

THE BELL JAR DESCENDS AGAIN: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF MODERN MEDICINE BY SYLVIA PLATH AND REBECCA MYERS-SPIERS*

Sırça Fanus'un Geri Dönüşü: Sylvia Plath ve Rebecca Myers-Spiers'in Metinlerinde Modern Tıbbın Feminist Bir Eleştirisi

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ÖZET

Bu makale, Sylvia Plath'ın *Sırça Fanus* eserini 1950'ler Amerika bağlamında inceler ve romanın çeşitli biçimlerle dönemin cinsiyet rollerini destekleyen tıbbi nasıl eleştirdiğine odaklanır. İkincil olarak incelenen, Rebecca Myers-Spiers tarafından 1999 yılında yazılmış “*Sırça Fanus'a Yeniden Yolculuk: Genç Kızları Ataerkil Sisteme Mahkum Bırakma*” metni, ataerkil düzende çok da bir şey değişmediğini ve psikiyatrinin kadın odaklı bir yaklaşım sunmaktan hâlâ ne kadar uzak olduğunu gözler önüne serer. *Sırça Fanus*, uymacılık ve gelenekçilikle şekillenen ve geleneksel cinsiyet rollerini savunan bu dönemde özgür bir genç kadın olan Esther'in psikolojik problemlerini aşma ve kendini gerçekleştirme yolculuğuna odaklanır. Esther'in yaşadığı kimlik bunalımı hem 1950'lerin kısıtlayıcı sınırlarından hem de bu dönem içinde şair olmak isteyen bir kadın olmasından kaynaklanır. Kişisel buhranına ve son olarak iyileşmeye giden yolda, Esther farklı doktor karakterlerle etkileşim içinde bulunur. Plath bu karakterler aracılığıyla modern tıbbın genel olarak kadınları ele alış biçimini eleştirir. Romanda Buddy Willard ve Doktor Gordon karakterleriyle örneklendiği gibi, dönemin doktorları bilimi ve mesleki kimliklerini kadınları yönlendirmek ve onlara hâkim olmak için kullanmaktadırlar. Bu bağlamda, doktorlar daha geniş ve baskın ataerkil söylemin vekilleri olarak hareket etmekte, toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini dayatmakta ve Esther'i baskı altına almaktadır. Bu karakterlerle yaşadıkları Esther'in durumunu daha da kötüleştirir. Diğer bir deyişle, ataerkil söylemi temsil eden tıp Esther'e şifa değil, bir nevi ceza vermiştir. Öteki taraftan, Esther'in kadın bir psikiyatrist olan Doktor Nolan'la olan ilişkisi önceki deneyimlerinden oldukça farklıdır. Doktor Nolan'ın tedavi biçimi kadını merkeze alır. Bu feminist yaklaşım ve Doktor Nolan'ın Esther'le kurduğu kadın dayanışması sayesinde, Esther psikolojik krizini aşar. Sylvia Plath *Sırça Fanus* eserinde, feminizmi ve kadın odaklı bir tıp anlayışını, bu dönemde kadınların karşılaştığı sorunlara çözüm olarak sunmaktadır. Benzer biçimde, Myers-Spiers'in yaşadıkları ataerkil ideolojinin bilim söylemini kullanarak kadınları nasıl baskı altında tuttuğunu kanıtlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Sırça Fanus*, modern tıp, feminizm, Rebecca Myers-Spiers, psikiyatri.

ABSTRACT

This article examines Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* within the context of the 1950s' America and the ways the novel criticizes the workings of medicine in perpetuating the gender roles of the time together with Rebecca Myers-Spiers's personal account entitled “*The Bell Jar Revisited: Putting Young Girls Under the Lenses of Patriarchy*” that was published in 1999 and aims at showing that there has not been much progression in psychiatry in terms of focusing on the female problem. *The Bell Jar* chronicles the life of Esther, an independent young woman, and her journey of self-realization and psychological crisis during the 1950s which was a decade of conformism and traditionalism that encouraged the traditional gender roles. On the way to her crisis and final recovery, Esther interacts with different doctors through which Plath criticizes how modern medicine is treating women in general. As exemplified by the characters Buddy Willard and Doctor Gordon, doctors of the time use their scientific knowledge and medical profession as ways to manipulate and dominate women. In this respect, they act as the proxies of the patriarchal discourse and oppress Esther which worsens her condition. On the other hand, Esther's relationship with a female psychiatrist Doctor Nolan highly contrasts her previous experiences with medicine. Doctor Nolan's treatment methods are gynocentric. Thanks to this feminist approach and the female solidarity she builds with Esther, Esther is able to overcome her psychological crisis. In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath recognizes feminism and a gynocentric approach in medicine as a cure for the problems of women in the 1950s. Similarly, Rebecca Myers-Spiers's account shows that there has not been much change in terms of the treatment of women in psychiatric clinics since the 1950s. Patriarchal ideology still oppresses women by using and manipulating the scientific discourse.

Keywords: *The Bell Jar*; Modern medicine, Feminism, Rebecca Myers-Spiers, psychiatry.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Amerikalı şair Sylvia Plath'ın tek romanı olan *Sırça Fanus* eseri 1963 yılında yazarın intiharından sonra yayınlandığında büyük bir ilgiyle karşılanmıştır. Otobiyografik izler taşıyan romanda, Plath 1950'ler Amerika'sında genç bir kız olan Esther'in hayatındaki birkaç yıla odaklanır. Esther şair olmak isteyen fakat dönemin gelenekçi ve erkek egemen toplumunun kısıtlayıcı sınırları içinde hapsedilmiş bir bireydir. Bildungsroman, yani olgunlaşma romanı olarak da nitelendirilebilecek *Sırça Fanus*, Esther'in intihar girişimi ve akıl hastanesinde kalmasının ardından iyileşmesiyle son bulur. Plath, eserinde tıp söylemini ve özellikle psikiyatryi hedef alır ve bunların nasıl ataerkil söyleme hizmet ettiğini gösterir. İkincil olarak incelenen eser, Rebecca Myers-Spiers tarafından 1999 yılında yazılmış "Sırça Fanus'a Yeniden Yolculuk: Genç Kızları Ataerkil Sisteme Mahkum Bırakma" metni, ataerkil düzende ve kadının bu düzende çok da bir şey değişmediğini ve psikiyatrinin kadın odaklı bir yaklaşım sunmaktan hâlâ ne kadar uzak olduğunu gözler önüne serer. *Sırça Fanus* romanının yayınlandığı yıl olan 1963'te Amerikalı feminist bir yazar olan Betty Friedan'ın *The Feminine Mystique* eseri yayınlanmış ve Amerika'da ikinci dalga feminist hareketin en önemli metinlerinden birisi haline gelmiştir. Friedan, kitabında İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası iş gücünden geri çekilen ve tekrar "mutfığa dönen," banliyödeki evlerinde anne ve eş rolüyle sınırlandırılmış kadınların yaşadığı kimlik bunalımından bahseder. 1950'lerde Amerikalı kadınlar üniversite eğitimlerinin ve savaş sırasında iş gücünde yer aldıkları aktif dönemin ardından ev hayatının sınırları içine pasif roller üstlenirler ve ev işleriyle ve çocuk bakımıyla meşgul olmaya başlarlar. Friedan'a göre, dönemin erkek egemen toplumu ve savaş sonrası hâkim olan gelenekçi yapısı içinde kadınlar "adı olmayan bir problem" yaşamaya başlarlar ve kendilerine "hepsi bu kadar mıydı?" diye sorarlar. Bu kimlik bunalımı o dönemde psikiyatri kliniklerine başvuran kadınların sayısında belirgin bir artışa neden olur, fakat tıpkı *Sırça Fanus*'ta olduğu gibi, ataerkil söylemi temsil eden tıp kadınların bu varoluşsal krizlerine çözüm sunmaktan oldukça uzaktır. Bilakis kadınları baskı altına alır. 1950'lerde kadınların kimi zaman sessizce kimi zaman kliniklerde çözüm aradıkları bu adı olmayan problemleri 1960'lara geldiğinde bir başkaldırıya dönüşecek ve ikinci dalga feminist hareketi başlatacaktır. *Sırça Fanus*'taki Esther de genç bir kadın olarak 1950'lerde mutfığa veya "dişil" mesleklere itilen kadınların bu problemini paylaşmaktadır. Esther hem erkek egemen ve cinsiyetçi toplum düzeninde kadın olarak hem de bu kısıtlı toplum düzeni içinde geleceğini nasıl şekillendireceğini bilmemesinin verdiği endişeyle ağır bir psikolojik bunalım yaşar. Esther'in psikolojik krizi hayatındaki erkek-doktor karakterlerle ilişkileri neticesinde daha da ağırlaşır. Hem bir tıp öğrencisi olan erkek arkadaşı Buddy Willard hem de ilk elektroşok tedavisini gerçekleştiren psikiyatrist Doktor Gordon, erkek egemen söylemin vekilleri olarak hareket ederler ve cinsiyetçi rolleri Esther'e dayatmaya çalışırlar. Bu bağlamda doktorlar toplumdaki cinsiyetçi çifte standartları temsil ederler ve Plath romanında tıbbın ataerkil söyleme nasıl hizmet ettiğini ve kadınları baskı altına aldığını gösterir. Esther'in iyileşmeye giden yolda tek destekçisi yine o dönemde erkek egemen bir meslek kolu olan tıp alanında bir psikiyatrist olarak var olmayı başarmış Doktor Nolan olur. Doktor Nolan'ın kadını merkeze alan tedavi yöntemleri ve Esther'e yaklaşımı hem iyileşmesini hem de daha önceki ilişkilerini ve tedavi yöntemlerini sorgulamasını sağlar. Doktor Nolan'ın güçlü ve feminist duruşu Esther için bir kılavuz niteliğindedir. Romanın sonunda belirtildiği gibi, Esther'in yeniden doğuşu Doktor Nolan'ın sayesinde olur. Esther'den farklı olarak, Rebecca Myers-Spiers'in ona kadın odaklı bir tedavi sağlayacak bir doktoru yoktur. Myers-Spiers akıl hastanesinde geçirdiği üç ay boyunca bedeninin ve aklının kontrol edilmeye çalışıldığı türlü uygulamalara maruz kalır. Okuduğu kitaplara ve dinlediği müziklere fazla radikal görülerek el konur. Onun akıl hastanesine gelmesine sebep olan tecavüz gibi travmatik olayları ilgi çekmek için kullandığı söylenir ve ataerkil söylemden gücünü alan sürekli bir aşılamaya maruz kalır. Myers-Spiers'in yaşadıkları 1990'lara geldiğinde ataerkil ideolojinin bilim söylemini kullanarak hâlâ kadınları nasıl baskı altında tuttuğunu gösterir.

INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel *The Bell Jar* is situated in the 1950s' America and tells the story of Esther Greenwood who tries to develop an intellectual, mental, spiritual, and sexual identity of her own in those years of limits, borders and spheres marked by domestication, traditionalism, and conformism. While constructing her story from her own memories and life, Sylvia Plath makes medical profession in general, and psychiatric medicine in particular, as her targets and she criticizes the state of medical profession and the medical doctors who perpetuate the general patriarchal ideology of the time by their labeling, categorizations, and their general attitude towards female patients. Although feminist readings of *The Bell Jar* have been made, there are very few studies on the depiction of medical profession and its patriarchal orientation in the novel which parallels Betty Friedan's arguments in *The Feminine Mystique*. By looking at the psychiatric treatment of women in *The Bell Jar* and in Rebecca Myers-Spiers's personal account "Revisiting the Bell Jar: Putting Young Girls Under the Lenses of Patriarchy" (1999), it could be argued that psychiatry still endorses the sexist and biased approaches to women nourished and strengthened by the patriarchal discourse. In the final analysis, it will be shown that despite being published in 1963 and reflecting the state of female mental patients in 1950s' society, *The Bell Jar* is still a relevant text today as Myers-Spiers's account well illustrates.

In Plath's novel, the protagonist Esther is at odds with society and her development into a mature artist and woman who is ready to challenge patriarchy and to keep staying in public sphere happens to be an arduous journey. Her wish would make it just and necessary for Buddy Willard and Doctor Gordon who are acting as patriarchal proxies to oppress Esther. Only through her treatment by a female physician whose methods are gynocentric can Esther start to recover and take the necessary steps in her development. The female solidarity she establishes with Doctor Nolan effectively contrasts her previous experience with the male dominated medical profession to which her boyfriend Buddy, and her first psychotherapist Dr. Gordon belong.

In Rebecca Myers-Spiers's short account which was published in *Off Our Backs*, a feminist "news journal by, for, and about women" ("off our backs, inc."), it is seen that psychiatric treatments can still fail young girls and women in the 1990s as it did in the 1950s. Myers-Spiers recounts her three-month stay at a recovery center in Mississippi after her repeated suicide attempts. Reminiscent of Esther's stay at the state hospital in *The Bell Jar*, Myers-Spiers's stay at this mental hospital and the medical treatment she received become an indelible trauma for her. Unlike Esther who is able to recover with the help of a female psychiatrist, her gynocentric treatment methods, and female solidarity they establish, Myers-Spiers is alone in this hospital and subject to the mistreatments of psychiatric medicine that are shaped by patriarchal assumptions and beliefs. Although a feminist criticism of the overall state of female patients in psychiatric medicine is beyond the scope of this article, a comparison of these two accounts by female writers prove that female solidarity and the empowerment that comes along with it are antidotes to the silencing and oppression women have long faced in medicine and psychiatry.

1. The Bell Jar and The Feminine Mystique

The Bell Jar is a female rite of passage novel or bildungsroman and which treats the issue of growing up female within the confining boundaries of the 1950s. It was well suited to the spirit of the 1960s with its independent female protagonist. A similar retrospective look at the fifties by a different author, and in a different genre, but with very similar concerns which "exploded into print" (Judd 2003) in the same year with *The Bell Jar* was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan's work became a milestone in the second-wave feminist movement and was acclaimed for dealing with the problems of women in the 1950s' America. Besides portraying the problems of women in the 1950s, both Plath and Friedan touch upon how they finally led women to the psychiatric clinics and the resulting inability of male doctors to understand and identify the real predicament of women.

America in the 1950s witnessed the re-birth of the cult of domesticity and true womanhood. A patriarchal ideology of a bygone era, the cult of domesticity was established on the notion of separate spheres assigning private and public spheres to women and men respectively. Its rebirth in the fifties meant the loss of freedom that was enjoyed by women in the previous decade. In the 1940s, women

were driven by the urgent need to support their country during World War II. They started to fill the occupational positions men had left to keep the machine going. Yet this second major entry into work force—the first being during World War I—showed the same pattern with the first by sending women one more time back to the kitchen after the fathers, brothers, and husbands came back home. Post WW II and following Cold War years were marked by a rising trend towards traditional values that emphasized gender roles and the revival of the cult of domesticity. In an atmosphere of fear caused by the Cold War, any diversions from and perversions of the mainstream ideology could easily be stifled if they were seen as threats to the peace, security, and order that America has been longing to have in the war years.

The return to the kitchen, the move to suburbs, the shift to consumerism were important historical markers of the fifties and these were oppressive for many middle class women as evidenced by Friedan and Plath in their accounts. This problem of the fifties would famously be dubbed as the problem “that has no name” by Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Women who were educated and liberated in the public sphere as they took part in the work force were now back in the domestic sphere unable to exercise the freedom they had before. As discussed by Friedan, there was a growing number of middle class women who were discontent with their lives and seeking cures for their problems in psychiatric clinics. In his article “Medical Treatment of Mental Illness,” Philip A. Berger states that coming to the 1955, the number of patients in mental institutions had raised almost two percent each year. And 1955 was the year of its height when the number hit 559.000 (2009: 975). Let alone naming their problem and dissatisfaction, most women could not even understand their problem. And even if they consulted professionals, they were not given adequate reasons for their crisis in their lives. A psychiatrist was heard to say “I don’t know what’s wrong with women today . . . I only know something is wrong because most of my patients happen to be women. And their problem isn’t sexual” (Friedan 1973: 15). The problem Friedan voiced was that these women who have already completed higher education were now seeking fulfillment as housewives and mothers which created a sense of void and dissatisfaction in their lives as they were not able to use their education and abilities in the public sphere. As Friedan describes

These were fine, intelligent American women, to be envied for their homes, husbands, children, and for their personal gifts of mind and spirit. Why were so many of them driven women? Later, when I saw this same pattern repeated over and over again in similar suburbs, I knew it could hardly be coincidence. These women were alike mainly in one regard: they had uncommon gifts of intelligence and ability nourished by at least the beginnings of higher education— and the life they were leading as suburban housewives denied them the full use of their gifts. (225)

It will not be wrong to say that Esther was one among the many women of the period who was seeking a solution to her problem in psychiatric clinics which were then acting as institutions of the dominant conformist and patriarchal discourse. *The Bell Jar* also reflects the oppressive political atmosphere of the fifties which was a time of growing conformism nourished by fear of a past war and the ongoing Cold War with Russia. The fear was also perpetuated by McCarthyism and McCarthy’s infamous communist hunt that was sweeping out the country. Two famous victims of this communist hunt were Ethel and Julius Rosenberg who were thought to pass the atomic secrets to the Soviet Russia. The couple’s guilt could not be proven and after a dubious trial, the couple were electrocuted in the summer of 1953 and “the witch- hunts whipped up a frenzy of terror across American society” (Schulte 2003).

The Bell Jar begins with this incident and Rosenbergs’ electrocution functions to give us a notion about Esther’s own fears in a society where the non-conformists are being severely punished (Perloff 1972: 518). The electrocution of the Rosenbergs which is situated at the beginning of the novel not only serves to show the political oppression sweeping the nation but also a foreshadowing for Esther’s own electro-shock treatment she will receive at the hands of male physicians: “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York. . . . I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world” (Plath 2013: 1). By tying the personal experiences of Esther in psychiatric hospitals to the general political atmosphere of the fifties, Plath makes it clear that the political inescapably becomes personal with its repercussions in different institutions and

they all tell women to conform and accept the traditional gender roles.

From the beginning of the novel, Plath shows that Esther is at odds with such a society that expects women to perform the traditional gender roles. It is clear that Esther is somehow different from other girls, and she says that she is discontent with something she cannot name, which reminds Friedan's "problem that has no name." In the New York hotel she stays, there are girls of her age "with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men couldn't get at them and deceive them" (4). These girls are "secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other" (4). Esther can not get along with these girls. They look "bored" to her. She says that "girls like that" makes her sick (Plath 4). It is seen that Esther is quite critical of these girls because they are the operators of the patriarchal discourse and have internalized the dominant ideology that tell women to stay at home as wives and mothers. Esther on the other hand is a girl in chase of self- fulfillment. But the seemingly many options such as becoming a poet, a university professor, or an editor, and the impossibility to choose one freely, confuse her. She has been a girl of scholarships and straight "A's" until that point in her life, but in New York she starts to think differently after seeing the competitive world; she feels as if she is "dropping clean out of race" (Plath 27).

We learn that Esther has not been out of New England for nineteen years and it has been her first time in New York because she has won a scholarship to be a guest editor to a magazine. Her New York experience is supposed to make Esther happy, but instead, it offers and shows Esther other options she can choose for her identity construction. The sojourn in New York stirs up her discontent with the divide between her wishes and the expectations of the society which she recognizes in the aftermath of a psychological crisis. Esther wants too many things that she cannot have and she is driven into hopelessness in the stifling atmosphere of the fifties. The fig tree metaphor in the novel describes these options and how they leave Esther in a state of crisis. Among them are having "a husband and a happy home and children" or being "a famous poet" or "a brilliant professor" (73). She is unable to decide between these options and not allowed to have them all:

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 there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath 73)

Esther states that she is "interested in everything" (29) and at the same time she does not know what to do with her life, which sums up the reason for her her identity crisis. According to Perloff, Esther's "dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject" (Perloff 1972: 511). This dilemma in a society where she is expected to marry with Buddy Willard, a medical student and thus the perfect candidate for a husband, is one thing she would resolve through the end of the book. Esther simply does not want to marry, or be domesticated in any way. She does not like cooking, she does not want to learn shorthand which can make her "in demand among all the up-an-coming young men" (Plath 72). The 1950s "accepts the primacy of the woman's role as wife and mother and . . . assumes that other aspects of women's lives must be fitted into that" (Birmingham Feminist History Group 2005: 8). Esther strongly rejects these assumptions about women, in her own words, she "hate[s] the idea of serving men in any way" and "want[s] to dictate [her] own thrilling letters" (Plath 72). Her passion for becoming a poet can also be seen as a way for her to get beyond and free herself from the oppressive expectations of the patriarchal society.

Like a typical heroine of the bildungsroman, Esther is quite naïve about the issues concerning marriage and sexuality at the beginning. In the scenes she talks about her relationship with Buddy Willard, it is seen that she cannot yet recognize the double-standards in society. Her ideas on sexuality start to change slowly after she discovers her boy friend to be a "hypocrite" (Plath 115). She sees that there is a double standard that teaches girls to remain virgins, while boys are free to do whatever they want. It turns out that Buddy is not an exception to this case. While he expects Esther to remain a virgin, but at the same time assuming her to be experienced which all exemplify another conflicting expectation from women, he sleeps with other women. On the other hand, Esther is dictated to remain a virgin

until getting married. Figures like her mother and Buddy's mother are acting as the female proxies of the patriarchal discourse and they find it very important to keep oneself "clean" (64) for her future husband. One day at college, Esther receives a letter from her mother, and she finds an article entitled "Defense of Chastity" that warns girls about the possibility of getting pregnant. The article advises girls to protect their chastity, as there is no "one hundred percent sure way not to have a baby," it is "better be safe than sorry" (77). After realizing these two sets of rules for men and women and finding out Buddy's relationships with other women, Esther decides to define sexuality in her own terms. She decides not to be "the place an arrow shoots off from," but to become "the arrow into the future" (79). She wants "change and excitement and to shoot [herself] off in all directions . . . like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (Plath 79).

2. Against Patriarchal Proxies: Buddy Willard and Doctor Gordon

By portraying Esther's psychological crisis and her treatment, Plath shows her critical stance against science and modern medicine. Frederick Buell states that this is what makes Plath belong to a longer tradition of artists who are aware of the possible horrors that science can produce: "Plath's obsession with the demonic side of medical science and the kind of disgusted attention to fleshly physical processes it is capable of producing is one that, because it deals with the human body, makes her absorption of scientific rationality both uniquely lyrical and inhuman" (1976: 205). In her article "Sylvia Plath's Anti-Psychiatry," Maria Farland (2002) views *The Bell Jar* as an exemplary work that reflects the anti-psychiatric movement that was prevalent in America in the 1960s which began with Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. According to Farland, the novel attacks the oppressive institutions of the time represented in the novel by the asylums and psychiatry. Especially in the second part of the novel, Plath directs her criticism from medicine to psychiatry and the reader can have glimpses into the ways of modern medicine and how it treats patients. Plath shows that the advancing technology and its use in medicine have endowed physicians with a certain degree of power and authority, which enables them to behave inhumanly at times. She shows that modern technology and its sisterhood with medicine can be monstrous at the hands of people who are not apprehensive, conscious, and conscientious enough, and they can be used as mechanisms of oppression against the disadvantaged groups in society such as women and the minorities. In the novel Both Esther's boyfriend Buddy Willard and her first psychiatrist Dr. Gordon are representatives of "science" and they are powerful figures in manipulating the assumptions of other people as well as Esther's with their scientific "knowledge." Both of them act according to their status in the patriarchal society that give men certain privileges. In her book *The Psychiatric Persuasion* (1994), Elizabeth Lunbeck puts forwards that starting from the beginning of twentieth century psychiatrists widened the scope of psychiatry and their sphere of influence and this also enabled them to use certain privileges of gender and class. As professionals "their ethos . . . spun a story about class" that is white middle class "while quietly encoding a program of gender" (Lunbeck 1994: 28). Lunbeck's analysis certainly holds true for the male physicians and psychiatrists in *The Bell Jar*. They are unable to address Esther's identity crisis and through the privilege of being male and white, they oppress Esther who tries to transgress the gender roles the society imposes upon her.

One reason for the conflict Esther has with her boyfriend Buddy Willard is her wish to be independent and have the chance to act freely in the public sphere at a time when the notion of separate spheres is being constantly emphasized. Buddy Willard is a medical student, and his behavior towards Esther is not different from his behavior towards his patients. Because "knowledge is power," (Foucault 1986, Lunbeck 1994) and he is now mastering medicine, he has the superior position in his relationship with Esther. He is always "scientific" and tries to teach certain things to Esther. According to him, Esther's interest in and attempts at poetry are trivial. In his eyes, a poem is "a piece of dust" (Plath 53). It can be said that Buddy creates a dichotomy between real "science," that is a male dominated area, and literature. When he defends the superiority of science, he is making it clear that he also emphasizes his superiority over Esther.

As Judith Walzer Leavitt suggests in her book *Women and Health in America*, in the twentieth century "physicians and medical institutions intrude much more broadly into people's lives" and more people "receive and accept medical wisdom" (1984: 634). Buddy and Dr. Gordon are two characters who

are representing the medical discourse, at first, Esther accepts their “medical wisdom” without questioning it. The way the doctors treat other patients is constructed in a positional hierarchy just as in her relationship with Buddy. They enforce full dominance over patients by assuming superior positions. One day Buddy takes Esther to a hospital to show her “some really interesting hospital sights” (Plath 59). After she watches Buddy and his friends cutting cadavers, Buddy takes her to “to see a baby born” (Plath 60). The student that will perform the operation warns Esther in the following words which reflects his underestimation of female potential and the act of birth: “You oughtn’t to see this,” Will muttered in my ear. “You’ll never want to have a baby if you do. They oughtn’t to let women watch. It’ll be the end of the human race” (Plath 61).

Leavitt states that unlike the physicians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, twentieth century physicians increased their authorities to become the “powerful arbiters in America’s birthing rooms” and established “obstetrical authority” with the new technological developments they introduced (1984: 636). Unlike the births that took place at home in the previous centuries within a “women’s network” that provided an emotional back up for women in labor, births at hospitals in the twentieth century isolated female patients (Leavitt 1984: 339). Esther’s observations during her tour reflect the cold atmosphere of the hospital: “I was so struck by the sight of the table where they were lifting the woman I didn’t say a word. It looked like some awful torture table, with these metal stirrups sticking up in mid-air at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes I couldn’t make out properly at the other” (Plath 61). Unlike Esther, Buddy does not seem to be disturbed by this scene and the treatment of the birthing woman. He even suggests that she would forget what she has been through because she was on a drug and would want to have another child in the future (Plath 61). Esther observes and criticizes the sexist approaches of male doctors to their female patients: “I thought it sounded just like the sort the of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn’t groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been” (Plath 62). After watching the operation, Buddy is satisfied with his “colleagues manipulation of woman” (Buell 1976: 205). As Perloff points out “[w]hile Esther wholly identifies with the woman in labor,” Buddy sees the birth “from his male point of view, [and he] is proud of the expert and efficient treatment his colleagues give the patient” (Perloff 1972: 516). This is one of the most significant scenes in the novel in terms of showing how Plath directs her feminist criticism not only to psychiatry but also medicine in general. She shows that patriarchal dominance in medicine, especially in areas that deal with women’s health, can be a playground of sexist mistreatments.

When Esther visits Buddy after he is diagnosed with tuberculosis and hospitalized, Buddy proposes to Esther now that he does not have his superior position anymore. Esther rejects the proposal by saying that she is never going to get married because she can not “settle down” (Plath 1963: 89). Esther reminds Buddy having accused her of being a neurotic and she is now ready to challenge him. She states that it is not neurotic to want two things at the same time, and she can be a poet as well as a wife and a mother. After this rejection, Buddy persuades Esther to ski, or rather to teach her how to ski. Esther remembers the way he was persuading the relatives of the dead people to give their consent to use the bodies for “interests of science” (91) just as he is persuading Esther now. And after Esther tries to ski and ends up with a broken leg, Buddy is content to have a chance to detect and diagnose an injury, with which he takes the superior position once again: “A queer, satisfied expression came over Buddy’s face. . . . Your leg’s broken in two places. You’ll be stuck in a cast for months” (94).

The other representative of the medical profession in the novel, Dr. Gordon is neither capable of diagnosing Esther’s identity crisis, nor helping her. Considering the growing number of psychiatric patients in the 1950s, we see that psychiatrists had the chance to exert power and influence people and thus maintain conformity to the larger “professional brotherhood” (Lunbeck 23). They were professionals “with a distinctive authority” that they exerted through “class, race, and gender and . . . [their] successful association . . . with science and authority” (Lunbeck 45). While sitting in Dr. Gordon’s room, Esther is immune to images of male power. Dr. Gordon is sitting at a “highly polished desk,” and tapping his “silver pencil . . . across the neat green field of his blotter” (123). His features are “so perfect” (Plath 124). Contrary to what Esther has expected, Dr. Gordon “was young and good looking.” Esther recognizes easily that “he was conceited” (124). On Dr. Gordon’s table, Esther sees

a family photograph, which “for some reason” makes her “furious” (124). In the photograph, she sees a beautiful woman and two children with him. They are so happy that she likens the photograph to a Christmas card. Having been exposed to the image of a perfect family she does not want to and cannot live up to, Esther feels depressed and unable to communicate with the doctor. This increases her isolation and hopelessness. She no longer believes that Dr. Gordon, himself being too perfect and too happy, can help such a “neurotic” like her.

Dr. Gordon is a representative of white middle class male superiority and he is seemingly proud of having achieved such a status. He is in a “realm of knowledge and power in which he is mov(ing) confidentially” (Lunbeck 34). And Esther’s doubts are justified with his treatment method. After a second therapy session which is not very different from the first one, Dr. Gordon decides for a shock-treatment. Instead of helping and curing Esther, his treatment is much more like a punishment that was foreshadowed by the electrocution of Rosenbergs at the beginning of the novel. It shakes her “like the end of the world.” “Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a splint plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done.” (138) After the shock treatment, Esther’s condition worsens. She is drifted into suicide finally ending up in an asylum.

According to Elizabeth Lunbeck, at beginning of the twentieth century, psychiatry defined its borders once more ending up with a wider sphere of dominance. In doing so, psychiatrists got “less interested in insanity than in normality” (Lunbeck 3). They not only “established mental diseases” but also encapsulated the happenings of everyday life (3). It became “the predecessor of psychiatry as we know it today. ... They brought psychiatry and psychiatric thinking from the asylum into the cultural mainstream where it has remained” (Lunbeck 305). In her examination, Lunbeck also states that gender played an important role in the assumptions of psychiatrists and treatment methods. In Esther’s case, we also see that her problem is not something that we can call an “established mental disease.” She is one of the many women in the 1950s who tries to define her life in her own terms. However, the cultural conditioning and the state of psychiatry can easily categorize her as “neurotic” and “mad.”

In the asylum scenes after Esther’s suicide attempt, there are glimpses into the mental institutions of the time. The state hospitals which host people with less money, as Esther notes, are the worst of all. Patients in the hospitals constitute a group of their own, they are isolated from the society, and they are “other-ed.” They are the objects of research and examined less for their betterment than for their possible contributions to medicine. Esther is moved to a private hospital after Philomena Guinea, whose scholarship she had for her college education, pays for her treatment. This new hospital is worlds apart from the state hospital which felt more like a prison for Esther. In this new place, Esther meets with a female doctor, Dr. Nolan, whom she is surprised to see in the psychiatric profession: “I was surprised to have a woman. I didn’t think they had woman psychiatrists.” (Plath 179)

As a woman who had her place in a male-dominated profession, Dr. Nolan’s therapies highly contrast Dr. Gordon’s. In her first therapy, Dr. Nolan speaks with Esther about Dr. Gordon and tries to understand how and why his treatment failed Esther. The shock therapies Esther underwent were a mistake according to Dr. Nolan. She promises Esther that she will not have any shock treatments, and even if she has, she will be informed beforehand. Observing Esther for a while, Dr. Nolan decides that she should not have any visitors for a while, which Esther finds “wonderful” (194). Esther confesses her that she hates her mother. Dr. Nolan sees this confession as a step towards her recovery. When Esther understands that she will have shock treatments again, she feels disappointed with Dr. Nolan until she is comforted by her: “Dr. Nolan put her arm around me and hugged me like a mother. ... Then she hooked her arm in my arm, like an old friend, and helped me up, and we started down the hall” (204).

Unlike the time of her first shock treatment, Esther is not alone now. She is encouraged and supported by Dr. Nolan, whom she regards as a mother. After the treatment, she is awakened by Dr. Nolan who leads her “through a door into fresh, blue-skied air” (Plath 206). In contrast to the first therapy which resembles death, this one is like a rebirth. As E. Miller Budick suggests, different from “Dr. Gordon, who confuses and mangles and veritably obliterates Esther’s identity... Dr. Nolan confirms Esther’s

identity and reestablishes her sense of self. ... she leads her out of the bell jar” (1987: 880).

Dr. Nolan’s treatment of Esther is highly female-conscious. She wants to free her from all kinds of patriarchal oppression that have led to her suicide. Her methods contrast with those of another woman psychiatrist, Doctor Quinn. Doctor Quinn is Joan’s doctor, a too abstract person for Esther, who follows a different kind of therapy in which she speaks about “Egos and Ids” (214). Esther says if Dr. Quinn were her psychiatrist she would not have improved at all. Joan does not improve, either. Dr. Nolan befriends Esther and she becomes a mentor helping her obtain birth control which makes Esther feel as if she is “climbing to freedom,” finally being “her own woman” (213).

Coming from the consciousness raising groups, feminists therapists of the seventies were “explor[ing] “women’s distress” by looking at the external “social and economic context” (Worell 2000: 190). By paying attention to “external sources” as well as “women’s internal conflicts,” they sought and established “egalitarian relationships” with their patients (190). “By valuing women’s perspectives,” these therapists “encouraged self-care as well as caring for others, and encourage[d] women to value themselves and one another” (191). In this light, having employed many techniques of the feminist conscious therapies on Esther, Dr. Nolan is a predecessor of the feminist therapists of the 1970s. Esther’s recovery comes after a hard struggle against her own fears, and most importantly against the oppressive atmosphere of the fifties and both *despite* and *thanks to* medicine. Going for a last inspection into the room where doctors are waiting, Esther feels renewed and considers her experiences as a “ritual for being twice” at the end of the novel (Plath 2013: 233).

3. “Revisiting the Bell Jar: Putting Young Girls Under the Lenses of Patriarchy”

As its title indicates, Rebecca Myers-Spiers’s experiences at a mental hospital in 1990s’ are reminiscent of what Esther undergoes at different mental hospitals in *The Bell Jar*. Myers-Spiers’s account proves that psychiatric treatments are still shaped by patriarchal norms. She exhibits that there has not been a noticeable change in women’s place and treatment in psychiatric clinics. All these experiences point to the conclusion that the solution to the psychological problems of women today still lie in the feminist and gynocentric approaches in medicine and psychiatry as seen in *The Bell Jar* as well as in women’s support and cooperation groups.

In her account, Myers-Spiers tells her experiences during a three-month stay at a recovery center where she voluntarily decides to go when she was fifteen. As she describes, she was desperately looking for a solution to her repeated suicide attempts as well as a chance to get away from her family. While she hopes that staying at the adolescent unit and interacting with her peers who are experiencing similar things would help her, her stay there becomes a traumatic incident which she would remember throughout her life. She describes her horrific experiences as losing her identity under the oppression of this medical institution: “. . . one thing that never crossed my mind is that I would lose all identity, personality, and control over my life once I stepped through those doors” (1999: 6). Even in the first moments of her visit to the hospital, she realizes the big mistake she has done in deciding to stay there. The medical staff removes her toiletries and personal belongings in case of another suicide attempt while also removing her music, t-shirts, and books. She tells how she was questioned about her reading preferences which included feminist writers like Plath and Anne Sexton:

But then their search got more intense, rifling through every book I had, removing all music (it often had a negative influence? rock and roll is of the devil) and band T-shirts (for above reasons). They interrogated me for half an hour on the content of my books. I had to explain why I carried Marilyn French, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. To respond to my inquisitor’s misogynistic airs, I explained my need for other women’s writing in a very careful way. *The Women’s Room* was a story about a group of housewives. Anne Sexton “reinvented” fairy tales and Sylvia Plath “just has a bad life.” They let me keep *The Bell Jar*, which just happened to be the one that offered me the least hope. This is how they begin to control my mind. (6)

The rest of the days Myers-Spiers spent in the hospital prove more devastating than her previous suicide attempts. She tells in detail how both her body and mind were controlled through a diet change (when she tells she is vegetarian, she is told that she was trying to be “cool”), an overdose of medicine which turned everything in her mind to a “blur,” and being deprived of her books and reading: “What I would really be getting used to were days without the sun, being drugged out of my senses, and being treated like shit” (6). She was also subject to the continuous humiliation of the medical staff whenever she articulates her opinions and preferences. She was also shut up when she wanted to talk about the fact that she was raped and she was told that she is “just trying to get attention and that didn’t happen” (7). The acts of silencing she is coerced to reveals how patriarchal oppression is still prevalent in therapy rooms. She also reveals the biases of her psychiatrist towards her because she was not “pretty” enough:

I remember when they gave more attention to my roommate because she was obviously prettier than the rest of us, reinforcing the beauty myth. When she told them that she wanted to be a writer, they assured her that she would succeed. When I tried to join in and tell them that writing was my talent also, they told me (once again) that I was lying and that I would never make it.

After her second week in the hospital, Myers-Spiers attempted to kill herself again which led her to the “quiet room” of the hospital. While she still expected to be understood and cared for, she was left bleeding on her own in the quiet room for a three days. Her final words in her account reveal the causes of her psychological crisis: “It still hurts to know that they never once considered that it might have been my fucked up family, the horror that other kids put me through or the sexual abuse I had experienced and not a chemical imbalance that made life in this world unbearable” (7). Here she also reveals another dubious case in the treatment of mental patients which disregards the social and environmental mechanisms that oppress women and violate their sense of self and puts the blame only on “a chemical imbalance” in the brain. This, in turn, causes women to be treated with a variety of other chemicals that silence them, finally creating an endless vicious cycle. Unlike the heroine of *The Bell Jar*, Myers-Spiers does not receive a gynocentric treatment in the hospital that would have helped her recovery. She ends her piece by warning women about the dangers of hospitalization and urges them not to listen the patriarchal teachings that tell women that they are “the one[s] with problem” (7).

CONCLUSION

The Bell Jar reflects the fifties, the doctor-patients relationships of the time, and how these relations were based on power structures and gender roles in society. In a general outlook, it is seen in the novel that the dominant historical and cultural discourses and ideologies of the time, and mainly the patriarchal system, and the expectation for an absolute conformism which is crystallized in the projection of the medical profession in the novel have shaped the life of Esther who has grown up in the fifties. As represented by the doctor characters in the novel, medicine in general and psychiatry in particular work to impose patriarchal assumptions on women and silence them by using the authority of science. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther is able to free herself from these with the help of female solidarity. When we look at Rebecca Myers-Spiers’s piece, it will not be wrong to say that these patriarchal norms and teachings do still exist in the contemporary psychiatric discourse and work to oppress women. Not only in treatment methods, but also in diagnosis of mental illnesses, women are still subject to inequalities and prejudice. As these feminist texts clearly illustrate, women should advocate for gynocentric approaches in medicine and psychiatry and look for cures to their problems by building female solidarity and women’s support groups.

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