her existence:

I am a conglomerate garbage heap of loose ends—selfish, scared, contemplating, devoting the rest of my life to a cause....anywhere, anywhere, where the burden of the terrifying, hellish weight of self-responsibility and ultimate self-judgment is lifted. I can see ahead only into dark, sordid alleys, where the dregs, the sludge, the filth of my life lies, unglorified, unchanged— transfigured by nothing: no nobility, not even the illusion of a dream (150).

The image of the garbage heap, the dark alleys that fill the filth of the life now glorified, shows Plath in a different light. The whole burden of the psychic reformation that does not happen in the life of Plath suffocates the poet in such a way that she looses out on the illusions of dreams as well, one of the life giving forces of this visionary creator. Talking of suicide, Lynn Gallop, in her book *Sui Song*⁹ tries to establish a connection between creativity and the act of suicide. She establishes the fact that both the acts have similarities, “ there are credible connections between creativity and suicide...not...all artists are neurotic, although they may be, or even that neurosis is a prerequisite to creativity.”¹⁰ Considering the view we can agree that the neurosis Plath went through is a part of her creativity.

Another vital fact that we have to consider while reading the narratives describing Plath's obsession with death and suicide is that these are the only evidence we have in order to find the cause of her act. Though the aim of this dissertation is not to find facts, for calling the narratives as dream narratives we have to take into consideration these pages where Plath was more than herself, at all the points referring to doubts and reservations she had about life. All the great literary suicides intrigued the mind of the young budding artist whose philosophy of life bordered on the precarious edge of undecided dilemma. The great truth that dawned upon her is that one cannot be happy forever, even though one is successful. She

asked herself the vital question, "Why did Virginia Woolf commit suicide? Or Sara Teasdale---or the other brilliant women---neurotic? Was their writing sublimation (oh horrible word) of deep, basic desires?"(151). She wanted to find suitable answers to all these questions. She was not sure how high she could set the goals of her life. The assumption was that the height that these writers wanted to reach was not allowed to them freely, though they were capable, and that was the root cause of the whole disappointment. Such a realisation in the part of a twenty-year-old woman is quite noteworthy, as she has not tasted any kind of brutal failure until then. The journals do not include the crucial pages before her actual suicide and these missing pages leave us in the dark as to why the drastic step was necessary. The passages discussed till now show the various doubts that ultimately led to the act which was not an action taken against the infidelity of her husband: it is more than that as Plath leaves behind a collection of the most powerful poems she wrote at the time of her death. The suicide is not a defeat in any sense; it elevates the artist to the realm where she wanted to have her own way. A. Alvarez was a close acquaintance of the Hughes and he deals at large on her suicide in his book *The Savage God*¹¹. Plath talked about her suicide in a "detached manner" according to Alvarez and the claim he makes is that:

..the suicide adds nothing at all to the poetry, so the myth of Sylvia as a passive victim is a total perversion of the woman she was. It misses altogether her liveliness, her intellectual appetite and harsh wit, her great imaginative resourcefulness and vehemence of feeling, her control. Above all, it misses the courage with which she was able to turn disaster into art.¹²

When we return to the journals--after her (undocumented) suicide attempt and graduation from Smith, in full swing as a Fulbright Fellow in Cambridge, England--

the themes that are to haunt her writing until her death are Present and worried over, like a dog with a dishcloth. Even in her early years at Smith, Plath was obsessed over whether or not she was dedicated enough, disciplined enough. In her rigorous tasks that she set for herself always included learning German, writing more, reading more. These become, first with her entrance into the rigorous intellectual society at Cambridge and then with her subsequent marriage, more and more of a bitter self-reprimand.

The *Unabridged Journals* are significant for another reason— as they reveal the kind of relationship Plath shared with her husband Ted Hughes. Before glancing at the kind of portrayal Plath has given of the relationship, we can read these lines from Hughes' poem "Dreamers"¹³:

"Europe's mystical jewel....
I refused to interpret. I saw
The dreamer in her
Had fallen in love with me and she did not know it.
That moment the dreamer in me,
Fell in love with her, and I knew it.

(*Birthday Letters*)

These beautiful lines give us a picture of a relationship between two great poets and dreamers. Hughes, in the poetry collection *Birthday Letters* (1998), tries to establish the fact that they were a perfect couple wronged by the vagaries of time. When we read Plath, we do not get the same picture. There are several disparities between the two views and as Plath wrote the journals as a true narrative of her heart, we have the

reason to support her view more than that of Hughes, who gives a rosy picture of the whole relationship. As in all great romances, the entries become fiery when Hughes enters the picture. In the now-famous account of their meeting, in 1956, at a party for the literary magazine *Saint Botolph's Review*, Plath's first meeting with Hughes is one of the finest descriptions on how the relationship started and on what terms. Plath describes Hughes as,

The one man in the room who was as big as his poems, huge, with hulk
and dynamic chunks of words...(212)
That big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me.
(213)

Huge enough, that is, to engulf her talent, her fears, her strong sexual urges. In this encounter, a very drunk Hughes ripped Plath's red headband off her head as a souvenir (in *Birthday Letters*, Hughes' poetic account of their marriage, Hughes insists the headband was blue). In response, Plath, also drunk ("he was sloshing brandy in a glass and I was sloshing it at the place where my mouth was when I last knew about it"), bit him on the cheek so hard that she drew blood, but knew then that she had met her match, writing, "oh, to give myself crashing, fighting, to you."

It turns out that this catastrophic meeting was not the real beginning of their relationship. Plath was still wildly in love with Richard Sassoon, a Frenchman she met while at Smith. After the Saint Botolph's party and a later "sleepless holocaust night with Ted in London," she fled to Paris in search of Sassoon, but not finding him, returned to England and Hughes. They married, and there began the strange shifting of power between them. At first, Plath is quite smug about her good luck, writing, "All my past theories against marrying a writer dissolve with Ted: his rejections more than double my sorrow & his acceptances rejoice me more than

mine--it is as if he is the perfect male counterpart to my own self.... Together, we are the most faithful, creative, healthy simple couple imaginable!" (271)

The 1982 edited edition of the journals projected almost a one sided view of the relationship. The omissions made in that journal went nearly against Plath. We can again look at the first meeting of these two poets, which was not projected properly in the earlier journals. It is very evident from this passage:

...and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth [and ripped my hairband off, my lovely red hair band scarf which has weathered the sun and much love and whose like I shall never find, and my favorite silver earrings; "hah, I shall keep", he barked.] And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face. (212)

The bracketed portion of the entry was omitted in the earlier journal--- which ultimately projected Plath in a violent light but Hughes was given a clean image. His violence was masked. But the unabridged journals have published all the passages in their true form and we get a better picture of the legendary relationship of the two poets. Plath was very happy to be associated with the most famous British poet. She always wanted an intelligent partner and Hughes fit into the role perfectly. Her journal entries of 1957 indicate her happiness at getting married: "I'm married to a poet. We came together in that church of the chimney sweeps with nothing but love & hope & our own selves..." (270) Again, she writes: "And here I am: Mrs. Hughes and wife of a published poet. O I knew it would happen---but never thought so miraculously soon..." These were one of the happiest moments of Plath's life. In Ted Hughes, she found the soul mate who can give her a feeling of security, who can criticize her writing and yet be a loving husband. Plath depended a lot on Hughes and his colossal presence sometimes choked her creative abilities. Till the time Plath

found about Hughes' infidelity, she was happy with her marriage even though she felt jealous at times by his success. The early years of marriage made Plath feel close to Ted. According to April 1st, 1958 entry, Hughes, for Plath, was "...closer, warmer, dearer..." than she was ever to herself. She claims to have:

...the impossible, the wonderful, —I am perfectly at one with Ted, body and soul, as the ridiculous song says—our vocation is writing, our love is each other—and the world is ours to explore...

The closeness and dependence on her husband at times threatened Plath. She noted down her feelings, "Dangerous to be so close to Ted day in and day out. I have no life separate from his, and likely to become a mere accessory." (524) This fear of losing identity instilled an urge in Plath to be independent. She again wrote, "How to develop my independence? Not tell him everything. Hard, seeing him all the time, not leading outer life". As long as Plath led a happy life with Hughes, she was busy with her two children Frieda and Nicholas and writing had taken a back seat. After the tormenting days of finding out Ted's relationship with another woman, Plath and Hughes separated in the October of 1962. From that time till her suicide on February 11, 1963, Plath led a very creative life. She rejected the idea of living a morose and defeated life and created some of her best poems in these last six months. But we are still clueless as to what triggered her suicide—because of the fact that Hughes destroyed the journals written during those last days. A beautiful relationship ended in a gory manner with enough pointers at Hughes as one of the reasons for it.

The journals are the true narratives of the relationship between the mother and daughter: Aurelia and Sylvia. There is a marked difference between the kind of relationship portrayed by the *Letters Home* and the journals. The letters are the more

private narrative than the journals but the truth is that the letters so much disguise the feelings of Plath who wanted to tell a certain kind of story of her life to her mother.

One reason I could keep up such a satisfactory letter relationship with her while in England was we could both verbalize our desired image of ourselves in relation to each other: interest and sincere love, and never feel the emotional currents at war with these verbally expressed feelings.

Plath took the letters as just verbal interplay and chose the journals to gush out her true emotions. The hatred of Plath for her father is very well known but the kind of anger she carried all her life towards her mother comes out alive in the pages of her journals. Aurelia Plath calls the relationship that existed between her and Sylvia, a kind of “psychic osmosis”— which is at times very wonderful and at times an unwelcome invasion of privacy. In the letters to her mother, Sylvia poured her heart out. Still she did not let her mother know about the kind of turmoil going inside her mind. On the contrary, she tried to shield her mother from the ‘psychic osmosis.’ Adrienne Rich, in her famous treatise on motherhood, *Of Woman Born*¹⁴, discusses the problem of mother-daughter relationship where she points out the difficulties of the relationship. According to Rich, patriarchal attitudes encourage a split between the two and women are made taboo to women— not only sexually but also as co-creators and co-conspirators. The idea of warmth, nourishment, tenderness and security come from the mother. A woman comes to love her own body through first loving her mother’s and this is termed by Rich as profound “matrilineal bequest.” In case of Sylvia, this strong bonding is lost somehow and she accuses her mother for killing her father and portrays her as a ‘Medusa’ figure in her poem. Plath always had a problem of agreeing with her mother and she was frightened by the fact that she

hears her mother speaking through her. Sylvia had a fear of losing her identity to her self-imposing mother and pronounced her hatred for her in clear terms in front of her psychiatrist R.B. When the doctor gives her permission to hate her mother, she feels that it is better than any shock treatment.

“I hate her, doctor.” So I feel terrific. In a smarmy matriarchy of togetherness it is hard to get a sanction to hate one’s mother especially a sanction one believes in. I believe in RB’s because she is...“a permissive mother figure.”.... it makes me feel good like hell to express my hostility for my mother, frees me from the Panic Bird on my heart and on my typewriter...(429)

This freeing of the self from the mother who not only tormented her life but her writing also is very difficult to believe if we read the *Letters Home* simultaneously. The difference in tone is shocking but the pent up feelings that she tried to hide from her mother came out as the journal entries and this outlet was needed very immediately as the undisclosed emotions were disturbing Plath all the while.

The journals of Plath are not only records of her private feelings and emotions. These journals are practising ground for her creative writing as well. The poems, *The Bell Jar* and numerous short stories pop out from page to page. Plath’s agonies of creation, her feelings of triumph after writing a good poem or a story—everything is recorded in these journals. They tell the untold story behind almost every poem, every story. There are enough notes included, which acted as the building grounds for most of her creations. Writing filled the void in Plath’s life--- so whenever she felt the threat of losing creativity she suffered from loneliness. Plath declares that she has to write about the world “with no glazing.” She had a fear that she might not be successful. The craving for fame and popularity always followed

her motives for writing. She put it precisely in one journal like this, "...it is sad to mouth only to be able to mouth poets; I want someone to mouth me." (92) This desire for fame is nothing unnatural, but more than fame, she was worried about her creative ability. She describes her fears in such a way:

What horrifies me most is the idea of being useless: well educated, brilliantly promising, and fading out into an indifferent middle age. Instead of working at writing, I freeze in dreams, unable to take disillusion of rejection. (524)

Whenever Plath overcame the fear of facing "blank pages" day after day, she became the happiest. Her life and happiness revolved around her creativity. She noted down events, happenings, and characters in her journals and later used them in her poems, stories, and novels. One example of her writing process is enough to give us an idea of how the journals lead the reader to experience her creative process:

...back to work. Writing and scrawling corrections, retyping, my story on Trouble-Making Mother: close to my experience, getting a neat slice out of a big potholing deepish pie...

Plath justifies the way she writes by saying that:

Since my woman's world is perceived greatly through the emotions and the senses, I treat it that way in my writing--- and am often overweighed with heavy descriptive passages and a Kaleidoscope of similes. (88)

All the journal entries are but extensions of Plath, the poet, novelist and storywriter. Even without paying attention to the biographical details of the entries, a closer look will reveal a poem, a story hidden between the lines.

Plath makes extensive notes on the plots of the stories, more than the poems. She mentions the poems, their writing process, but no previous notes ---as poetry came spontaneously to Plath. But in the case of short stories, Plath made a lot of

notes. She thrived to be a successful storywriter and this factor has created so many entries and notes on story outlines. Plath sounds happy when she becomes able to write a story to her heart's content:

I feel this month I have conquered my Panic Bird. I am a calm, happy and serene writer. With a pleasant sense of learning and being better with every story, and at the same time spurred tension that comes from knowing they fall short, in this way or that, from what I see ahead, ten stories from now. (486)

In her lifetime only a single poetry collection and a few stories and poems were published. The joy of seeing her work published is immense any way.

The journals are the true dream narratives of Plath. She transforms her every dream, every nightmare into written pages with an amazing clarity. This clarity translates her dreams into reality and yet leaves an aura around them for the readers to enjoy and appreciate.

But in those early years of marriage, it was Hughes who was the more successful writer, winning awards and publication, and Plath struggled, doggedly sending out poetry and stories for publication and dreaming of seeing her work in *The New Yorker*. Oddly, it was prose that she had the highest hopes for, the poems were a lesser effort. Plath took rejection hard, and fought to keep her disappointment from Hughes, to stop nagging him (although it seemed that saying anything to Hughes that he did not want to hear was included under the rubric of nagging). They warred over Hughes' perceived infidelities, spectacularly at times; of one fight she writes, "I had a sprained thumb, Ted's bloody claw marks, for a week, and I remember hurling a glass with all my force across a dark room.... I got hit and saw stars."

This is not to say that Plath's journals are all pyrotechnics and bloody tooth marks. Some of it is dull, slow going: lists of things that Plath cooked; worries about money, illness. But they do make her less of an abused icon and more human in all her wild flinging from despair to giddy happiness and back again. (At one point she dryly notes, "There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive, recreate it.") What her journals re-create is the journey from wanting to be a writer to actually being one; her suicide--far from a theatrical act--was the terrible coda to the story of someone struggling to live in a complicated world. She did not live to tell this story, but her journals do.

The person Plath warred with the most was not her husband, her father, or her mother. It was her own self that she was in constant fight with. The journals take us through an emotional journey of Plath's life and a beautiful portrayal of the day-to-day events touch any reader. Journals of women are not only their private endeavours, but also a history of so many untold stories. Usually there is a lack of narrative by women which are personal and revealing their lives. A generalisation will be too trivial, though we have to admit that the age in which Plath wrote, had very few women telling their lives to the public. The style of the journals is more of the spoken form, than high literary endeavour. Plath preferred this mode to tell the incidents of her life, not only to herself, but also definitely to an audience that she never specified. Journals are the true narrative of her self as she donned the garb of a teller, who does not have any inhibitions depicting her life and dreams to the world at large.

Notes

¹ Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1952-1963*. Ed. Karen Kukil. (London: Faber and Faber, 2000). This latest publication is discussed here and as there is the earlier version of the journals, I have used the term *Unabridged Journals* for this volume to avoid confusion. The silencing of the certain entries earlier has lead to the title of this chapter, where the quote is taken from the poem "Little Fugue" from the poetry collection *Collected Poems* by Sylvia Plath.

² Sylvia Plath. *Letters Home*. Ed Aurelia Scorer Plath. (London: Faber and Faber) 31.

³ Ted Hughes, "Foreword", *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Francis McCullough. (London: Faber and Faber, 1982). xiii.

⁴ Stephen Gould Axelrod, "The Second Destruction of Sylvia Plath." *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Linda Wagner Martin. (New York: Routledge, 1988). 329

⁵ Ted Hughes, "Foreword", *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Francis McCullough.

⁶ Ibid. xiv.

⁷ Ted Hughes, "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals." *Ariel Ascending: Writings About Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Paul Alexander. (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). 154.

⁸ Helen Cixous. "The Laugh of Medusa." *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* Trans. Keith and Paula Cohen. (New York: Schocken, 1981). 248

⁹ Lynne Sallop, *Sui Song* (New York: Vantage Press, 1978).

¹⁰ Ibid. 2

¹¹ A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*. (New York: Random House, 1972).

¹² Ibid. 40. Alvarez explains Plath's suicide and at times generalizes it and justifies it on the basis of the idea of suicide in general. According to him death came to Plath very "carelessly, by mistake and too soon." The final suicide attempt leaves behind the doubt whether she wanted to die or not as she left the doctor's phone number for the baby sitter to find when she comes for duty. Death was a kind of liberal force for Plath not an accident. As a last thought she might have wished to be found out, but the part of her that wanted to die should be considered as the creative self and this part overpowered the other.

¹³ Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters*. (Faber and Faber. London: 1998). 157-158.

¹⁴ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution..* (New York: W W Norton & Co., 1976).

Chapter-II

“With No Strings Attached”: *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*.

Sylvia Plath's life and work revolve around the circumstances that led to the final culminating point---her suicide. This aspect influenced her stories intensely. The short stories of Plath are basically written in her teenage or early twenties. The stories were written with an aim to get them published in popular magazines like *Mademoiselle*, *Seventeen* etc. While some of them were published, the greater number of them remained unpublished. After her death, in 1977, Ted Hughes first published a small collection of it and again in 1978 it was reprinted with a few more stories. This small collection of stories titled *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose and Diary Excerpts*, showcases the genius Plath possessed and is a great example of her apprentice. The problem of looking into these stories arises when we try to judge them according to the standard norms of short fiction. Some of the stories are fine pieces, but some are just formula written. Here, the aim of this dissertation is not to judge their credibility, but to look for the voice of the writer forming a powerful narrative.

Douglas Hill in an article “Living and Dying” claims:

Those who would deal in the legend of Sylvia Plath, who would buy and sell the myths of a woman propelled by psychosis into a fury of poetic creation and a compulsion to destroy herself, do her craft and her precious artistic commitment—something of a disservice.¹

This claim is very much true and we will be doing “disservice” if we take the prose pieces in a lighter vein than the poems. Plath's life story is reflected through her

writings and no one can deny that. But this becomes problematic when it becomes the single angle of looking into her work. In a journal, entry Plath voices her wish:

If IF I could break into a meaningful prose that expressed my feelings, I would be free. Free to have a wonderful life...My first job to open my real experience like an old wound; then to extend it; then to invent on the drop of a feather, a whole multicolored bird. (8 Sept. 1959)

Though critics deny Plath's obsession with prose as unnecessary, the fact remains that she considered prose as a more liberal medium with enough space in it. The experience of her life influences her narrative and her dreams get a form in it. Plath herself contradicts her own remarks and says at a point that:

“I shall perish if I can write about no one but myself.”

This is a kind of denial of her own true talent. Ted Hughes, while criticizing her stories says that: “...she has an instant special pass to the centre, and no choice but to use it.”² So, her writing reflects her subjectivity as she directly reaches the centre of her being. This subjectivity is not a constraining one; it transcends the personal layer and appeals to the heart. The only problem we can guess at this stage about her short stories is that Plath aimed at the popular American magazines and almost failed to make an entry into the field. Otherwise, these pieces are true to her creative genius as her poems are. They reflect the inner urge of the poet in a different medium both powerful and distinctive.

Before analysing the stories of Plath, it becomes essential to consider the time when she wrote these pieces. The time was not so convenient for the women writers. They were still struggling to establish an identity, which has its own particular set up. In *Mad Woman in the Attic: The Women Writers and the Nineteenth Century*

Literary Imagination, Sandra Gilbert And Susan Gubar point out that the problem of a woman artist is her identity:

For a woman artist is, after all a woman—that is her ‘problem’—and if she denies her own gender, she inevitably confronts an identity crisis as severe as the anxiety of authorship she is trying to surmount.³

This ‘anxiety of authorship’ is always there for Plath and she tries to overcome it at so many different levels that her effort is recognised by the patriarchal literary society, though in the beginning she struggled a lot. The argument put forward by Gubar and Gilbert is that “a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend these extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her” or they will find themselves “killed” into “male art,” their choices limited to those of “angel in the house” and “the mad woman in the attic.” The writings of Plath show a conscious effort to come out of these two binding forces and establish herself in the role of a successful woman in all the senses of the term. Lynda K. Bundtzen, reviewing Gilbert and Gubar’s comment in her biography on Plath, says that:

Gilbert and Gubar suggest that Plath—like other women writers before her—does not transcend the literary and critical categories imposed on her by male tradition. She remains in her “textually ordained ‘place’”—as another madwoman---but one who refused, unlike her precursor Dickinson, to renounce her adult sexuality and femininity, or to confine her “intransigent female autonomy” to writing anonymous poems in the attic of her father’s house.⁴

Bundtzen supports Plath's effort to stay away from both the suggested categories and realizing her dream of becoming a so-called normal woman and a writer. Plath's stories are enough proof of this as the narratives are free from any kind of bondages and freely express her ideas. The situations of her day-to-day life find place in the

stories and some of them are unsettling as she had the courage to portray her characters in the way she wanted. She executes a lot of characters in the process of writing some of her best stories and those death's are symbolic enough of the liberty she sought to achieve from the moulded cast of "the plaster"⁵ of life and from the "bell jar of stifling distortions"⁶ and be the persona having an independent self. Even after accepting Gilbert and Gubar's pioneering views on women writers, here I have to admit that their version of Plath is a bit frightening as Plath is portrayed as having a torn identity. It is necessity to look into the stories as narratives of Plath's formative days as a writer and later as a mode of expression that can accommodate more than what she can explain through her poems.

The story collection that is being discussed here is not in any sense representative the varied moods and themes explored by Plath. Most of the stories are in the unpublished form and treasured in the archive of the Lily Library, Indiana University. Linda Wagner Martin, in *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*, has discussed in detail some of the unpublished stories and any reference made to those stories are taken from Wagner-Martins book. The twenty stories and the ten short prose pieces collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose and Diary Excerpts*, give us the other side of the talent Plath possessed. Though the analysis may seem to be inadequate in the wake of the unavailability of the whole collection of stories, we have to rely on the judgment of Hughes and take these pieces as the most representative pieces till the whole lot of stories is published.

The theme of death is one of the prominent subjects in most of the stories, mixed with dreams and hallucinations to give the desired effect. The most

remarkable stories in the collection deals with dreams, which are destructive most of the time. The title story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams", along with similar pieces like "Daughters of Blossom Street" and "Wishing Box" deals with dreams which lead to the destruction of the protagonist. The dualities of self/other, real/surreal--- find a way into Plath's imagination and finally lead to the destructive endings. Another story, which also ends in a destructive dream sequence, is "The Fifty Ninth Bear". We can find a streak of biographical detail hidden in the folds of her stories. Plath speaks through her characters and as she chooses the prose narrative to be the narrative closer to her heart, we can invariably see her speaking through the lines.

In 'Johnny Panic' death acquires a "panic face" which is very powerful, a god like figure to whom the narrator of the story dedicates her life. Most strikingly, the narrator is a writer, just like Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, and both the characters have noticeable similarities with their creator Plath. In her *Unabridged Journals*, many entries are there on this story. They tell about her aspirations and happiness on writing a story like this. In her own words, the story is "[c]ooler and gray, with that city-canyon wetness after a spring rain."⁷ This remark is true as far as the story is concerned. The hallucinatory effect of the dreams described transports us to a world, which, in spite of being influenced by real incidents, looks surreal. The protagonist of the story works as a secretary for a Boston City Hospital, who is only referred to as "I" (we can assume her to be Plath at any moment). She works for Johnny Panic, the maker and keeper of dreams and copies the dreams of the hospitals' thirty-three year old history to make them into a 'Bible of Dreams'. A

secretary in Boston psychiatric hospital keeps a private record of the patients dreams, to create her bible and treasure house of dreams. The dreams come out of a great lake---‘the sewage firm of ages, transparence aside’--- which forms the contents of her own dream. She becomes the devoted follower of Johnny Panic: “Panic with a dog face, devil-face, hag-face, whore-face, panic in capital letters with no face at all--it’s the same Johnny Panic, awake or asleep.” (152) She not only records dreams for him but also invents them, until she is caught and given electrotherapy: “The crown of wire is placed on my head, the wafer of forgetfulness on my tongue.” (166) At that moment Johnny Panic comes to her rescue: “He forgets not his own.” This ending shows a saving of memory and dreaming. In the story and in the poem “Poem for a Birthday”⁸, written at the same time, the psychic process is teamed up with symbolization. The whole process of electrotherapy is almost identified as an enemy, which also brings to light the oppression of the mental institutions. Both in the poem and in the story, a sense of loss is also invoked; as the therapy takes away the negativity, which Plath considers a part of herself. In this sense, ‘Johnny Panic’ story is the strongest example of Plath’s ‘dream narrative’ where she spells out her inner mind in a narrative, which she considers a better one over the poetic style. After writing this story and some other excellent pieces like “The Fifteen Dollar Eagle”, “The Shadow” and “Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Man”, Plath notes down in her journal:

I felt that this month I have conquered my Panic Bird. I am a calm, happy, serene writer. With a pleasant sense of learning and being better with every story...I have done, this year, what I said I would: overcome my fear of facing a blank page day after day, acknowledging myself, in my deepest emotions, a writer, come what may... (UJ, p 487)

This feeling of contention gave Plath hopes of looking forward and becoming famous one day. Like every other American girl Plath also dreamed for fame and money and somehow decided that only fiction and journalistic writing can give her that much. Therefore, the stories became the prized possession for her in spite of having been able to write poetry more fluently than prose.

There isn't a dream I've typed up in our record books that I don't know by heart. There isn't a dream I haven't copied out at home into Johnny Panic's bible of dreams.
This is my calling. (155)

The dreams that the protagonist typed in the story are the typing of the dreams of the author as well. This story is the finest piece that she produced after conquering the disabilities of writing short fiction. The 'real calling' here stands true for the author also as she gets the calling of creativity and produces some finest poetry and prose during that time. (*Bell Jar*) "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" is definitely the best story by Plath. In the words of Wagner-Martin: "...it is the rhythmic texture of "Johnny Panic" that makes it such good writing. It is in fact more poem-like than many of Plath's 1959 and 1960 poems." The story concerns itself with the dreams of Plath's creativity along with the surreal death message. "I've a dream of my own. My one dream. A dream of dreams." (154) This dream that the protagonist talks about is very much the author's dream of being able to create and this creativity leads her to say: "I'm at the point of re-creating dreams that are not even written down at all. Dreams that shadow themselves forth in the vaguest way, but themselves hid, like a statue under red velvet before the grand unveiling." (156) Whenever we read a prose piece by Plath we get the feeling that somewhere she is trying to tell the world that she can also create prose that is worth reading; and in this story, her

explanation of creating the dreams is not only confined to the fictional character but it reflects her own ideas thread-bare. Throughout the story we encounter the strong belief of the writer's capacity to recreate dreams and her belief in them. The story has a surreal surrounding, but the faith in the power of dreams narrates the writer's willingness to communicate to the world what she believes in.

The narrative structure of the story provides Plath with the opportunity to incorporate characters that has a major role to play in her life, some way or the other. Mrs. Milliravage (the name seems a mixture of "Milltown and Ravage" according to Plath), is such a character, who represents the suffocation of the psychiatric clinics and also embodies the strong presence of elderly ladies in the writer's life. As the Secretary of the Psychiatric Observation Ward, she represents a picture of sternness with her uniform clad, stiff muscled appearance. After the authority of the hospital catches the protagonist, she finds herself in the arms of Mrs. Milliravage. The treatment she gets from the elderly lady is a kind of love that leads her to the shock treatment: "Against her great bulk I beat my fists, and against her whopping milkless breasts, until her hands on my wrists are iron hoops..." and she calls "My baby, my own baby's come back to me." (165-166) This instance of the over-adoring presence is similar to the presences that Plath had in her real life in the form of all the matronly ladies who influenced her life. This is a description that subtly brushes upon the relationships with those ladies with Plath. Plath always had a problem with the presence of the mother figures in her life, including her own mother, and the character of Mrs. Milliravage portrays what she felt about all these ladies in real life.

discuss the gender problems raised in the story. The problem, that is complemented in 'Johnny Panic' as well, is about the woman who feels quite suffocated by the ways of men in the physical world; finds it impossible to worship religion whose symbols are patriarchal. Even before the rise of mainstream Feminism, Plath voiced her strong conception of it in her writing. The kind of oppression the characters face in the stories is similar to the kind Plath herself faced in her life inside or outside her home.

In due course of time, Plath's narrative style improved considerably. She produced stories with remarkable theme and characters. "Sunday at Mintons", a story, won her the first prize (\$ 500) in Mademoiselle's national fiction contest and was published in the same magazine in August 1952. Plath was very pleased with the narrative style of the story and in her journals she wrote about it as: "...The serious prose style of the Mintons..."(527) This Mintons story is about the mutually destructive brother, sister relationship between Elizabeth Minton and Henry Minton. Henry, who is so "supremely fastidious", is a creature of rationality obsessed with maps and clocks and Elizabeth is a spinster in Lavender skirts:

Hers was a twilight world, where the moon floated up over the streets at night like a tremulous balloon of silver light and the blush rays wavered through the leaves outside her window... (301)

The contrast between the two Minton siblings is very prominent. Both belong to two different worlds and Plath with her depth narrative portrays a convincing picture of the inner workings of their minds. Henry's mind is:

...flat and level, laid out with measured instruments in the broad, even sunlight. There would be geometric concrete walks and squares, perfectly synchronized. The air would be thick with their accurate ticking. (301)

The appearance of the Johnny Panic figure is debatable as the protagonist is shown to be saved by the male character. The specialty of the story also lies in this surreal ending where the rescuer is himself the god of fear and the protagonist gains the ultimate rescue by submitting to "Fear": "May Fear and Fear and Fear be everywhere." (166) The love this rescuer portrays tells a lot about his character: "His love is the twenty story leap, the rope in the neck, the knife at the heart." (166) These closing lines leave the readers wondering whether the rescue of the protagonist is for the better or the worse. Plath does not clear the position and in a way the ending foretells her own plight, where she rescues herself from the hopeless situation, and takes refuge in the arms of death.

During the same period, Plath wrote the story 'This Earth Our Hospital' which she called as "My best story..."⁹ (487). Eliot's "Four Quartets" influenced the title of the story, and an editor later changed it to "The Daughters of Blossom Street". This story is a kind of companion piece to the 'Johnny Panic' story. Like 'Johnny Panic', this story also takes place in Massachusetts General Hospital, where Plath worked. The story relates the lives of several secretaries and their mutual bonding. The characters of Emily Russo, a fellow secretary, who is suffering from cancer dies soon after a visit from Billy Monihan, a worker in the patients' record section. Here Billy becomes a figure of death. He is a mirror figure, a quintessential Plathian character. In an article published in "Studies in American Literature", Sally Green calls the story: "...in some ways about death and spiritual resurrection, with a limited Christ figure managing to administer a limited amount of "paternal care," Plath's use of religious myth in the stories needs a different reading, but here we can

Elizabeth's mind is:

...a dark, warm room, with colored lights swinging and wavering, like so many lanterns reflecting on the water, and picture coming and going on the misty walls, soft and blurred like impressionist paintings ...And there would be, from somewhere sweetly coming, the sounds of violins and bells. (301)

The world of the protagonist is a vague, impressionistic world, full of daydreams.

This dreaming leads the story into fantasy, which ends in a symbolic double death.

The Mintons take their Sunday walk to the ocean. On such a walk, Elizabeth loses her mother's brooch, and when Henry tries to retrieve it, he is washed away by the waves. Freed from the authoritative presence of the brother, she sails away into space, no longer submissive: "Enjoying herself thoroughly, blowing upward, now to this side now to that, her lavender dress blending with the purple of the distant clouds." (305) This final scene blends fantasy with reality and unites the characters in the end. Plath here problematizes the question of gender and at the end gives a peaceful and fantastic touch to the story. The woman persona is strongly depicted which reflects Plath's own anger at the inequality meted out to women. Plath ends the story in a clever way, which even after having a strong feminist viewpoint, succeeds commercially and caters to all kinds of readers. This story has another strong undercurrent, which we must not overlook. Plath's feeling of insecurity at not being successful or suppressed by the great male writers is reflected. The male protagonist, Henry is described as "a colossus astride the roaring sea." The fear of being crushed by the "colossus" figure runs through many stories. And Plath tries to overcome it by portraying the female protagonist in a stronger light. In this story, Elizabeth's preference is for the impressionist world of her mind, which is true

for the author as well. The dreams and aspirations of the protagonist transcribe the creator's strongest impulse of building and reshaping the world around according to herself.

The gradual movement of the stories leads us to a story like "The Wishing Box" (1957). This story was written at a time when Plath was enacting the real life wife to the highly successful poet Ted Hughes. Lorna Sage, in "Death and Marriage" describes this story as:

"Here, she treats Agnes and Harold's marriage as a dreaming contest; he 'spending one third of his life among celebrities and fabulous legendary creatures' while her mind empties of even the usual banal nightmares, 'without a single image of its own to ward off the crushing assault of smug autonomous tables and chairs', let alone his gratifying Technicolor visions."¹⁰

The whole story revolves around the dreamless, sleepless nights of Agnes Higgins who becomes jealous of her husband:

...she smoldered in silence over her coffee, wrestling with the strange jealousy, which had been growing on her like some dark, malignant cancer ever since...she had discovered about Harold's dreams. (204)

Dreams never came to Agnes naturally, "I see everything way in the back of my head." After losing on dreams Agnes tries to populate her mind with novels, television, drink; but all these are momentary relief---once out of it she used to feel as if " a protecting world had been extinguished." The realisation dawns upon her that the 'curtain' of sleep had been lifted from her "eternally, irrevocably." A box filled with sleeping pills comes to her rescue- to liberate her from living "wakeful, visionless days and nights stretching ahead of her. So, in the end, to balance the imaginative power, she transcends into the world of dreams herself:

...on the sofa... dressed in her favorite princess-style emerald taffeta evening gown, pale and lovely as a lily, eyes shut...Her tranquil features were set in a sight, secret smile of triumph as if, in some far country unattainable to mortal men, she were, at last, waltzing with the dark, red caped prince of her early dreams. (206)

More importantly, Agnes' death is a triumph, not a defeat, for she does re-enter the world of imagination. The story is written on a similar line as the "Johnny Panic" story and "Daughters of Blossom Street". The conquest of the protagonist over the negative forces is evident, though the endings are twisted and treated in a different manner. All the three stories have the similar themes and language. Plath writes about the battle of wills between man and women over different forms of imagination, a different register, in the world of signs. The story also surfaces Plath's fear of being short on "shaping imaginative power". The expressions like 'choking', 'smothering', used in the story relates to Plath's life as well. Her constant fear of failing as a fiction writer troubled her all through. Like Agnes, she wanted to transcend to the world where the individual self is free of any restraints and devoid of "visionless days and nights stretching unbroken ahead of her."

Sylvia Plath's stories depict characters that are alienated from the technical, cold world of rationality. They are characters similar to any characters in any feminist fiction, which create a world suitable for the women. The re-shaping of the world according to the individual self is what makes the difference. The characters escape from the real world to the one of imagination for as one can accept a world, which denies the power of fantasy, individuality and denies the fears and thoughts of adults without replacing them with stronger beliefs and dreams. Plath, in her fiction

creates a world of dreams, where dreams become the powerful narrative, creating a self-effacing world in itself.

There are other stories like “The Fifty Ninth Bear” and “The Fifteen Dollar Eagle”--- where the relation between husband and wife is discussed again. In the “Fifty Ninth Bear”, a story published in *London Magazine* (1961), Sadie and Norton are in Yellowstone Park for a cross-country vacation. They are counting bears as a game to see who could guess most accurately. In 1959, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath drove across the country and the only difference with the story is that Ted was not killed in the end. The character of Sadie is of a childlike wife who sets the target as fifty-nine bears as it’s her “symbol of plentitude”, while her “hollow-cheeked Hamletesque” husband who imagines himself as a widower casually sets the bet for seventy-one. When they do encounter the fifty-ninth bear at night, it was ravaging the car and the food supply. Norton goes out to shoo away the bear and is killed in the process. Thus, Sadie wins the bet as “My bear” kills Norton and she realises to her utter shock that “there was another will working, a will stronger, even, than his.” (JP, 114) The end suggests the winning streak of the wife, of which the husband seems to get a hint at the last seconds of his existence. He tastes “a thick, sweet honey” and hears “As from a far and rapidly receding planet...a shrill cry---of terror, or triumph, he could not tell.” (114) The closing scene is symbolic of the kind of liberation Plath had wanted to achieve in her life from all the muggy surroundings. The story is an expression of the anger at the enclosures of the competitive self which led Plath into considering all the relationships in terms of winning and losing. The smashing of the hat and Norton being killed in the process of retrieving it is

definitely symbolic of more than a mere incident. The hat, “the remains of Sadie’s hat, a grotesque crumple of straw, laying at its feet”, becomes the representative of all the negative energy. Here, another image is also evoked, as the hat is a symbol of intellect. The crushing of the hat is basically the defeat of the intellect as intuition wins over it (the wife’s claim that she will win the bet and her ultimate win). The subordination of the intellect to intuition may not be a deliberate attempt by Plath, but it clearly shows the winning of the one over the other and it might have been there in the subconscious of the writer to establish the victory of the wife. In real life though Plath was no way inferior to Hughes intellectually, the time in which the story was written Hughes was a successful poet, whereas Plath struggled to make a mark as a poet and get her works published. The end is very disturbing, if we look into the story as a quasi-autobiographical one. The husband is removed from the existing planet and lands up in the alien embrace of a bear, an entrapment in the folds of immense power. Lukas Myers called this as, “I found the story unsettling...I was surprised she made a story of the killing of a husband for her husband and their friends to see.”¹¹ In a sense, the wife liberates herself from the husband’s suppression though it involves the killing of the man and establishes a womanly triumph.

“The Fifteen Dollar Eagle” is a story concerning a tattooist, who is an artist on his own right, but in front of his wife, he loses his mastery. The problematizing of the marital relationships reflects Plath’s own insecurities. Plath considered this story as one of the finest pieces of fiction, where she created the character of Carmey, “a real poet with the needle and dye, an artist with a heart.” The story is first published in the *Sewanee’s Review*, and the editor of the magazine, Spears praised it as, “It

seems to me a remarkable tour de force and a very fine story.”¹² The story is a significant one with its slightly different theme and the helpless husband who is unable to create an impression on his wife. He fails miserably in his own matter of love and heart. Carmey says to all his customers, “You got a dream...Wear your heart in your skin in this life...”(94) Plath also wore her heart in her skin and never did she get the attention that she craved for. From childhood onwards the sense of loss followed her and even after marriage she was not fully successful in getting whatever she needed emotionally. The story reflects the same problem where the “death-lily-white” wife leaves the artist husband alone. The province of an accomplished artist can be destroyed by the hostility of the people who matters to them a lot. Though the victim in the story is the husband, the resemblance to the disappointments in the relationship of Plath with Hughes is apparent. The story is written in 1959, a time when the rift between the poet couple started becoming prominent. The un-reciprocative wife harms the craft of Carmey, as it does not leave him space to dream about her. Plath ends the story in a fabulous manner telling,

I imagine her body...the body of a woman immune as a nun to the eagle's anger, the desire of the rose. From Carmey's wall, the world's menagerie howls and ogles at her alone. (104)

The problems of a married couple are shown in all the stories. The male domination in most of the stories lead the female protagonist to take drastic steps to ensure the right that is denied to her in one way or the other. At this point, a question comes to our mind, whether Plath always had doubts in the institution of marriage and through her stories was trying to express in different ways.

The stories were the modes, apart from her journals, that Plath used to flush out her anxieties of the married life. These narratives, being so close to the authors life, clearly depicts what she felt in real life. In such a sense "The Day of Success"(1960) is a very crucial story depicting the marital relationship. This is a story of a young couple Ellen and Jacob and their child. Here Jacob is a playwright who is about to get a break as his play is going to be staged. The success of the husband triggers certain insecurities in the mind of the wife, which gets resolved in the end as the story ends in a happy note. If we look at the time of the writing of the story, it is very clear that by that time Plath and Hughes had started on a sour note in their relationship. The story has quite a few telling lines apart from the happy ending, that foretells Plath's worries and her attempt at holding on to the relationship hoping for it to succeed.

The couple lives in a dilapidated house in a crowded London city suburb, where Ellen hopes for the best: "*Please don't let it change*, she begged of whatever fates might be listening. *Let the three of us stay happy as this forever.*" (79) Ellen gets suspicious as her husband deals with a very attractive producer Denise Kay and along with it the example of Jacob's friend triggers her insecurity. Keith Regan, Jacob's school friend, made a play, became famous and wealthy and finally landed up in divorce court, leaving Nancy, the wife, alone and bitter. Nancy, acting as a friend to Ellen, increases her anxiety, by reminding her that divorce could be the only possibility after her husband gets success. The story is full of tell-a-tale marks of the growing insecurity in Plath's mind that is depicted by the musings of Ellen.

It won't happen right away, Ellen Mused...Breakups seldom do. It will unfold slowly, one little telltale symptom after another like some awful, hellish flower. (83)

This belief in the relationship is the quality that makes the readers feel happy as the story ends on a happy note. Jacob becomes successful, but does not get carried away by the new found glamour. The first thing he did after getting his play sold is to go and book the house that Ellen doted on during one of their stays in Cornwell. This flicker of hope is the main expression that the story portrays. These factors we cannot overlook while dealing the with stories, as they are the true narratives of the troubled poet who tried to achieve a stability in her personal life and failed to do so as her marriage broke down after a short time, unlike the one in the story "The Day of Success."

In late 1950's, Plath wrote the story "Stone Boy with Dolphin," which is a fictionalisation of the first meeting of hers with Hughes. The encounter is a bloody and ferocious one between a brooding young woman called Dody Ventura and a young poet, Leonard. Their meeting in a party ends in a brutal kiss, "Green shadow, mass shadow, raked her mouth." To this Dody responds with a smashing bite:

Teeth gauged. And held. Salt, warm salt, laving the tastebuds of her tongue. Teeth dug to meet. An ache started far off at the bone root. Mark that, mark that. But he shook. Shook her bang against the solid-grained substance of the wall. (JP, 184)

These lines tell the story of the first meeting of Plath and Hughes which was portrayed in the Journals with omissions and now available to all in the pages of the *Unabridged Journals*. The expressions in the story are similar to the real incident

and highly objectify the spirit Plath exuberated in her life. Plath being a woman of the fifties had the sense of self as a new realisation. Plath remarked that she and her husband were both bought up to “romp through words together.” Yet the divide that the difference in sex brings in, cannot be ignored. This difference and the defeated female self existed from long back. This defeat is not a self imposed one but engineered by the circumstances. In the story Dody in her “third floor attic room”, meditates on the defeat of her ancestors, “witches on the rack, to Joan of Ark crackling at the stake, to anonymous ladies flaring like torches in the rending metal of the Riviera roadsters, to Zelda enlightened, burning behind the bars of her madness.”(175) The character here is aware of the victimisation and female vulnerability and partly accepts the defeat, “Unwincing, in her mind’s eye, she bared her flesh. Here. Strike home.”(175) When the real world fails to allure the rebel in Dody she goes off to her imaginative world, where the statue of the ‘stone boy’ serves the purpose of surreal entity filling up the void of not having a male company. The allusion to the stone boy is based on an actual statue at Newnham College, Cambridge. Dody, cherishes the company of the statue as it is the:

...lone, lame gesture for the unbreakable stone boy in the garden, ironic with Leonard’s look, poised on the sculpted foot, holding fast to the his dolphin, stone-lidded eyes fixed on a world beyond the clipped privet hedge...A world of no waste, but of savings and cherishings: a world love-kindled, love-championed.(JP, 194)

The longing for this bright world ends the story that at the first glance looks like a narrative of accepting defeat. The hope for a “fine, lovely day” is what winds up the brutal meeting of the two overpowering souls. The story is clearly autobiographical and it shows the marked requirements of a nice American girl during the 1950s. The

character of Dody is not the type anyone will accept readily, but that was the time when the distinctive voices of women were heard at some corners of the society and Dody clearly represented that.

“All the Dead Dears” is a story about the protagonist Nellie Meehan who possesses the power of second sight. Linda Wagner Martin comments on this story and says that it is directly taken from life with Hughes family and their belief of otherworldly spirit connections to explore the supernatural.

Her interest in this subject came from visiting the Hugheses on the Yorkshire moors (Edith Hughes was said to have second sight although in a journal entry Plath commented wryly that her mother-in-law “almost “ had it) and being literally surrounded with the miasma of the acceptance of the occult.¹³

Paul Alexander states it directly, “Edith, it was rumored, studied magic...Finally this expanded Ted’s avid interest in horoscopes, hypnosis, and mind control.”¹⁴ The biographical details help us in clearing the confusion why Plath chose to write a story dealing with the occult so directly. But the gothic kind of surrounding and the subtle portrayal of the dead people surpass the kind of narrative voice that we are familiar with as far as Plath is concerned. The story is an observed narrative, which concentrates upon Nellie’s power and the interest her neighbours show in the power. The characters in the story talk about past events like suicide of Dora’s brother-in-law, Nellie’s brother Lucas’s suicide by hanging; the fates of Clifford Meehan’s friends who served with him in the World War I; and the fact that the Meehans’ lodger Herbert had forced his wife to leave him years before. The voices that discuss these events, while drinking tea seem quite ordinary; but they actually veils the violence of the events. Another key event of the story is Nellie being visited by

angels. The story provides a complex psychological insight into the minds of the different characters. The characters in the story are subjects of unconscious desire, who are caught up in the dualities of the stage. The characters are not sure of the idea of self and the other. Nellie Meehan visited by the angel of Minnie, her elder sister, who died when she was only seven. Nellie is a sensible woman yet she describes Minnie as if she is a part of her real being. Nellie finds comfort in those manifestations. The observer narrator confirms that Meehan's live their life by

“relieving each past event as if it had no beginning and no end, but existed, vivid and irrevocable, from the begging of time and would continue to exist long after their own voices were stilled”(200).

This presence of the dead people can be related to the unconscious. The workings of the unconscious mind is still not clear to us, but the repressed desires find a place in it. Nellie's obsession with all the dead relatives and neighbours can be termed as an emblem of the unconscious. The end of the story portrays a welcome picture of death where death is personified as a hostess inviting Nellie, “The voice at her back greeting her like a glad hostess who has waited long for a tardy guest: “Well, said Maisie Edwards, “it's about time, Nellie.”(203)

Plath's short stories concentrates on her relationship with her father, fictionalising her feelings for him. The early 1950 story “Among the Bumblebees” is a description of her feelings for her father. The tone clearly suggests the discontent that she had with her mother and the kind of admiration for the ‘giant’ father figure. The presence of the father gave her the security that was needed in her life, when the mother showered her love on sick Warren, her brother. The protagonist Alice is her father's pet, who thinks that her father is a god. They had a secret and close way of

communication and in perfect harmony with each other. He was the quintessential figure of power and Alice wanted that power to be able to stand up to the world. She pictured him as the university professor: "...like a god, high on a throne, he would call out the names in his thundering voice.." (308) This strong picture gave Alice the warmth and protection she wanted in this world. She openly proclaims that "through him, she could face the doomsday of the world in perfect safety. (310) Here we hear Plath speaking through Alice and the sense of dependence she had on her father. It is quite surprising that Plath never got over her grief of losing her father and this absence of the security later resulted in her being so insecure about her life. If we read this story carefully we encounter Plath speaking through her narrative and spilling out the longing to be with her father and the last lines of the story almost indicates the kind of life she is going to lead later in her life. The story ends with these powerful lines:

That was the last time Alice Denway saw her father. She did not know then that in all the rest of her life there would be no one to walk with her, like him, proud and arrogant among the bumblebees. (312)

The void created by the father's death in Alice's life in reality speaks for Plath. She uses certain beautiful sea imagery to talk about creativity and there is a very subtle link between the father's absence and the power of the artist to create that is visible from a story written early in the career of Plath. Alice goes for swimming with her father and experiences a certain 'growing strength' (310) in herself and the "sureness of the young limbs, that some day she, too, would be able to ride the waves in safe dominion, and that the sunlight would always bend deferentially to her, docile and generous with its creative warmth." (310) The urge to bend the 'sunlight' to

herself suggests more than a mere young girls wish to swim successfully. This is the ultimate urge that drove Plath to the altar of creation like a whirlwind. The tone of that creative urge surfaces in the form of sea waves that engulfs in its fold so many hidden treasures.

“It was denial of individuality.” Says Millicent, the protagonist of the story. This is a fine early story about a girl being initiated into the school group and her growth as a separate personality giving up on the prestigious school society and listening to the inner voice. This is Plath's story about becoming a poet who listens to the voice of the birds--heather birds. The story contains the image of the jar, the basement where Millicent is kept as part of the ceremony. The experience in this place, which feels like the “inside of a sealed jar”(285), makes her realise the importance of individuality, more than anything. She refuses to join the powerful group of girls in the high school, though she finishes her initiation into it with great success going through all the tortures. She takes the whole incident as a part of proving to herself that she is also important in the way other girls are, but she can still be friends with all without being a part of the sorority group. “she had proved something to herself...And how she could still be friends with everybody. Sisters with everybody.” (293) The poet in Plath makes an appearance in the story, through the sensitive character of Millicent. The creative abilities that the protagonist wishes for in the story “Among the Bumblebees”, materialises in this story as Millicent reaches towards a new beginning:

Within Millicent another melody soared, strong and exuberant, a triumphant answer to the music of the darting heather birds that sang so clear and lilting over the far lands. And she knew that her own private initiation had just begun. (294)

The story "The Day Mr. Prescott Died" was first published in *Granta*, in 1956. This is a story that resembles the Plath household and from the viewpoint of a bystander Plath tries to see the death of her father. This is a story where the themes of death and her obsession with the father figure culminates and shows her growth in the acceptance of the reality regarding her father. Though the main character Mr. Prescott is an elderly man with irritating and grumpy temperament, he resembles the kind of behavior that Otto Plath showed during his last days. The ever-pleasing wife who is twenty years the younger to her husband is a mere shadow of Aurelia who was twenty-one years younger. Even without such telling similarities, the factor that makes the story more interesting is the fact that Plath wrote it after she had her treatment with Ruth Buescher, and started looking at her family in a different light than projected by her mother as a happy family. There is a telling humour in the depiction of the characters and the way they are portrayed. The humour is applied to help in developing the feeling about death, and the 'quasi-though narrative' to quote Wagner-Martin¹⁵, helps building the tension between the mother and the daughter. When Lydia asks Ben whether he regrets his father's death, he says, "I could have been nicer. Could have been nicer, that's all." Immediately she feels the grief she failed to experience from the time she heard about the death. The telling similarities and the feelings that she shows are very true to Plath. This story acts as a piece where Plath expresses the feelings otherwise denied by her even to herself: "The part you don't have to run from. You know you take it with you, and then when you go any place, it's not running away. It's just growing up." This feeling of growing up is

true for Plath more than the character. This the first time she tries to get out of her cocoon and tell the world what she feels about her own family.

The collection, *Johnny Panic* contains stories that Hughes thought to be the most representative and brilliant pieces by Plath. This justification does not apply to all the stories as there is a lot many unpublished stories that are more brilliant than the ones collected here.

The importance of the prose narratives of Plath depends on the fact that they portray a woman sensitive from the very beginning, who dared to write about all her hatred and likes with an open manner of any confessional artist. The volume *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* not only anthologises stories but also includes some of the beautiful prose pieces that are so representative of the woman we are trying to reach at. "Ocean 1212" is the piece which looks like a posthumous writing, clearly depicting the sense of loss that created its void in the tender mind of a nine year old Plath. Commissioned by the BBC, Sylvia Plath wrote this essay for a series entitled "Writers on Themselves." This autobiographical selection is a very poetic rendering of her childhood in Winthrop, Massachusetts. It stands as one of the best pieces in the collection, lending deep insight into the world in which she both lived and was able to create. The shocking revelation is that the moment of her brother's birth acted as the moment of awareness of the separate identity she holds in this world:

...I trudged off on my own, in the opposite direction toward the forbidding prison. As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the *separateness* of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over.
(23)

Plath symbolised the day as the “awful birthday of otherness, my rival, somebody else.”(23) From that moment, onwards she became a sensitive being probing deeper into the mysteries of life than being a confused kid brooding over her loss of place in the family. The sea, described so vividly in this piece, takes up the world of young Plath. Her childhood landscape starts with the image of the sea with the self image of “I am like the purple ‘lucky stones’ I used to collect with a white ring...”(JP, 20); and ends in a image of “violence”, “a still, unhealthy yellow day in 1939, the sea molten, steely slick, heaving at its leash like a broody animal, evil violets in its eye.”(25) This is the foreboding of all the black days that has to follow all through her life. After the first nine years of her life, she never felt the lucky charm of her personality. Her father died when she was nine and she lost the comforting force and felt left alone in the vast sea of life with: “Those first nine years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle---beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth.” (26) The childhood got sealed in a bottle, with all it’s sweet memories and those times never came back to support her in her endeavours. The narrative links us to those years of Plath's life that seemed so cheerful, yet the lines do not hold the power to restrict her depressive bouts. The confessional narrative has become successful in delineating the problem of the age. These are the thoughts that she wanted to share with the world of her readers, and bring forward the points of difficulty of existence at that moment of her life.

The next prose piece that stands out among the others is the essay written in 1962 for BBC where she quotes a tiny poem by Ezra Pound comparing poet and poem relationship to that of a packer and of a suitcase packed. This piece, which is a

prose poem itself, talks about the room a novelist has, compared to a poet. The inclusiveness of prose is contrasted against the glimpse that a poem gives, “a door opens, a door shuts. In between you have had a glimpse: a garden, a person, a rainstorm, a dragonfly, a heart, a city...the poet becomes an expert packer of suitcases.” (62) Against the poet, the novelist gets more freedom to develop his/her ideas. There are detours and expansions, ‘a heart line, a head line; moral and money’ coming into it. While talking about her envy of the novelist, Plath makes it clear that she is concerned about the women novelist as she sees a parallel in her. Women have centuries of untold stories to tell; even the everyday incidents build up quite a huge material that is difficult to accommodate in the single breath of a poem. She describes a women novelist having “a kind of modest, beautiful X-ray vision.” Her business is Time with a capital ‘T’:

the way it shoots forward, shunts back, blooms, decays and double-exposes itself. Her business is people in Time. And she, it seems to me, has all the time in the world. She can take a century if she likes, a generation, a whole summer. (61-62)

This is a very representative piece of work by Plath, telling the world her preference for the mode of novel writing. She is very clear about her preferences and slots out the relationship between a poem and a novel clearly. Even while she talks favourably of the novel and lack of space and order in a poem, she quickly adds, “I am only suggesting that perhaps the pattern does not insist so much.” The finality with which a poem enwraps itself, is not there in a novel and this is the explanation Plath gives for her preference for the form of novel: “The door of the novel... also shuts. But not so fast, nor with so manic, unanswerable finality.” (63)

In the same year 1962, Plath wrote a short essay, "Context", commissioned by London Magazine. This is a short and polished piece of writing on her views of poetry. The essay in a way explains why she writes the way she do:

I am not gifted with the tongue of Jeremiah...[M]y poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming it finger by finger in the dark...[T]hey are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighboring graveyard.

In a sense, these poems are deflections. I do not think they are an escape. (64)

Plath's prose pieces are a revelation of her ideas and beliefs. In these pieces we find Plath narrating her dreams and visions in a clear cut way. Though "Context" is about poetry, this is an excellent example of her fine prose writing. The piece demonstrates her precision and control over language and the poetic quality of the prose that makes it more interesting. Plath admired the poets for whom poetry is the breath of life. Pleasure is the greatest use of poetry according to her and the poetry that she delights in are poems "born all-of-a-piece, not put together by hand." (65) The concluding lines of the piece are the example of her powerful prose and her attachment with poetry:

I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far—among strangers, around the world, even. Farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescriptions of a doctor; if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime. (65)

Both the prose pieces "A Comparison" and "Context" are discourses on Plath's views and preferences for poetry and prose. These are some of the ideas that run through all her creations and are true to her proclamation. The striking thing about these pieces is the maturity they portray regarding Plath's artistic skills. These short pieces are the glimpses into the command Plath exhibited in the field of prose.

The collection *Johnny Panic* includes two more pose pieces written during 1963, just before her death. Plath continued to write these short pieces for either BBC or for some magazines, while she was perfecting her art of poetry that later came out as the *Ariel* collection. "America! America!" an essay published posthumously in *Punch* in April 1963, is targeted at the British audience on the free education Americans receive in public school. This is a sort of companion piece to her story "Initiation", revealing the horrors of the hollow system of education that prepares one to be accepted to the elitist groups that chat away their time in superficially. The crux of this piece is Plath's discontent at the tailor-made image one acquires in a public school education, devoid of any intellectual maturity. She unflinchingly criticises the American education that diagnoses talent as problem : "the girls' guidance counsellor diagnosed my problem straight off. I was just too dangerously brainy." (54) The custom of entering the chosen groups in the school, which she calls the "ancient relics of snobbism", is what Plath hated. Though, she was also a part of the sorority, she never liked the concept of being tailored into an image that is accepted by the society. She questions the validity of such womanhood which leads to the pressure of "being everybody; ergo, no one." This matter troubled Plath from the beginning and even though she went through all the rigors of the sorority, it never let her lose the individuality that she guarded so precious.

The essay ends in a somewhat positive note, as Plath, after looking through the "plate-glass side" of an American primary school, sees sunlight everywhere. She ends her piece by posing a valid inquisition: "Did I glimpse, in the First Aid cabinet,

a sparkle of bottles---soothers and smootheners for the embryo rebel, the artist, the odd?" (55)

The only prose piece that survived from the last four weeks before her death is the essay "Snow Blitz." This is a horrifying but minute description of the great snow that London experienced and the way Plath managed herself with two kids in a leaking flat in the cold, lonely surroundings. This is the time Plath came into the grip of depression again and the bad weather accompanied by flu and loneliness made life miserable for her. The amazing factor in this whole piece is that it makes us aware of the circumstances in which Plath produced some of her best poems and we appreciate all the more the talent and courage the persona of this artist reflects. Plath might have recorded her woes in a better manner in her journals, destroyed by Hughes, and this essay is the only material we have that tells us about her last days and the difficulties she faced.

There are four journal pieces available in the collection, which were omitted from the published journals that came out in 1982. Plath was a voracious writer of journals and Hughes included these pieces as some of the best entries. The pieces like "Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers" and "Rose and Percy B" are two magnificent character sketches. Plath matured as a prose writer and the tone of her journal writing changed as she matured as a poet. These writings are a kind of practice for her poems. "Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers" from June 1962 journal entry is a direct link to her wonderful Bee sequence in *Ariel*. The journal pieces are helping ladders towards her other creations, be it poetry or prose. Plath collected her thoughts, scenes, ideas in these pieces and used them, sometimes word

by word, in her writing. As the ~~first~~ chapter of my work concerns itself with the journals, I take the liberty of not discussing these pieces here.

We can question now-- are the stories unattached to any strings (tied to the biography of the writer)? If not how can we call them so? They are the narratives of Plath's dreams where she was able to give trivial details of the daily incidents to confess whatever she wanted. They are the narratives she used to depict the facts that were not clearly put through in the poems. The stories are simple ones and they give the fillip to the ambitious narrative structure of Plath. They are the stories that reveal the Plathian anxiety and help a reader go deep into the relationships she had with the outside world and her understanding of it. These stories are based almost on all the important happenings of her life, though at times they are disguised in the form of the character and background. The main theme is to reveal to the world the dilemma she went through at almost every point of time and the culmination of it in her ultimate end by committing suicide. The refreshing quality of some of the stories, specially the ones written during her college days, narrates the incidents and the desires masked behind them. the detached quality of her narrative, even after the non conformist attitude gives us a pass into the centre of her being, so specific to her works. Plath draws the material from the real events of her life but does not just portray them in the stories. There is queer intermixing of actual events and imaginative caricatures. The intermingling is done so well that the readers are left to appreciate the narratives not only as the incidents of her life, but as the direct pass into the world that is not visible in the other modes of writing. Some of the stories

merge into her novel, the only one by her that incorporates the incidents and feelings of so many stories written over her whole period of her creative career.

Plath wrote a continuous narrative--- poems, stories and the novel merging in perfect harmony. The stories perfected her craftsmanship, giving the preparing ground for the novel. The stories are the narratives Plath used, from the beginning of her literary career, to yield out her dreams of growing up, facing the world and her consciousness, which at many a time, still remains contemporary.

Notes

- ¹ Douglas Hill, "Living and Dying," *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Linda Wagner Martin. (New York: Routledge, 1988). 234
- ² Ted Hughes, "Introduction". *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1977) 5.
- ³ Sandra M Gilbert, Susan Gubar. *Mad Woman in the Attic: The Women Writers and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. (New Heaven and London: Yale U P, 1979) 66.
- ⁴ Lynda K. Bundtzen, *Plath's Incarnations: Women and the Creative Process*. (The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1983) 17.
- ⁵ Sylvia Plath, "Plaster". *Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Ted Hughes. (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1981).
- ⁶ ___, *The Bell Jar*. (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1971).
- ⁷ ___, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1960*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. (London: Faber and Faber, 2000). 486
- ⁸ Sylvia Plath, "Poem for a Birthday." *Collected Poems by Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Ted Hughes. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981) 131.
- ⁹
- ¹⁰ Lorna Sage, "Death and Marriage" *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Linda Wagner Martin. (New York: Routledge, 1988) 235.
- ¹¹ Lukas Myers, Appendix I, Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Frame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988) 317-18.
- ¹² Quoted in Paul Alexander's, *Rough Magic*. (New York: Viking Press, 1991) 235.
- ¹³ Linda Wagner Martin. *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*. (New York, St. Martins Press, 1999) 59.
- ¹⁴ Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic*. 196.
- ¹⁵ Lind Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath : A Literary Life*. 14.

Chapter III

Caught in the “bell jar”: An Artist Speaks

To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream.

(*The Bell Jar*, 267)¹

Over the years of critical appraisal and legendary treatment, an image of Plath has been created. This image is of a persona of an artist, who is mesmerized by her own art and considered more an artist of suicide who kills herself in the process of unifying life and art. In discerning this image of Plath, *The Bell Jar* contributes its own share, revealing to the world the “bad dream” she encountered almost everyday. For Plath her whole life was guided by the double fear of being “blank and stopped”: of dying (“stopped”) and of being unable to write (“blank”).

The problem of looking into Plath's work is that we tend to do injustice to it by taking an advantageous position according to our own convenience. Erica Jong has aptly commented that:

Everyone wanted a piece of Sylvia. The feminist movement wanted a martyr. The suicide theorists wanted someone to theorize about. The estranged husband (also a poet) wanted a relief from his guilt, a chance to raise two motherless kids as well as he could, a chance to somehow continue his own creative work. The poet's mother also wanted self-justification, a respite from grief and the best possible future for her grandchildren. And all the literary jackals wanted something to write about, a subject, a cause, a potential best-seller.²

This want for a “piece of Sylvia” is what I am trying to avoid in my analysis of her work. Especially while analyzing *The Bell Jar*, we tend to look at it as a biographical account of a poet whose suicide attempt and her contempt for close relatives are depicted. But the novel is more than a personal account. This is a narrative which gives a

synchronic view of womanhood from a woman's own perspective, even though it stands inside the parley of the narrator's own story. This is not a simple history of a girl, trying to end her life, even after having a successful academic life. This is a story of the stifling times when the societal oppression led a promising life to its abrupt end. Plath gives us a portion of her times when a woman had to be happy to be acceptable to the society, successful in terms of family values, and ready to submit to the sphere of matrimony. In such a time, Plath showed enough courage to come out of the cocoon of anonymity and establish herself in the realms of the society as a promising poet and writer. Though *The Bell Jar* speaks about mental breakdown and suicide, it needs a lot of courage to depict a happy end to the story when in real life one is going through a traumatic period. Such kind of courage takes its toll on the narrator and destruction is the only visible end in the long run. In such a situation, Plath has given to the world a beautiful narrative that talks about a feminine consciousness much ahead of the wave of mainstream feminism coming into prominence. Instead of peering into the bell jar descending upon the protagonist Esther Greenwood, we tend to debate whether the novel is a feminist manifesto or a psychiatric account of Plath's life. What we forget here is that basically this is a part of Plath's attempt at freeing her disturbed self of the stifling past, a kind of dream narrative through which she tries to pacify the disturbing ghosts of her depressing psyche. Throughout the history of humankind, man has tried to define the norm of life by writing stories. The view we get from these writings is a man-centric one where women figure as a subsidiary. One reading of *The Bell Jar* made me aware that even though the time is different and the milieu is dissimilar, a considerable part of me is present in the pages of the novel. With it came another realization that our view of the

world is determined by the literature we read in a world governed by men's words. *The Bell Jar* is not just the story of Plath; it is a conscious feminine narrative true to all the women who suffers by the abject ways of life.

Sylvia Plath wrote the novel *The Bell Jar* as a college girl story; but the kind of deep incursion it shows into the dark corners of the psyche is rare in any novel. Plath was not a person who will let go of her ambitions and let sorrow guide her ways. In spite of the wrong connotation we usually get about her, this factor has to be admitted that Plath was strong enough to stand up to any kind of situation till the last breath of her life. Plath as an "artist" is not so popular among the readers as Plath, "the suicidal poet" is. The extra attention given to the factor of suicide affects the assessment of her work. And especially *The Bell Jar*, looked at from this point of view becomes just an extended account of her suicide. But Plath never tried to depict sorrow on print, rather she created a powerful narrative style to deal with her own problems which attain a universal quality in spite of its confessional nature. Here we can quote her own words about writing, as she expressed in a letter to her mother in 1956:

I need no sorrow to write; I have had, and, no doubt, will have enough. My poems and stories I want to be the strongest female paean yet for the creative forces of nature, the joy of being a loved and loving woman; that is my song. I believe it is destructive to try to be an abstractionist man-imitator, or a bitter, sarcastic Dorothy Parker or Teasdale...³

Her sorrow is not the subject of her writing, but the subjugation of her self in the world overpowered by the 'male self' disturbed her a lot. The story of Plath's depression starts with the kind of treatment she gets in the hands of society. The character of Esther Greenwood, who is a shadowy figure of Sylvia, is portrayed to drive home the truth that a tormented childhood can lead to despair. In the words of Lynda K. Bundtzen, in the

novel: "She represents Esther's (and by extension, her own) depression as a result of male usurpation and abuse of female creative powers..."⁴ One thing that Plath was worried about all her life was her loss of self and creative ability. Therefore, she was unable to carry the burden of being that part of the population, which is dominated by its counterpart at almost all the levels. *The Bell Jar* throws light on how she hated all the male relationships, when they tried to disturb her well-guarded independent self. The novel is a well-knit account of Plath's real life relations with a bit of caricature done to most of the characters, but this does not hide the fact that she had a very bitter experience of life from the closer acquaintances, including her mother. The novel is kind of a narrative, which tells us the story of the teller whose life is being depicted with masterful strokes.

The Bell Jar was first published in London in 1963 under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. Sylvia Plath wrote to a friend that *Bell Jar* is: "...an apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past."⁵ This novel bears a close resemblance to the life of Plath and she adopted the pen name because she was worried about the disappointment the publication might cause to many of her acquaintances. The central themes of Plath's early life are the basis of the novel. In Plath's own words, *The Bell Jar* is an account of her life: "What I have done is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalising to add colour ..." Though the novel is considered an adolescent crisis narrative, it attained the status of feminist manifesto as well. The novel is written in the style of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*⁶. In his review of *The Bell Jar* in *The New Statesman*, Robert Taubman described the novel as: "...the first feminine novel in a Salinger mood." But our concern here is not to make comparisons as to the kind of novel

it is but to read it to find out the truth hidden behind the fictitious characters and incidents. *The Bell Jar* is not the only novel to have a female protagonist or to have the story of the struggle of its heroine. But the narrative is a powerful one where, through language, the female condition is depicted; and it becomes convincing at the highest level of literary merit. Teresa De Lauretis says that:

The Bell Jar is an account of a journey, of Esther's decent into the hell of self-disintegration, her rebirth, and ascent to self unity and freedom. Although she actually travels through different physical spaces from one geographical location to another, the journey⁷ is mainly an inner one, inward into the self and outward into the world.

This journey, even after having personal touches, has the power to attract the audience who can identify with the kind of life depicted in those 270 odd pages. Esther Greenwood, the narrator of the story is a disguised version of Sylvia Plath, who is a brilliant student getting straight A's all through her life, in an Eastern Women's college. But Esther secretly doubts her own capabilities. As the novel opens, Esther is seen in New York City as prize-winning guest editor of a fashion magazine. Along with twelve other lucky girls, she seems to be enjoying her time, yet she fails to wholeheartedly take pleasure in the event. Towards the later part of the novel, the atmosphere becomes intolerable and the heroine, almost like Plath, leaps into madness and makes an almost foolproof attempt of suicide. But she survives at the end, unlike Sylvia. This is the story of *The Bell Jar* in a nutshell.

The story of the novel, bright at one point, grim at another point, is very suggestive of the social and cultural milieu of the 1950's. As Paula Bennett has written, Sylvia Plath's novel offers a brilliant evocation of: "... oppressive atmosphere of the

1950's and the soul-destroying effect this atmosphere could have on an ambitious, high-minded young woman like Plath."⁸

Sylvia, from her girlhood days tried to be what the situation and family demanded her to be. She was a loving daughter, good student, caring wife and mother. Inwardly, she hated the whole concept of pretension, and through her heroine Esther, Plath says that she wants to write a novel where she can "screw" everyone.

The novel *The Bell Jar* is not a narrative written over a short period to flush out the kind of disturbances we see in the life of Plath. Saul Maloff has the opinion that:

she completed the final version on a Eugene Saxton Fund fellowship and felt towards its terms an urgent sense of commitment and obligation...but above all, its subject: her own pain and sickness, treated with literal fidelity, a journal done up as a novel, manifestly re-experienced, and not from any great distance glowing health.⁹

The opinion of Maloff goes along with Plath's own clarifications where she writes to her mother and tells that the novel is to show, "how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown...to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar." Plath again assures her mother that her second novel "will show that same world and the people in it as seen through the eyes of health."¹⁰ Plath never had a chance to write the second novel, but her clarification seems too weak to make a mark. She was too worried about hurting her close acquaintances and tried her best to protect their cause. The claim of looking at the world through the distorting lens finally depicts how true is the view even though it is not seen through the clear eye. The whole claim appears as a facade to give a superficial cover to the deeper truth depicted by the powerful narrative. This is a well-meditated piece of work where we find a rare feat on the part of a writer who despite calling the novel a trivial exercise depicts one of

the most powerful feminine narratives known to us during the early sixties. The modern feminist movement can be said to start with Betty Freidan's book *The Feminine Mystique*¹¹, which was published in 1963. As this book came out during the 1960s and the protests of the civil rights movement, the two events reinforced each other, because the civil rights movement emphasized the extent to which groups were oppressed on the basis of both cultural and physical factors. Freidan describes in 'The Problem That Has No Name', one of the chapters in her book, how 'no name' probably describes what thousands, or perhaps millions, of American suburban housewives felt. During the fifties, this had been a personal and private problem, which one did not talk about. There was something wrong with the woman who did not feel that her life as a housewife was fulfilling. Betty Freidan founded, and became the first president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. When the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, Title VII included a ban on discrimination in employment based on sex as well as race. Older women activists, particularly business and professional women, and veterans seized the Title as an instrument of change. When the government failed to act on complaints of sex discrimination, exhibiting the same reluctance it had shown with the civil rights violations, these activists formed NOW to mobilize pressure on behalf of women's rights. The fight for equal rights for women were flowering in the late sixties and the seventies, and that *The Bell Jar* came out before those ideas were debated, shows that it is an early feminist text. There were few literary novels about female characters during the fifties, and this fact makes *The Bell Jar* a feminine text of its time. *The Bell Jar* was an attempt to write sympathetically about growing up in the United States of America during the forties and fifties, especially about being a woman. Recognizing that

females faced difficult situations and took difficult decisions about their own and their family life was at this time a feminist realisation in itself, as women were not supposed to be as smart as men were. Esther Greenwood is in New York at the beginning of *The Bell Jar*. One can say that 'the problem that has no name' is rather described here. She says: "I knew something was wrong with me that summer ... I was supposed to be having the time of my life ... Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself." (2) One can say that Esther has the empty feeling Freidan talks about in *The Feminine Mystique*: 'I felt very still and very empty'. All Esther wants to be is a poet. The scene of Esther being photographed with the rose signifies her desire to be a poet, and stands as an image of her frustration. The women of the fifties were not supposed to want careers. As Freidan says in 'The Problem That Has No Name': "They were thought to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents."¹² Sylvia Plath has become sort of a martyr to women's rights, an implicit criticism of women's role in the fifties, the mid-century system that denied women ways to become professionals. She is, as most women during the fifties, expected to marry. Esther Greenwood sees herself as something else than primarily a housewife, and she use a lot of her energy to try to avoid marrying the one she is expected - Buddy Willard. The last comment Buddy gave Esther gives a good picture of the attitude towards women, that is women's role as partners in marriage, in the fifties: "I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther. Now you've been," and Buddy's gesture encompassed the hill, the pines and the severe, snow-gabled building breaking up the rolling landscape, "here", but Esther seems to understand the full import of his question. After her well publicized story about her psychic breakdown, her chances for marrying well has become smaller,

as she is no longer a 'normal' college student, she has become a woman with a frightening past. The title of the novel is pointing to the fact that this is a feminist text as well. The image of a 'bell jar', to be placed under a glass enclosure, a confined space for the purpose of being observed, caught in a vacuum, separated from other lives, would surely be a negative experience. To be such an observed object, and woman, indicates the image, which is to be used often by the later feminist movement that all too often women are looked upon as objects of their men and their culture. Therefore, Sylvia Plath's use of the idea of being a scientific object, staked out as it were for the explicit purpose of observation, can only be negative and dehumanising.

The image of oneself inside a "bell jar" is quite disarming and to live under it is like going through hell each moment of one's existence. If we agree to the fact that the novel has the streaks of autobiography ingrained in every word, we can now look at the narrative as the "dream narrative" of a talented persona who is lost like a dream herself. In Plath's own words, Esther "would be myself, only in disguise." This disguise was necessary to write about her life as otherwise the novel would have become a mere autobiographical account. The novel can be divided into three parts: the first part with an academically brilliant Esther, the second part with her breakdown and the last part forming her recovery. This is a rough division, which has in its folds several thematic developments that we have to look into. Esther goes to New York after winning a story contest and joins as a guest editor for the *Lady's Journal* magazine. From a superficial level, this seems to be a coveted moment for any teenage girl. However, the protagonist of the novel is unable to enjoy the moment for some unknown reason. At this point, we can look into the life of Plath and into the factors that led her to depict such a moment in

a negative light. For that matter we just have to realize that though Esther in the guise of Plath has wanted to become a successful story writer and journalist, the lack of depth in the real world leads her to despair.

In the first place, Sylvia Plath introduces and develops the character of Esther Greenwood, the narrator and protagonist of the novel. Since the major concern of the novel is the mental health of Esther Greenwood and her progression into a deep depression and eventual recovery, in the first chapter itself Plath establishes the roots of Esther's mental illness. Although Plath does not attribute one specific cause to her protagonist's condition, she does in this chapter lay the foundation for the causes of Esther's dissatisfaction. One of the most significant causes of this depression is certainly the high-pressure environment in which Esther lives, for Plath clearly establishes that Esther is the quintessential overachiever, a scholarship winner and gifted student who consistently wins prizes and contests for her academic abilities. While Plath implies that the other girls who are working for this magazine internship in New York are from wealthy backgrounds of leisure, Esther comes from a more modest family. The internship that Esther wins elucidates one of the major themes of the novel: the disparity between what Esther believes should be and what actually occurs. Plath states this most explicitly when Esther notes that she should have been having the time of her life in New York, but instead finds herself quite dissatisfied.

A second prominent cause of anxiety for Esther concerns matters of sexuality. The society of the early fifties in which the story takes place is one noted for its sexual repression, and Plath bolsters this through the inclusion of various details of Esther's stay in New York. She stays in a hotel for women only, presumably intending to keep the

women of the hotel away from predatory men. The name of this hotel, the Amazon, is ironic, for the name elicits the idea of strong women warriors, but instead places these girls in cloistered positions of safety and seclusion. This also introduces a theme that will recur throughout the novel, the idea that Esther is trapped or confined.

Plath introduces the theme of sexuality partially through the contrast between Doreen and Betsy, two young editors, the former, savvy, urbane and liberated, and the latter a symbol of a rustic innocence. The suburban Esther mediates between these two extremes: she chooses to associate with Doreen, but admits that Doreen causes major trouble for her. The inclusion of information on the Rosenbergs also brings in Esther's preoccupation with death, a character trait that foreshadows the suicide attempt that will be the central event of the novel.

The specificity of the narrative makes it come alive as a piece of work depicting the dreams and aspirations of the author. Many critics have considered *The Bell Jar* as an allegorical piece of work, where allegory means, "quite simply in this instance a narrative or description conveying a hidden meaning."¹³ Again, according to Bundtzen, the novel is a "feminine allegory" with three distinct aspects: "...the woman's place in society; her special creative powers; and finally, her psychological experiences of femininity." If we take these words as our focal point in dealing with the narrative, we are sure to find the shades of all the three as in the novel Plath deals not only with a personal problem at a narrow level but has traversed a vast expanse of physical and psychological ground. There we encounter the women specific problems which are as well, the dream come true narrative of a creator who has suffered the bitter taste of suppression in the hands of the society. Plath projects a fragmented femininity as her

own self was like that. Though we hear such assertions as “I am, I am, I am.” (178), that certainty is lost in the web of male-dominated environment, which saps her creative energy at certain levels. Esther, the protagonist, after coming to New York is indecisive about which of the two girls to be chosen as her friend, Doreen or Betsy. Doreen is the sort of high society girl whose “elaborate decadence” attracted Esther “like a magnet.” Esther liked Doreen for her great intuition. She was unable to ignore Doreen’s identity, as she felt that: “Everything she said was like a voice speaking straight out of my own bones” (8) This familiarity of self slowly vanishes as Esther gets to know her friend more closely. On a night out in New York, when they meet a disc jockey, Lenny, Esther discovers the differences that set both the girls miles apart. As Lenny chooses Doreen as his partner, Esther feels left out and a kind of negation in her being: “I felt myself melting into shadows like the negative of a person I’d never seen before in my life.” (11) In the same encounter, Esther creates a different identity for herself by telling her name as Elly Higginbottom, in order to save herself from being recognised. The kind of insecurity Plath felt in assigning her name to the novel is reflected in the behaviour of Esther here. The close sexual encounter of Lenny and Doreen results in Doreen collapsing in her own vomit, after getting heavily drunk. After this incident Esther makes up her mind about Doreen: “...deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her.” (25) Instead, she declares: “Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart” (25). Esther attaches herself to Betsy and they do whatever is expected of them. After an elaborate luncheon, this relationship also ends as they fall ill because of poisoned crabmeat. This uncertainty of recognizing oneself with someone is because the protagonist was not sure about her ‘self’. The fragmentation

of the self happens due to the unnecessary Pressure exerted by the society to mould one's behaviour in a particular manner.

Recovering from the almost killing sickness, Esther becomes her own independent self, and she starts feeling that her virginity is hanging heavy on herself. This happens because she comes to know about the double standard maintained by the society in the matters of purity and sexuality. Her learning about the infidelity of Buddy Willard, who maintains that one should not have sexual experience before marriage and goes on to have a relation with a waitress, destroys her confidence in the beliefs and practices of the society. The same society, which gives so much liberty to a man, restricts the free movements of a woman and in Esther's case, it was Buddy himself and his mother who insisted on this matter of purity. The beliefs of the society are reflected in the words of Mrs. Willard, the mother of Buddy Willard, who says that: "What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security" and "What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off" (79). However, Esther was the last person to wish that way. She says: "...the last thing I wanted was... to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted... to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a fourth July rocket" (92). This wish of catapulting the protagonist into the air like an arrow is also visible in the poem "Stings"¹⁴ in *Ariel*, written at almost the same time Plath was writing the novel:

More terrible than she ever was, red

Scar in the sky, red comet

Over the engine that killed her---

The mausoleum, the wax house.

And again, in the poem "Ariel"¹⁵ the movement of the horse has the arrow imagery where the poet insists,

And I
Am the arrow,
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning.

The relationship between Buddy and Esther has a lot of sexual connotation, about the ways of the society Plath disapproved of. Buddy always tried to introduce new things to Esther and in a bid like that he bares himself to show how a man looks like. Esther could not stand the sight and the only thing she could think of was, "turkey neck and turkey gizzards and felt very depressed" (75). When Buddy asks her to show herself, she bluntly refuses. Linda Bundtzen calls this refusal as her "reluctance to be 'graded' next to him [Buddy]."¹⁶ This act shows the male arrogance in its full form where a man is free to choose his sexual behaviour and the woman is supposed to comply with the demand made on her. Plath's narrative is true to her self as the relationship ends in Esther's rejection of Buddy. Here we should not overlook the fact that Esther dismisses Buddy's proposal not because he slept with a waitress, it is more because she.

could not stand...Buddy's pretending I was so sexy and he was so Pure,
when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress and
must have felt like laughing in my face.(78)

Esther's protest is against the existing system of values that makes a farce out of women's lives. Knowing Plath we can expect no other conclusion of the relationship, as the narrative depicts Plath's own values regarding relationships. It is very difficult to come out of the societal pressure and reject the notion of chastity as the woman gets discarded in the process for no fault of her own.

After Esther decides to abandon Buddy, she gets the news of him contracting TB and going to the sanatorium. This news relieves her, as she feels free to use that issue as the cause of their break up. In spite of the differences she visits Buddy in a TB place in Adirondacks. During the visit Esther goes for skiing on Buddy's insistence and breaks her leg. Initially she blames him for the broken leg, but later she changes her opinion. She comes to the conclusion that, "No, I broke it myself. I broke it on purpose to pay myself back for being such a heel" (95). There ends the domination of the male spirit over the controlled soul of Esther who unknowingly had given in to the trapping of the society.

In *The Bell Jar*, we meet Esther as the guest editor, along with another eleven girls, from different parts of America. All of them were nice, ambitious and full of life, entering a world that was mostly male dominated. This surety of vision that the girls shared is not present in the world of Esther. The kind of insecurity that Plath encountered in her life is seen in the life of Esther as well. She meets Jay Cee, the editor of the *Ladies Day*, and this meeting reveals the uncertainty. When Jay Cee asks Esther about her aim, she replies, "I don't really know"(35). Outwardly, Esther was sure that she wanted to win scholarships, go around Europe, and finally settle down as a writer and a poet. But the inner self speaks out and in spite of herself, Esther spells out the truth, which is deeply embedded in her:

I felt a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true.

It sounded true, and I recognized it, the way you recognize some non-descript person that's been hanging around your door for ages and then suddenly comes up and introduces himself as your real father and looks exactly like you, so you know he really is your father, and the person you thought all your life was your father is a sham(35).

The symbolic description of the disillusionment sounds so true that we can feel how deeply the author was caught in the dilemma herself. The kind of doubt Esther exhibited is a result of the persuasive upbringing. The society demanded of every individual to be successful in the conventional terms and any deviation from it was considered madness. Esther was an academically bright student who was a straight 'A' all her life and as her academic life was ending, she was unsure about what she wanted to do. For her life seemed to be like that of a racehorse in a world "without racetracks". Plath uses a very nice metaphor to describe the life of her protagonist. Esther observes: "I saw my life branching out before me like a green fig tree...from tip of every branch...a wonderful future beckoned and winked"(84). This future included "a husband and a happy home and children", "famous poet", "brilliant professor" and another showed herself as "Ee Gee, the amazing editor." The problem of having a certain future is losing all the other chances life can provide:

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat here, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (85)

Esther is a kind of character who wanted to be everything at the same time but did not have a definite aim. Wanting a lot at the same time was not something a woman could

ask for during the fifties. The male-centric ideas of career and aim would mislead not Esther but any women of that generation.

Troubled relationships between the female characters depict the kind of trauma Plath went through in her life where she cannot even trust her own mother. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich affirms that:

The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, mutuality, comes from her mother. The earliest enwrapment of one female body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo; but it is, at the beginning, the whole world.¹⁷

Plath, very early in her childhood lost the kind of contact with her mother as Rich has pointed out. The moment her brother was born, she felt that she had missed the attention her mother paid to her. Though it is very natural in any sibling relationship to feel left out after the birth of a younger one, Plath as a sensitive child lost all attachment and started hating her mother. Plath could not tell the world about the love-hate relationship she shared with her own mother without hurting her. So, in the novel we encounter a mother who is discussed not in detail but the few deft strokes establish the fact that the protagonist and the mother figure had problems. Esther wanted a mother like Jay Cee, “I wanted a mother like Jay Cee. Then I’d know what to do.”(42) The helplessness of Esther arises because of her strenuous relationship with her mother. She looks up to Jay Cee and imagines her life as a famous editor. Her mother could never give her this confidence; instead, the relationship with her became very arduous. “My own mother wasn’t much of help.”(42) These sentences in the novel sound as if they are taken from Plath’s own life. Throughout her life, Plath was overburdened by the relationship with her mother. In *Letters Home*, she sounds positive praising her mother, “You are the most

wonderful mummy that a girl ever had, and I only hope that I continue to lay more laurels at your feet.” On the contrary, the novel projects a kind of hatred towards the mother, very subtly portrayed to perfection. Among the line of visitors she got in the hospital, she found her mother as the worst visitor because “she never scolded me but kept on begging me, with sorrowful face to tell her what she had done wrong”(228). Plath did not put up a different situation for the protagonist; it dealt with the day-to-day misgivings between Esther and her mother. During the days of Esther’s treatment, she openly tells her psychiatrist, Doctor Nolan, that she hates her mother. To her utter relief Nolan replied, “I suppose you do.” This understanding unburdens the troubled heart, as it always felt guilty to hate her own mother. These lines in the novel are almost similar to the lines found in the journal entry where she tells her psychiatrist about her disappointment with her mother. The lack of similar vibration on her mother’s part led to the dismantling of the relationship.

The episode of Esther throwing away the roses brought in by her mother is a sure sign of mother-hatred acted to perfection:

That afternoon my mother had brought me the roses.
 "Save them for my funeral," I'd say.
 My mother's face puckered, and she looked ready to cry.
 "But Esther, don't you remember what day it is today?"
 "No."....
 "It's your *birthday*."
 And that is when I had dumped the roses in the wastebasket. (228-229)

At this point Doctor Nolan supports her feelings and Esther feels assured that Nolan understands what she “meant.” In contrast, the passage clearly shows lack of understanding on the mother’s part, which is similar to the kind of relationship Sylvia shared with her mother. As a sensitive college student, Plath went through several

traumatic periods and never had a single soul to share her doubts and frustrations. Had her mother been a bit more understanding she might not have gone into depression so badly. The roses episode of Esther is indicative of the anger that Plath wanted to vent out in order to free herself from the past ghosts of discomfort in the guise of fiction. When Esther needed genuine help to come out of her depression, her mother asked her to learn shorthand to overcome her despondency. Her mother never let her forget the fact that a simple English major is not worthwhile as far as getting a job is concerned. Whereas, a knowledge of shorthand can put her in demand among all “the up and coming young men and she would transcribe letters after thrilling letters”(83). Marjorie Perloff observes this as, “typing and shorthand; her mother’s domain become the symbol of male oppression: she rejects her mother’s practical notion...”¹⁸ This rejection was very strong because she “hated the idea of serving men in any way” and wanted to dictate her “own thrilling letters” (83).

Esther’s relationship with the women in the novel brings out sharp and contrasting views. Plath not only brought in characters from her own life into fiction, but in dealing with them projected the kind of idea she liked or disliked about women as such. All the characters are looked at through the same scrutinizing lens, with which Plath viewed life. The most important figure after her mother is the character of Jay Cee, the magazine editor. Esther liked her for the strong professional ethics that does not cater to the needs of the male dominated framework of the society. She was a woman, who in spite of being in the fashion magazine world, hardly cared about superficial beauty.

Jay Cee was my boss, and I liked her a lot, in spite of what Doreen said She wasn’t one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry. Jay Cee had brain, so her plug-ugly looks didn’t seem to matter (6).

Doreen calls Jay Cee as “ugly as a sin” and coolly claims, “I bet that old husband of hers turns out all the lights before he gets near her or he’d puke otherwise”(6). Esther fails to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit and in bed with her fat husband. For Esther she becomes a symbol of intellect without paying regard to the fact that she is a woman and her first priority is to look good to survive in the world.

The acceptance of Jay Cee does not imply that Esther liked to be guided by all the women she met in her life. The insistence on the independent self is everywhere to be seen. “Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all the old ladies wanted to teach me something, but I suddenly didn’t think that they had anything to teach me”(6-7). The reference to the old ladies included her mother and Philomena Guinea, her benefactor. Plath’s relationship with Guinea was quite cordial, but the stinging humour she uses in depicting Esther and Guinea’s friendship tells a different story.

Dr Nolan was the woman figure in the novel who helped Esther to come out of depression and live life with a positive attitude. The kind of consideration she showed in understanding Esther’s problems led to the latter’s belief in her. Esther found Dr. Nolan “a cross between Myrna Loy and my mother”(210). She looked at the doctor in disbelief as she had the idea that there are no women psychiatrists. Esther’s experience with the other psychiatrist Dr Gordon was a nightmarish one, and in comparison to that, Doctor Nolan seemed like a fairy to her. There is a period of distrust with Doctor Nolan also as Esther gets the news of her shock treatment suddenly even after the doctor’s former assurance that she’ll inform about it in advance. The vulnerability of Esther’s feelings comes out when she says that she had given her “trust on a platter” and gets back “bare faced treachery of Doctor Nolan”(238). Immediately after that, the assurance of the

have labelled Sylvia's father fixation almost as "Electra Complex". In the novel, we do not get such sort of description that can ascertain the claim. Instead, we see a very complex kind of relationship between Esther and her clinging to the memory of her father. The rejection of the close relationship with any male company in the novel can be attributed to her father-worship and she refuses to appreciate any of her male friends. After the disappointment with Buddy, Esther goes out with Constantin, the interpreter for UN and feels a kind of happiness she had very rarely experienced. "I felt happier than I had been since I was about nine and running along the white beaches with my father the summer before he died." (82) Esther realized that she had never been so happy all these days after she turned nine. This feeling of happiness that occurred in the company of Constantin is because she believed that he will "see through all that stuff [all her so called shortcomings] to what I really am" (81, *Parenthesis mine*).

The most intriguing thing in the novel is the image of the 'bell jar' hanging almost over all the moments over every characters head though they fail to realize it. The idea of confinement is one of the main trends running through the novel, as the title is suggestive of it. Plath, in her "straight from the heart" narrative, cannot write more effectively about something else than the suffocation she felt throughout her life. Not only Plath, but the whole generation of women feel this confinement within a "bell jar" where they are kept as ornamental pieces for show, for experiment, decaying away in the stale air of the jar. Whenever Esther feels depressed, the first experience she expresses is the confinement in the jar. Esther was astounded by the fact that there is not much difference between herself in a psychiatric clinic and the girls enjoying the broad daylight as "normal" girls. (Belsize) "But I wasn't sure. I was not sure at all. How did I

know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar with its stifling distortions wouldn’t descend again?” The image of the bell jar is not only related in direct terms depicting an oppressive picture. The whole novel is full of the confinements of different types. Illness of the body is linked with the kind of suffocation the protagonist felt at different points of the novel.

The sickness rolled through me in great waves. After each wave it would fade away and leave me limp as a wet leaf and shivering all over and then I would feel it rising up in me again, and the glittering white torture-chamber tiles under my feet and over my head and on all four sides closed in and squeezed me to pieces(48).

The closing in of the life left Esther feeling like being trapped inside a glass vessel. The stifling feeling is of the “bell jar” descending upon her slowly, which is first projected through physical illness extended to mental one in the process of the novel. All throughout the novel, Esther mentally felt like sitting under a glass jar that restricted her horizon. After her initial mental setback, Philomena Guinea provides her with the best sort of treatment to get well soon. Esther at that point, instead of being grateful to Guinea, feels:

I knew I should be grateful to Mrs. Guinea, only I couldn’t feel a thing. If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe...it wouldn’t have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat...I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, sewing in my own sour air (209).

On the way to the mental asylum, Esther tries to jump into the river when they were crossing the bridge. As her mother and brother stop her from opening the car door and going out she “sank back into the grey plush seat...The air of the bell jar waded round me and I couldn’t stir”(210). The confinement is too terrible for any one to cope with when this becomes the only kind of existence.

The obsession with death is the next stage that happens due to the confined existence. According to the norms of the society, Esther should have been the happiest girl enjoying the privileges of scholarship and good education. But an incessant urge to get away from life is there as a part of liberation from the stifling society. Esther becomes despondent during her stay in New York and by the time she comes back home, she gets the news that she did not make it to the writing course. The last hope of getting into doing something creative ends and she fails to retrieve the already lost good spirit. The next step is the drastic one, trying to end the life to get away from the disappointing surroundings. Esther enacts a symbolic death of her 'self' in New York itself by feeding her stylish wardrobe provided by the journal fund, to air. The dresses provided to the guest editors were the clothes that suffocated the personality of Esther. She performed the ritual of throwing them like the ashes of the dead and artificial self of her own:

Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the gray scraps were ferried off, to settle here, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York (124).

After this symbolic death, Esther was already exhausted with life. For her the importance of making it into the writing course was immense as she was concerned too much about her writing abilities. She expresses her willingness to succeed and surprise everyone by becoming a writer which is clear from these very personal lines:

I decided I'd surprise Jay Cee and send in a couple of the stories I wrote in his class under a pseudonym. Then one day the Fiction Editor would come in to Jay Cee personally and plop the stories down on her desk and say, "Here is something cut above the usual," and Jay Cee would agree and accept them and ask the author to launch and it would be me (114).

The ambition to write something 'cut above the usual' has been the constant aim of Plath, and these lines are as true for Plath as for Esther. The disappointment brought in by the failure enhances Esther's death urge and the circumstances following led to its speedy culmination. The first psychiatrist Doctor Gordon was a bad choice who destroys her confidence. The mistake he makes while administering the shock treatment makes Esther cry out, "I wonder what terrible thing it was that I had done"(161). The surroundings did not provide any respite to the already weeping mind of Esther. The gloomy picture of the treatment meted out to mentally challenged people instilled a kind fear in the mind of Esther, "The more hopeless you were, the further away they hid you"(180). She tries different methods to kill herself like drowning, cutting the veins, and hanging with her mother's bathrobe belt. She finally succeeds by consuming sleeping pills. Esther wrote a note to her mother saying, "*I am going for a long walk*"(189) She goes down to the cellar and gulps down half of the pills from her mother's bottle of sleeping pills: "The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep"(191). At this point there is no denying of the fact that the narrative definitely concerns the life of the narrator in such a way that all her hidden feelings get a voice to come out. The protagonist of *The Bell Jar* progresses through her life to find herself at the cliff edge of life with nothing beyond. This standing on the edge feeling remains though Esther is cured at the end of the novel. The end shows Esther cured but with a doubt: "How did I know---someday at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere---the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?"(271) This symbolic rescue of the protagonist shows the stream of life-loving force running through

the mind of the narrator. Plath through Esther establishes her self-assertion at the end of the novel:

“I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.
I am, I am, I am.”

For talking of the novel as a continuous narrative of the writer's dreams we have to consider the fact that there is a lot of similarity between the stories and the passages in *The Bell Jar*. We can say that Plath practiced some of the passages in the stories before translating them into the novel. The continuous flow is seen in all the three works discussed in this dissertation. Same passages, thoughts and ideas keep on appearing and re-appearing in the journal entries, stories and *The Bell Jar*. The voice that speaks in the short stories like “The Daughters of Blossom Street”¹⁹ and “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” moves straight into the novel. The stories like “In The Mountains” “Tongues of Stone” and “Johnny Panic” contain episodes with the same actions, characters, images and even the same words. Ted Hughes indicates that the stories of Plath “launched herself into the Bell Jar in 1960.”

The movement of the short story narratives directly into the novel shows the dealing of the similar themes in almost all the prominent prose narratives of Plath. The story “Tongues of Stone”(1955) uses the experience of a young girl's nervous breakdown like it is used in the novel. There are several incidents, which appear first in the short story, before being transferred to the novel. The nervous break down that the main character goes through is similar in both the pieces. Both the protagonists try to find solace in literary pursuits but fails, as the printed pages of the books become undecipherable to them. One of the important similarities in both “Tongues of Stone” and *The Bell Jar* is that each of the girls comes to an important realization after visiting

their respective sleeping mothers. In “Tongues of Stone”, the girl (nameless throughout the story) slips into her mother’s bed in the hope of finding some support. But the sleeping mother cannot protect, as she is unaware of her daughter’s presence. Esther, in *The Bell Jar*, looks at her sleeping mother as a source of safety and realizes the vulnerability of the situation. Both the protagonists come to the realization, vital to the development of the story, that there is no meaning in being there, either in the present or in the future.

The feeling of insecurity and meaninglessness leads both the characters to attempt suicide and be discovered and rescued at the last moment. Plath even gives similar kind of words to both the girls. In the story, the narrator after being saved explains:

At first they thought she would be blind in that eye. She had lain awake the night of her second birth into the world of flesh, talking to a nurse who was sitting up with her, turning her sightless face towards the gentle voice and saying over and over again, “But I can’t see, I can’t see. (266)

The nurse who also believed that she was blind, tried to comfort her, saying, “There are a lot of other blind people in the world. You’ll meet a nice blind man and marry him someday.” In this scene, the nurse comforts the girl after she realizes that the girl is blind. The same scene attains a more sinister look in *The Bell Jar*:

I opened my eyes.
It was completely dark.
Somebody was breathing beside me.
I can’t see”, I said.
A cheery voice spoke out of the dark.
“There are lots of blind people in the world. You’ll marry a nice blind man someday. (193)

Both the protagonists experience same kind of feeling and response from the nurse. However, in *The Bell Jar*, Esther is more detached from the voice that “spoke out of the

dark” and it shows the lack of affection and security throughout the novel. This uncertainty leads to the final breakdown.

Another striking resemblance is the attempt of strangling oneself. In “Tongues of Stone” the girl gets frustrated and depressed after the insulin treatment and tries strangulation to end self-disgust:

One night she hid the pink cotton scarf from her raincoat in the pillowcase...In the dark she had made a loop and pulled it tight around her throat... as the air stopped coming and she felt the rushing grow louder in her ears, her hands would slacken and let go... (266)

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther tries strangulation as a mode of experiment before the final attempt with sleeping pills:

...I sat on the edge of my mother’s bed and tried pulling the cord tight. But each time I would get the cord so tight I could feel a rushing in my ears and a flush of blood in my face, my hands would weaken and let go, and I would be all right again. (179)

Both the attempts show a rebellion against the worldly oppression and the underlying urge to go on living in spite of all the depression and failure. The similarities are obvious in both the narratives --- the only point of difference is that *The Bell Jar* portrays a stronger protagonist than the short piece. In the story, we are given a third person, limited view of the girl, whereas Esther in *The Bell Jar* embodies her recognition of fear, frustration and final breakdown more powerfully.

“ In the Mountains”, another short story, published before *The Bell Jar*, has similar characters. Isobel, a young college student, goes to visit her boyfriend, Austin, who has been in a TB Sanatorium. This is parallel to Esther Greenwoods’ visit to Buddy Willard under the same circumstances. Isobel, after visiting Austin feels that he is “still strong ... sure of himself.” But along with that, she feels the change that takes place in

her. Austin asks Isobel to promise to marry him. But Austin's attraction towards Isobel is a kind of physical one. When Austin expresses his longing, Isobel loses her interest in him. In *The Bell Jar* also, we see a change in Esther – and a more clear explanation of this change is given in the novel than in the short story. Esther's rejection of Buddy Willard is not only the rejection of the individual, but also a rejection of the constraints that may come up if she becomes his wife.

The story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" contains two images rather than any major event that moves into *The Bell Jar*. The first image is that of a woman who comes to the psychiatric clinic and whose dream the narrator records. The woman's tongue was struck out, which happened when she was giving a party in the honour of her French-Canadian mother-in-law, whom she hated "worse than pigs." This character appears in the novel as Mrs. Tomolillo, who has the similar symptom and a much hated French-Canadian mother-in-law. The second image is more powerful as it is crucial to both the stories. This is the image of shock treatment that the character goes through in the final scene of "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" and Esther's treatment in *The Bell Jar*. In the story, the shock invokes the image of Johnny Panic, who appears for the first time while "air cracked with blue-tongued lightning haloed angels " (166) In the novel, when Doctor Gordon fails to administer the shock properly Esther feels "Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light " (161)

The most distinguishing factor about "Johnny Panic" story is that it has as strong a narrative as the novel. This may be because of the first person narrative adopted by the author. Here the conscious persona of the narrator is dealing with the mental breakdown.

The story contains a central theme that is developed in the novel: the presence of the imaginary and the need to stress upon the point of an existing realm of imaginary against the 'real world.' There is one more similarity, the narrator of the story and *The Bell Jar* are writers. They both live in a world of imagination and this world leads them to be socially termed as mad. They escaped from the real world, as they cannot accept the denial of fantasy and dreams. This fear of death of imagination can be found in other writings of Plath as well. In "Cambridge Notes" an excerpt from her journals, Plath opines: "What I fear the most, I think, is the death of the imagination..." (260)

Sylvia Plath in her prose narratives, deals with the idea of death, depression and the frustration the protagonists feel. All these have some autobiographical note to it. The most important factor that a reader should not avoid noticing is that similar themes run along the short stories and find final expression in the novel. The form of the novel provides Plath with more scope to develop some of the incidents that she leaves unexplained in the short stories. This continuation of the themes and passage clearly depict the kind of struggle she went through in her mind to write something in prose in order to release her mental agony, which she felt cannot be expressed properly through poetry. Any reader of Plath's poetry will realize that she was more than successful in articulating herself in the poems. The fact still remains that she wanted to be a writer of prose to tell her own story in different forms and modes. There is no denying of the fact that every artist relates his or her own story in some ways or the other. Plath in her semiconscious effort in doing so did more than depicting her own story and prepared a manifesto of all the oppressed women of her age. This is by no means an ordinary feat as for the women to look at their own state of affairs and talk about it was a great deal

problematic than it is now. The interest that is generated in the writings of Plath is due to the fact that the struggle she started at the beginning of the warring fifties has not changed so much. The sacrifice Plath made in the altar of creativity can be marked as a mental disease by critics and scholars alike, though it does not deter a true Plath lover to claim that her sacrifice is a great achievement indeed. A poet and writer with just one published poetry collection and a novel to her name, generated enough attention to become a cult figure, only after her (in)famous suicide. It is not that her poetry or the novel was less in literary merit; yet the triggering force was her suicide that initiated interest in her work. Had her sex been different, the scenario might have been different: though we have no solid proof to claim like that. In such a situation, the only possible respite is the fact that though it came after death, fame did come to Plath who desired it so much when she was alive. The struggling voice of women through the centuries has suffered enough that whenever we start looking at the history of women's voice we find voices suppressed by a society, which do not give space to the voice it considers feeble and useless. In such a situation Plath's *The Bell Jar* projects an image of the persona who is not afraid of talking of the things that are considered taboo in a society whose norms are mostly set by insensitive male counterparts.

Hughes high-handedly rejects Plath's novelistic endeavours as something trivial to the craft of poetry, which is known as her forte. Plath always considered prose to be something "densely wrought, richly charged, of all-encompassing, superfine subtleties, with James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Henry James prominent in the pedigree"²⁹ But it is not that she tried to write prose to be equal among the greats like Woolf and James, it was her own creative dream that compelled her to write something beside poetry. The

writing of *The Bell Jar* was at the same time as her Ariel poems, though the poems came out after the novel: the kind of mindset that Plath was having at that time was the same. We see a lot of similarities between the theme of the poems and that of the episodes of the novel which invariably point to the same mindset of the poet and the novelist.

The kind of prose that she started writing with success started in the spring of 1959 with the story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" and the blockade of her mind that crippled her with lack of creativity sort of ended there. Plath had gone through a lot of changes during that time—change of home, the birth of her first child— which prevented her from devoting her time for writing. The only time available for her was the early mornings before the baby gets up. In such constraining circumstances Plath continued her creative journey and the best of her poems and the fruitful prose was written at this time only.

When we look into the narrative of *The Bell Jar*, we tend to ask ourselves the question whether this was the story Plath really wanted to tell the world regarding herself. The storyline invariably touches the real life events of the disturbed teenager in Plath, yet there is lot more to it than just a biographical account. Here we can quote Hughes regarding his views on the novel:

"*The Bell Jar* is the story, in other words, from behind the electroconvulsive shock treatment. It dramatizes the decisive event of her adult life, which was her attempted suicide and accidental survival, and reveals how this attempt to annihilate herself has grown from the decisive event in her childhood, which was the death of her father when she was eight. Taken separately, each episode of the plot is a close-to-documentary account of something that did happen in the author's life. But the great and it might be said profoundly disturbing effect of this brisk assemblage is determined by two separate and contradictory elements. One of these operates on what could be called an upper level, the other on a lower level."²¹

These two decisive events guide her narrative in the novel and she creates a space that is definitely feminine. This space is no normal space, but a space in the asylum, designated more to women than men. Ellen Mores comments on this appearance of the asylum in literary feminism of the early 1960's and mentions three novels: *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* by Hannah Green, *Faces in the Water* by Janet Frame and *The Bell Jar*, dealing with madness in the institutional setting. She says: "I mention these three novels here mainly to suggest that their setting, the asylum itself, becomes for these writers an elaborate, enclosed and peculiarly feminine testing ground for survival."²² Plath created this place of survival in her novel, but failed to retain it in her real life. The novel speaks more than we realize, the dreams that she had of the space , where she can be herself, the creative self that conquers the dragons of anonymity and depression.

Notes

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- ¹ All the quotes are from The Harper and Rowe Edition of *The Bell Jar* (1971).
- ² Erica Jong, "Letters Focus Exquisite Rage of Sylvia Plath," *The Critical Heritage*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988) 205.
- ³ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home*. Ed. Aurelia Schober Plath. (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1975). 238.
- ⁴ Lynda K. Bundtzen, *Plath's Incantations: Women and the Creative Process*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P, 1983). 115.
- ⁵ Lois Ames, "Sylvia Plath: Biographical Note". *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. 286.
- ⁶ J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*. (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1946).
- ⁷ Teresa De Lauretis, "Rebirth in *The Bell Jar*", *The Critical Heritage* 173.
- ⁸ Quoted in "The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1998), 2 April, 2002. <<http://stinfwww.informatik.uni-leipzig.de/~beckmann/plath/bond>>
- ⁹ Saul Maloff, "Waiting for the Voice to Crack". *New Republic* 8 may, 1971, 33
- ¹⁰ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home*. 305
- ¹¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (1963; Harmondsworth Penguin Books 1976)
- ¹² Ibid. 13.
- ¹³ Linda K. Bundtzen, *Plath's Incarnations: Women and the Creative Process* (Ann Arbor University of Michigan P, 1983).
- ¹⁴ Sylvia Plath, "Stings", *Ariel*. (London Faber and Faber, 1965) 67
- ¹⁵ Ibid 37
- ¹⁶ Linda K. Bundtzen, *Plath's Incarnations Women and the Creative Process* 113
- Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born Motherhood as Experience and Institution*
- ¹⁷ Marjorie Perloff. "A Ritual Of Being Born Twice Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* "
- <<http://stinfwww.informatik.uni-leipzig.de/~beckmann/plath/onlineart.html>>
- ¹⁸ All the stories are taken from *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams Short Stories and Prose Pieces* (London Faber and Faber Edition 1978)
- ¹⁹ Hughes, Ted. "On Sylvia Plath". *Raritan*, Fall94, 14 2 Academic Search Premier 21st Nov 02
- ²⁰ Ibid.

²⁰ Hughes, Ted. "On Sylvia Plath". *Raritan*, Fall94, 14:2 Academic Search Premier. 21st Nov 02.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ellen Mores, *Literary Women*. (New York: Oxford U P, 1985) 132.

Conclusion

It has barely begun, the search of women for themselves. But the time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete.

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

In 1963, Betty Friedan brought forward the issue of 'search of women for themselves' through her well-meditated work *The Feminine Mystique*.¹ She wrote from the point of view of the white, American, middle-class suburban housewife of the 1950s, brainwashed by the culture into the belief that a woman's greatest fulfillment can be found in caring for home, husband, and children. In compelling, often relentless prose, Friedan demonstrated that women have a right to education, to fulfillment in the wider world --- in other words, women must stand up for their rights and claim "an identity of their own." The urge within every woman to rediscover their 'identity' led to voicing their feelings and gave birth to a new breed of writers. They are not simply women writers, but self-styled individuals who realised the importance of seeking and establishing their own identity. Among this new brand of writers, some very powerful voices were heard which were full of futuristic visions. Sylvia Plath was one of the visionaries who led the path and established a powerful narrative voice, be it in poetry or prose, which can withstand any challenge and open up the vistas of woman's inner world, previously buried within the four walls of the house.

The writings on Plath generally tend to become biographical works looking for details of her personal life and suicide. There is no denying of the fact that the powerful narrative with its abounding humaneness and sensitivity touches the heart

of every reader and the reading becomes focused on the biographical factors. The attempt to evaluate her work within the set parameters of creative and intellectual principles, more often than not, becomes futile. The real charm and enjoyment of Plath's creative genius can be felt only if we give value to the kind of principles she followed. The style and manner of writing is unique to Plath herself and a total absorption is possible only if we let our minds flow with the dream like quality of her style.

Plath's prose writing, except for the novel *The Bell Jar*, has very few takers and even the attention towards these writings are drawn by the fact that they supply information on the personal life. Plath never failed to arouse the curiosity in the minds of the readers but almost for the wrong reasons. Readers Gobble up every written word on Plath to find out more personal details, and read about the ever-present addendum that makes her so special...her suicide. This cannot be a healthy attitude of paying the required tribute to one of the pioneering woman writers. The process of writing for a woman during the fifties had been troublesome. This point has been repeated several times in the course of the dissertation and even in the conclusion, it has its valid importance. The voices that made a public appearance through several modes had to assert their presence. Even though women writers emerged way back in the eighteenth century, during the 1950s and 60s the same suffocation of suppression was felt by the exponents of this time. Recognition of the separate self of the women writers was still not established. Plath cries out in pain and exclaims:

...spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free...I want, I think, to be omniscient. I think I would like to call

myself "The girl who wanted to be God." Yet, if I were not in this body, where would I be—perhaps I am destined to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I—I am powerful—but to what extent? I am I.²

It is a painful realisation that the kind of self-doubt, self-assertion we see in this passage is not found in the writings of men who wrote at the same time or much before this time. It is enough indication of the disparities prevailing even in the intellectual world. This question has not reached its answer even now though we claim to be the generation advanced enough to challenge the secrets of the outer space. Yet, there is no well-defined space for women in the society and the silencing of the vices is going on. A woman is still a housewife ultimately and the words of Plath's poem "The Applicant"³ still ring true for the every woman:

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook.

It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.

You have a hole, it is poultice.

You have an eye, it's an image.

My boy, it's your last resort.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

Here poet reduces a wife-to-be applicant to an inanimate 'it;' and if we look closer we can see a reflection of her in the same 'it.' Even after death, Plath was a mere accessory in the controlling hands of the people, who decided the publication of her works. Plath herself never left the works in a manner to be recognised. And the executors never allowed the free flow of her work. When the unabridged journals

came out a part of her hidden past made its appearance and the missing pages of the earlier published journals brought out the passionate, free-flowing confessional style of Plath's writing. The whole body of Plath's writing is in fact a search for the voice she thought suitable and the struggle that she went through depict her feelings at different points and by different modes.

The writings of Plath continue to have immense effect on the psyche of the young generation of readers, especially woman. Specifically, the prose works tell the story of Plath's life so vividly that its impact remains on the mind. But this influence is more because she tells the story of the whole generation of women, not just of herself. The incidents of the stories sounds true to the readers even now, though they are quite a few decades old. There are numerous web sites, fan clubs and discussion groups in the cyberspace, dealing with the works of this legendary writer. Jeffrey Berman from University of Albany expresses his concern over the risk of teaching Plath in the classroom. He reproduces the words of one of his students Justine, describing how she felt after reading *The Bell Jar*:

The Bell Jar made me think about suicide more clearly because of its realness in terms of Esther's suicide attempts. I hate to admit the similarities between us like our age, being English majors, having difficulty writing, knowing what you want to do but no motivation to do it, and paranoia among other things⁴

Justine's words are true for so many other readers and this is not an ignominious consequence that leads the readers to such feeling. Usually it is the female readers who are in the high risk group of depression gets affected by the writings. This obsession with the works of Plath and its direct influence on the readers is not a very

ordinary factor. Plath translated her feelings and dreams to printed pages so smoothly that every reader finds a part of himself or herself in the fold of her writings.

Ted Hughes endures all the criticism that is directed towards the reason of Plath's suicide. He is termed as the 'intelligent' murderer who neglected Plath not only in her life, but also after death. Validity of this accusation is not something that is concerned with my reading of Plath, but it is important to the work in the sense that had there been no suppression of her works, the world would have enjoyed more of her prose writings. The followers of Hughes accuses the feminists and specially the fans of Plath, for being partial to one poet and justifies his acts as the cause of Plath's bad temper and her depressed moods. All controversies apart, we encounter a writer in Plath, who is a woman and whose works get silenced for no fault of her own. Because of this silencing, Hughes is criticised by the feminists and usually a lot of protest is demonstrated against him, terming him as the murderer of Plath. This dissertation is not a probing into the relationship between Plath and Hughes, but the mention is needed as I feel that looking into the prose pieces and journal excerpts is also a kind of revolt against the neglect shown to these works. There is male domination in the field of high literary criticism and a writer is judged by the parameters that are biased. Terming of a work of art as superior or inferior depends on its artistic quality that is, at many times relative. Here, in my study of Plath's prose, I have tried to analyse her works from the perspective of a common reader, concentrating on the factor that they simply portray the untold dreams of Plath, and in the process describe the feelings that are common to so many generations of women.

The discussion of the stories, the novel and the journals are not adequate as I have not been able to get all the conflicting views that can be expressed on them. This is due to the cause that these works are not discussed widely in the intellectual circle. So, I have taken the vantage point of a pioneer who reads through the lines of the journals and the stories and the only novel to find the same materials appearing over and over again. The whole narrative is a kind of chronicle of an artist who was a poet at heart, reflecting her poetic quality even in her prose pieces. I have looked at the Journals, stories and the novel by Plath in the previous three chapters, which unfold before us the story that is unique to her. The journals introduce us to the events that had led Plath to the creative domain. These private narratives appeal to a reader as the mode in which they are written, borders on a kind of style where we hear the writer speaking directly to us. From the well of her experiences stem up the stories that I have discussed in the second chapter of the dissertation. The stories have characters from the real life of Plath, some of which appear in the journals as her friends and family. These characters continue their journey to the novel *The Bell Jar*, where Plath tells the story of her suicide and her experiences of growing up, in the form of fiction. The autobiographical element is the most evident element in the fiction writing of Plath. My attempt in the analysis of them had been to deal with their quality to portray the dream vision Plath had about life and art. There still remains a lot many unpublished material that can reveal to the world the continuous dealing of the same stories to build up the body of writing that depict the dreams of Plath. The available material is also proof enough of the voice that was a leading light in the confessional mode of narratives.

The short story and the novel are the genres that Plath wanted to embrace in order to tell the world the dreams of her life. Her wish is only fulfilled in the form of some publications in the magazines and a novel to her credit. Short fiction is termed as a feminine genre that does not have coherence of thought and ideas. They are considered to be loosely bound and not given as much importance in the critical circle. Elizabeth Goodman in her essay "Prose fiction, form and Gender"⁵ refutes such ideas and supports the genre not for its lack of coherence but the compact expressing capacity. This is a view that I have followed judging Plath's short fiction. Plath was an avid writer of journals, another feminine practice of writing. But this age demands the cataloguing of the lives of woman, as this is the high time to give space to the form of female narrative. In this regard, I am projecting Plath's prose works from the angle that they are the narratives closer to her heart, in fact --- as the "dream narratives" of not only herself, but innumerable other woman who failed to gain entry to the male dominated sphere of writing and publishing. Plath did not talk about revolutionary or path breaking ideas. Her writing is confined to her personal space, but transcends the limitations with their special quality. The act of concluding the argument is a very difficult process, as there seems to be no visible wrapping up to the problems posited by her writing. At the end, we can hope that the surfacing of the unpublished material, specially the stories and the unfinished novel will contribute to the world of women writers, whose dreams and aspirations are finding expression in all the literary modes, gradually, but with a very strong force.

Notes

¹ Betty Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*. (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1976.)

² Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed Karen Kukil.

³ _____. *Ariel*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1963)

⁴ Jeffrey Berman. Teaching Students at Risk. February 2001, July 2002.
<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipso/journal/2001/berman01.html>.

⁵ Elizabeth Goodman, "Prose fiction, form and Gender". *Language and Gender: Making the Difference* Ed. Poynton, Cate. (London: OUP, 1990) 71.

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doctor brings back the confidence in Esther. Expressions like “Doctor Nolan put her arm around me and hugged me like a *mother*”(238); “Then she hooked her arm in my arm, like an old friend”(239) show the kind of old familiarity that helped Esther to come out of the bad phase of her life. The use of ‘mother’ and ‘friend’ images are clearly indicative of the bondages Plath wanted to stress even while depicting a so called imaginary character.

Esther never had a fortunate relationship with men as well. The fault, in most of the cases, lies with the men, not with herself. She can never allow a man to act superior to her just because she belongs to the female sex. Her relationship with Buddy Willard was most taxing as he behaved in the most irritating manner with her. Buddy never had the sense to appreciate the talent of Esther and he considered a poem as “a piece of dust”(62). He had all the patriarchal notions a man can have about a career woman and her creativity. He felt that after marriage a woman feels differently and forgets about poems and any creativity. The next problematic encounter with man was with Marco where the latter calls Esther a slut for no fault of her own. Marco is a woman hater who tries to rape Esther. Esther concludes that:

I began to see why women-haters could make such fools of women.
Women haters were like gods: invulnerable and chock-full of powder.
They descended, and then they disappeared. You could never catch one
(119-20)

This expression about women haters is one of the powerful passages in the novel where we hear Plath speaking through her protagonist regarding her views on men.

Esther, as a protagonist had her own phases of sadness that added to the mystical quality she represented till the end. In the true vein of Plath, Esther suddenly becomes aware of the fact that she had not been happy from the time she lost her father. Critics