

Resistance as the Discourse of Docile Bodies in Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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ÖZET Michel Foucault *Disiplin ve Ceza* adlı kitabında, iktidar ilişkileri içinde bedenlerin en önemli odak noktası olduğunu ve iktidarın devamlılık sağlayabilmek için bireysel bedenleri disiplin teknikleri kullanarak belirli bir norma uyumlu hale getirdiğini anlatıyor. Foucault'ya göre gözetim ve kontrol, itaatkâr ve "faydalı" bedenler yaratmayı hedefleyen bu disiplinler teknikler arasındadır. Okullarda, hastanelerde, askeriye, hapishane ve akıl hastanelerinde ve hatta evlerde uygulanan disiplin mekanizmalarının asıl amacı iktidarın kontrolünü içselleştirmiş bedenler, etkin makineler yaratmaktır. Sylvia Plath'ın 1950'lerde yazdığı fakat ancak 1963'te yayımlanan *Sırça Fanus* adlı kitabı Foucault'un bahsettiği itaatkar bedenlerin oluşum sürecinin hikayesi olarak yorumlanabilir. Romanın bu biçimde yorumlanmasının başlıca sebebi Plath'ın eleştirdiği savaş sonrası sistemin Foucault'un anlattığı disiplinler sistemle benzerlik göstermesidir; iki yazarın da üstünde durduğu nokta bu sistemin görünmez olduğu, bu sebeple kolay işlemesi ve bu mekanizmanın bir parçası olabilmek için belirli bir tür bilgiye ihtiyaç duyuluyor olmasıdır. Plath'ın romanının asıl amacı bireyin bu disiplin mekanizması altında nasıl boğulduğunu göstermektir. Dolayısıyla bu makale romanda bireyin sözü edilen iktidar ilişkilerini değiştirme ve bu sistemle uzlaşma çabalarını, bu stratejinin sınırlılığını gösterecektir.

ANAHTAR KELİMELER beden, iktidar, cinsiyet rolleri, sosyal kurumlar, direnç, sessizlik

ABSTRACT In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault argues that the body is the object and target in power relations, and the purpose is to discipline the body in order to ensure the continuity of society. Thus he suggests that individuals are under surveillance and regulations that are most often subtle, and that by means of those regulations modern institutions individuate bodies according to designated tasks so as to create socially docile and profitable individuals. Therefore, disciplinary methods that are employed in schools, hospitals, armies, homes as well as prisons and mental institutions, are the tools of the collective forces aiming to "obtain an efficient machine"(164), through habituating the internalization of surveillance. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963 but written during the late 1950s, lends itself to a Foucauldian analysis of bodies that enter into the machinery of power that 'explores [the body], breaks it down and rearranges it' (*Discipline and Punish* 138). The reason for this inclination is that the postwar system that Plath critiques, like Foucault's disciplinary institutions, also requires knowledge of the system that is invisible. Plath's novel revolves around this theoretical framework with the aim of presenting how an individual suffocates under the pressure of disciplining regulations. This article, thus, aims to present the novel as an examination of the ways in which an individual attempts to change the power relations, negotiate with disciplining forces and the limitations of this strategy.

KEYWORDS body, power, gender roles, social institutions, resistance, silence

In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault argues that the body is the object and target in power relations, and the purpose is to discipline the body in order to ensure the continuity of society. Thus he suggests that individuals are under surveillance and regulations that are most often subtle, and that by means of

those regulations modern institutions individuate bodies according to designated tasks so as to create socially docile and profitable individuals. Therefore, disciplinary methods that are employed in schools, hospitals, armies, homes as well as prisons and mental institutions, are the tools of the collective forces aiming to “obtain an efficient machine,”¹ through habituating the internalization of surveillance. Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963 but written during the late 1950s, lends itself to a Foucauldian analysis of bodies that enter into the machinery of power that “explores [the body], breaks it down and rearranges it.”² The reason for a Foucauldian reading is that the postwar system that Plath critiques, like Foucault’s disciplinary institutions, also requires knowledge of the system that is invisible. Plath’s novel revolves around this Foucauldian theoretical framework with the aim of presenting how an individual suffocates under the pressure of disciplining regulations. This article, thus, aims to present the novel in the light of feminist perspectives of Foucault’s notion of “docile bodies”. As a result it will specifically be an examination of the ways in which an individual attempts to change the power relations, negotiate with disciplining forces and the limitations of this strategy.

The argument of this article will pivot around two different institutions within which Plath successively situates her female protagonist Esther: at work during the summer working as an intern in New York and at home, which is also an institution from a Foucauldian perspective, upon her return from New York. In these two distinct locations, Esther succeeds in creating two corresponding discourses: (1) At work Esther creates multiple names and identities through observing her peers, who seem to be more satisfied with their selves than she is. Yet, the more she observes the more different she feels, and the more different she feels, the more imaginative (she starts creating fake names when introduced to strangers) she becomes. (2) At home she relies on the construction of strategic silence. With the help of these discourses, especially through her silence, she seeks to detach herself from everything around her, and acts within her silence as her a strategy for autonomy. This article will elaborate on the possibility that these two actions, creating multiple identities and silence, are used as a resistance to the hegemonic limitations of the changing social system of the US of the 1950s, following a more radical way of resistance: suicide. In the novel, this argument is presented through Esther’s time in a private mental institution to which she is admitted by her mother after her numerous suicide attempts. Once Esther is admitted to the mental institution, she stops creating fake names, abandons

1. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991), p.164.

2. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.138.

her silence, and re-identifies herself by way of traditional social labels and categories. She is 'cured' and adjusts to the hegemonic culture of postwar America. At the end of the novel Esther is ready to leave the institution and enter the social world. Although the novel does not offer an explanation of Esther's life after the asylum, the beginning of the novel implies that she is a mother who "cut[s] the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with"³ eluding that she sacrificed her individual identity to become a mother. The beginning of the novel also presents Esther as being frustrated when trying to understand what she wants, while at the novel's end, after she is 'cured', she has internalized what is wanted from her and becomes a mother. Due to this smooth transformation, this article will also focus on the disciplinary techniques used in order for the individual to habitually internalize society's control, through which they become docile, self-disciplined bodies.

The novel begins with the narrator Esther remembering the time when she was a 20-year old girl living in Boston with her mother, wishing to be a writer and a world traveler. She gained a summer internship at a women's magazine in New York, and although she was "supposed to be having the time of [her] life [she] felt very still and very empty."⁴ Her time in New York was very frustrating for Esther because she was trying to fit into the social atmosphere, where all the girls were different than her. Esther felt different around them since some of them were only wishing to get married, an expectation Esther never had, or they knew what to do with their time in New York, something Esther also lacked. Therefore, Esther's difference is in her lack of expectation for the present and the future. While trying to figure out what she would be like in the present and in the future, her internship ended and she went back home. Upon her return, her mother told her that she was not accepted for the writing course she had applied for. Because she wanted to be a writer, she started writing anyway, but realized that she lacked the life experience to write a book. Every day she got more overwhelmed and frustrated with the reality that she saw no present nor future for herself.

At the beginning of the novel, Esther opens a story book and reads a story about a man and a woman under a fig-tree:

This fig-tree grew on a green lawn between the houses of a Jewish Man and a convent, and the Jewish man and a beautiful dark nun kept meeting at the tree to pick the ripe figs, until one day they saw an egg hatching in a bird's nest on a branch of the tree, and as they watched the little bird peck its way out of the egg, they touched the backs of their hands together, and then the nun didn't come

3. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.3.

4. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.2.

out to pick figs with the Jewish man any more but a mean-faced Catholic kitchen-maid came to pick them instead and counted up the figs the man picked after they were both through to be sure he hadn't picked any more than she had, and the man was furious.⁵

With the fig tree example Esther is reminded that there are two dominant categories for women. The first category is a woman as a mother, who disappears from the public world, after having a child, represented by an egg hatching incident in the story. Having read the story, Esther becomes aware of the female role in childrearing as an imprisonment. The second category is a woman who remains by the man's side and demands equality, by counting "up the figs the man picked after they were both through to be sure he hadn't picked any more than she had". These two contradictory categories presented to Esther, the mother, given the identity of a nun, is religiously praised. On the other hand the woman, who opts for participating in an activity alongside the man, requiring equality, is fictionalized as a 'mean-faced' woman, allows Esther to conclude that although she can be more than a wife or a mother, she is still expected to be domestic and nurturing as a result of the changing norms of postwar society.

It is not surprising to see the emphasis on the cult of domesticity, since the 1950s American culture is remarkable in its unexpected social change. With the Cold War, middle class women were encouraged to work outside their homes and consequently realized their ability to be socially productive. During their period of time in the work place, women realized that they could be more than housewives. They could depend on their own power for protection rather than waiting to be protected, be economically independent, have their share of the public world, and prove themselves to be active members of society. When finally most of the professions were open to women and they had the chance to discover the world, they found themselves in a culture which encouraged them to go back home. Although some women carried on working, they were insidiously discouraged. As Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1977) points out, the method of discouragement was by labeling them as "man-eating feminist, the career woman- loveless, alone."⁶ or as in the case of *The Bell Jar*, they were the 'mean-faced' women. In addition to these labels, in *The Way We Never Were* (1992), Stephanie Coontz adds that "Women who could not walk the fine line between nurturing motherhood [...] or who had trouble adjusting to creative "homemaking", were labeled neurotic, perverted, or schizophrenic."⁷

5. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, pp.52-53.

6. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1977), p.93.

7. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and The Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p.32.

With the threat of being unnatural, women were systematically encouraged to choose to be 'angels in the house', loved and cared for by their husbands.

Woman's return to home was not the only change in the 1950s. The construction of the tradition of nuclear family was highlighted since "a "normal" family and vigilant mother became the "front line" of defense against treason."⁸ In the early years of the Cold War, the home was inscribed as a place of security from the uncertainties of the outside world, since the war brought an implicit fear of attack from the outside. People started to see home and family as a bulwark against uncertainty, a promise of stability that they needed the most. In short, fear of the outside world put them back into their houses, with the responsibility of creating a secure nest for their families. However, as Sally Bayley points out creating a private space did not provide the safety that was desired, since the postwar culture was a kind of culture that

Defamiliarize[d]and depersonalize[d], a culture in which the protective boundaries of the private realm [were] persistently opened up to a direct encounter with the rhetoric of nation.⁹

Bayley suggests that in the first stage of the Cold war, the division between the public and private disappeared and the private became the public, the threat of one-sphere out-maneuvering the other became a real threat. The two contradictory spheres blend with each other, yet this merging did not erase the conflicting notions of these two spheres. Having education and employment on the one hand and family and home on the other hand the 1950s generation suffocated in the roles that do not coexist. In *The Bell Jar* Esther, gets more frustrated when the categories presented to her become even more blurry and contradictory. As a result of this vagueness, the idea of what she wants to be, unconsciously disappears.

What I always thought I had in mind was getting some big scholarship to graduate school or a grant to study all over Europe, and then I thought I'd be a professor and write books of poems and be an editor of some sort. Usually I had these plans on the tip of my tongue.

'I don't really know,' I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true.¹⁰

Esther confesses that when she was in the school, she dreamt of becoming a writer and a world traveler. Yet, she admits that, these plans were always on the tip of her

8. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, p.33.

9. Sally Bayley, "'I Have Your Head on My Wall': Sylvia Plath and the Rhetoric of Cold War America" *European Journal of American Culture*, 25/3 (2006), p.159.

10. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.30.

tongue, but she has never put these plans into a speech. As a consequence her plans remain a wish rather than an articulated plan. The moment she realizes this confusion is the moment she hears herself, and it is the moment her uncertainty of what she should be in the future arises. In other words it can be suggested that with the increase of opportunities but also the vagueness of what is required, Esther is encouraged to doubt her plans for the future.

Not knowing what she should want, Esther started to observe what alternatives were presented to her. While observing, Esther learned how to pursue external goals, and by doing so “had simply internalized society’s norms for women.”¹¹ In the novel, we see that internalization is not a result of a sudden self- transformation, but a detailed- yet most often subtle, control on the individual. According to Foucault, internalization of the external goals is achieved by three steps. The first step is observation that aims at the attainment of a self-policing individual by creating a feeling of being under constant surveillance. Second, forcing the individual to judge herself, by locating her in a place where she can compare and eventually identify herself with socially accepted and ‘profitable’ role models. The third, examining the individual by making her visible so that power can be exercised on her. With the process of examination, the individual becomes a space. The Ethel Rosenberg example at the beginning of the novel is where the internalization begins. In June 1953, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were convicted and executed for committing espionage. Public reaction was dominantly on the side of their being traitors, however, Ethel was also criticized in terms of her motherhood, since during the Rosenberg trial, the sons, Michael and Robert, had no home to go to. Ethel was thus harshly criticized as a mother, who rejected the duties of a nurturing mother and her responsibility of creating a secure nest for her family. Thus, in the public eye, Ethel had become a ‘mean-faced’ traitor and a bad mother. In ‘The Radical Imaginary of “The Bell Jar”’ Kate Baldwin points out that the novel introduces Ethel Rosenberg as Esther’s doppelganger and that Ethel’s “status as a bad mother - an image the press went to great pains to construct - stays with Esther as a reminder that she must conform to the era’s dictates and be a good mother.”¹² Through the execution of Ethel Rosenberg in 1953, Esther was not only reminded that she could not be a bad mother, but with electrocution as a potential punishment, she was threatened with a form of being a bad mother that would not result in isolation, but rather in elimination from society.

11. Harold Bloom (ed.), *Alienation* (New York: Infobase, 2009), p.14.

12. Kate Baldwin, “The Radical Imaginary of “The Bell Jar,”” *A Forum on Fiction*, 38/1 (Fall, 2004), p.25.

Although Esther is aware that the Rosenberg's execution has nothing to do with her, she becomes aware of the similarity between Ethel and herself.

'It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenberg's, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers- goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.'¹³

Through Ethel, Esther is reminded of her nonmaternal side, thus Ethel functions as a mirror to Esther. As a consequence, Ethel serving as the double of Esther creates an uncanny fear and she feels Ethel's threat wherever she looks and likens it to 'goggle-eyed headlines', staring at her all the time. In Foucauldian terms, the headlines function as the disciplinary gaze, similar to panoptically designed watchtowers. The principal of the gaze as a disciplining technique is not rooted in the actual act of watching, but in the individual's internalized belief on the possibility of constant observation. In other words, the act of watching is occasionally practiced, however people never know when these occasions will take place, so they always assume that they are being observed. The 'goggle-eyed headlines' can thus be seen as a function of control over Esther that reminds her of the constant observation of her, which is what keeps her obedient to external demands. In other words, with the execution of Rosenberg's Esther feels threatened with being labeled like Ethel; a bad mother, a traitor to her country, and a demonized woman, and it is this threat that keeps Esther withdrawn.

What we have seen so far is the function of power, creating a disciplinary gaze as a way of observation through which the differences of the individual become apparent. Yet these differences are the conflicts of the self that needs to be repaired. With the awareness of her difference Esther has entered into the machinery of power that "explores [the body], breaks it down and rearranges it"¹⁴ in New York. At the end docile bodies would be created.

What is hidden behind the aim of creating docile bodies and homogenous society by reducing the individual differences is that, this process does not abolish altogether those distinctness that stand as an obstacle to the continuation of the dominant ideology. The differences still exist and the individual does not deny the existence of these differ-

13. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.1.

14. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.138.

ences. Yet learns, and is trained to cover them, and thus starts to ‘act’ the same with the majority. In the novel, Esther begins to learn to ‘act’ first by avoiding being like Ethel Rosenberg. She learns not to be a rebel like Ethel, but be obedient to social determinants as a docile body.

In *Foucault and Feminism* Lois McNay suggests that “the consequences of Foucault’s idea of docile bodies was an impoverished account of the construction of gender identity.”¹⁵ From a feminist perspective she believes that although Foucault’s theory of the self is limiting because the individual is never placed in an autonomous environment, the tension and conflict felt between the feminist and Foucauldian view opens up new debates for feminists to consider. Alongside with the Foucauldian theory, she furthermore argues that the practices of the self are in close connection with the social determinant. Thus the dominant power shapes the gender of the individual. McNay’s reading of Foucault’s notion of “docile bodies” highlights Simone de Beauvoir’s statement ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman’ in the sense that becoming a docile body is similar to ‘becoming’ a woman. However, what we see in Esther is the fact that her gender identity is nothing more than a role she is acting, similar to what Judith Butler suggests, that “gender is performatively produced.”¹⁶ Throughout the novel, we will come across with the many performances that Esther preoccupies herself. These performances are not only shaped by the pressure of the disciplinary gaze, but also by the guidelines of the disciplinary space, which in the novel is demonstrated by the hotel Esther stays in during her time in New York.

According to Foucault, disciplinary spaces are arranged in such a way that control of the body is eventually internalized by the individual and the self is disciplined by the self. In the first instance, the disciplining process starts in the physical space of the individual and there are two important techniques that are taken into consideration while disciplining the body: enclosure and partitioning.¹⁷ Factories, schools, monasteries are examples of such enclosed institutions. Within the walls of these institutions, the body of the individual is protected as the inconveniences and the disturbances of the outside world, such as interruption, are neutralized. However, for Foucault “the principle of enclosure is neither constant, nor indispensable, nor sufficient”¹⁸ to constantly survey the individual and therefore the disciplinary space also needs to be partitioned. When the enclosed space is

15. Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1998), p.71.

16. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p.33.

17. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.141.

18. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.143.

also partitioned and each individual has his own place, exploring the individual and recognizing what and who needs to be broken down and rearranged to “obtain an efficient machine,”¹⁹ become more achievable.

The hotel Esther stays in, acts as a disciplining space where the rules and the guidelines are established to secure protection, but is also partitioned with the purpose of allowing the disciplinary mechanism to operate in a more flexible and detailed way. Moreover, much like the panopticon, the disciplinary nature of the hotel lies more in the self-imposed, psychological barriers that the space represents for Esther, rather than the space itself:

‘So there were twelve of us at the hotel, in the same wing on the same floor in single rooms, one after the other, and it reminded me of my dormitory at college.

It wasn't a proper hotel- I mean a hotel where there are both men and women mixed about here and there on the same floor. This hotel- the Amazon- was for women only, and they were mostly girls my age with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men couldn't get at them and deceive them.’²⁰

The hotel's name, The Amazon, which is significant in its mythological reference to the notion of all- female warriors, is closed to the disturbances, distractions and inconveniences of the outside world such as men. The twelve girls staying at the hotel are in their enclosed kingdom but this kingdom is partitioned and each girl is allocated different rooms, which is in accordance with Foucault's explanation of the art of distribution that “individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations.”²¹ Although in this statement Foucault suggests that there is no fixed position for an individual in a society, as fictionalized in the hotel, by locating each girl in a different room rather than a dormitory, the idea of disciplining also suggests that there is no space for acting differently either, since the rooms in the hotel function as fixed locations and are similar to one another. The irony in Esther's situation is that, no matter how much the disciplinary mechanism avoids giving physically fixed positions by partitioning, as long as each partition in the hotel exposes the same possibility as the other, it suggests a socially fixed notion. Therefore, it can be suggested that the hotel compels Esther to follow a path of introspection that leads her to compare herself to her peers. It creates a sharper distinction between what is expected of

19. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.164.

20. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, pp.3-4.

21. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.146.

Esther (to marry and have children) and what she eventually desires from life (to remain a single writer and world-traveler).

Through the group of girls staying, working and socializing together, Esther is familiarized with a notion of femininity that is mostly busy with painting their nails and worrying about their clothes. Through this presentation of femininity, Esther steps into the disciplinary mechanism that reminds the individual of the primacy of practice over belief. Susan Bordo who analyzed the effect of power on female body, argues that the practices of femininity is another kind of subtle power imposed on women when creating docile bodies ;

Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity- a pursuit without a terminus, a resting point, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion- female bodies become what Foucault calls “docile bodies,”- bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, “improvement”[...] Through these disciplines, we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, insufficiency, of never being good enough.²²

Bordo argues that ideal perspective of femininity is homogenous and that feminine practices do not lead to an active engagement with a role, but to an obedience to what is required. When trying to be feminine, women are encouraged to perform what is ideal. In Bordo’s point of view, the obedience is what Foucault calls ‘docile’ bodies. What Bordo suggests is that obedience is not only due to the tendency to perform what is ideal, but also a far fetch consequence of detecting insufficiencies of the individual. This is the second step into the individual’s training in the internalization of the external goals. As previously stated, the individual is located in a place where she can compare and eventually identify herself with socially accepted and ‘profitable’ role models. When comparing herself with her peers, the self perpetually detects insufficiencies and thus devotes her energy to modify herself all the while struggling to annihilate the differences. During her stay at the Amazon, Esther is presented with alternative identities and through these alternatives she manages to learn what it means to be a white, middle class, urban woman. What is also of great importance is that while Esther is observing the others, she starts observing herself and eventually starts comparing herself with others. As a consequence she not only discovers the requirements of womanhood, such as fragility, femininity and sexuality, but also realizes that she does not possess these qualities. That is why she feels like ‘a numb trolley-bus’ in the world she inhabits. Sense of alienation from self and

22. Susan Bordo and Alison M. Jaggar (eds.), *Gender and Body: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p.14.

alienation from the world motivate Esther to perform so that she will be engaged with the environment she is in.

One of the performances that Esther preoccupies herself with in the novel is the 'Elly Higgenbottom' identity. When Esther went to a bar with Doreen, where they met a couple of men, she was anxious because she did not even know which drink she liked to order. She was worried that she 'might make a fool of [herself]' ²³ and thus she introduced herself as "'Elly Higginbottom'. After that she 'felt safer.'" ²⁴ With the character that Esther creates and performs, she creates a space that she can hide behind and free herself from the tension of looking like a 'fool'. From a social perspective, creating a fake name allows Esther to escape from a fixed position and thus she continually becomes someone else, which gives her relief from the tension of trying to adapt a single, rigid identity.

We can also argue that it is not only the space that Esther is in, but also the presence of Doreen that forces her to perform a different identity. Caroline J. Smith suggests that Doreen is a friend who "opens Esther's eyes to the ways in which women might not fit the more conservative model."²⁵ The tendency is to interpret Doreen as a rebellious girl, existing in opposition to the domestic girls in the hotel, who opens Esther's mind to other options- that women can be Amazons, and by doing so they do not have to fit into a more conservative model. In addition to Doreen's function as a rebellious girl, she also "embodies Esther's dark side- satirical, cynical, wild" ²⁶ and thus in the presence of the rebellious Doreen, Esther becomes 'Elly'. Triggered by Doreen's presence, Esther creates an identity she can perform. She is disguised in Elly character and acts as a woman who is as self confident and outgoing as Doreen. Yet, one may also wonder why Esther needed to disguise her real name and become Elly, when performing without hiding her real name was what she was doing since the first day she arrived to New York. Linda Wagner explains that "Esther has called herself Elly Higginbottom in this scene, knowing instinctively that she wants to be protected from the kind of knowledge Doreen has,"²⁷ suggesting that Esther does not really want to be like Doreen. She is encouraged to act like Doreen in the bar because she does not want to make a fool of herself. In that environment, she has no other option but be like Doreen, yet at the same time, she wants to be protected from what

23. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.10.

24. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.11.

25. Caroline J. Smith, "'The Feeding of Young Women': Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Mademoiselle Magazine, and the Domestic Ideal," *College Literature*, 37/4 (2010), p.13.

26. Harold Bloom (ed.), *Alienation*, p.14.

27. Linda Wagner, "Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female Bildungsroman," *Women's Studies*, 12 (1989), p.57.

Doreen represents- rebellion, sexuality, transgression. Hence she creates a fake name as a protection for her real self. The Doreen example resembles the Ethel Rosenberg example, in the sense that both characters mirror Esther's rebellious side, but also function as a threat to the continuity of society.

After going to Lenny's apartment and witnessing Doreen and Lenny "jitterbugging during the intervals. [she] felt [herself] shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs that pine-paneling. [She] felt like a hole in the ground."²⁸ Esther leaves Doreen in Lenny's apartment, abandoning the Doreen identity covered in the Elly identity, returning to her room, to being Esther. Later that same night, when Doreen knocks to Esther's door drunk and vomiting, she decides not to carry Doreen into her room because she felt if she "carried Doreen across the threshold into [her] room and helped her on to [her] bed, [she] would never get rid of her again."²⁹ In his article 'The Woman is Perfected. Her Dead Body Wears the Smile of Accomplishment', Garry Leonard interprets Esther's decision to lock out Doreen as "locking out the blonde personality, who has participated in a drunken one-night stand."³⁰ Marilyn Boyer claims that Doreen's vomiting scene is the Kristevan concept of abjection, where the identity is constituted by exclusion of threats and that "the notion of "abject" disturbs the usual social and cultural conceptions of normalcy."³¹ By abandoning and excluding her, Esther has labeled Doreen undesirable, because her dirty nature, as her culture would define, is a threat to society.

Threatened by Doreen's display of vomit, Esther chooses to resemble Betsy and "her innocent friends. It was Betsy [she] resembled at heart,"³² Betsy is another girl staying at the Amazon, "imported straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile."³³ She represents the nice, pure and innocent type of girl, contrary to what Doreen represents. Yet, what needs to be pointed out at this stage of the argument is that Esther's decisions are directed by the external agencies In the movie Esther watches, the splitting of the 'good' and the 'bad' is ascribed by "a nice blonde girl [...] and a sexy black-haired girl" brings Esther to realize that she does not want to be like Doreen the 'sexy' girl, but like Betsy, the 'nice' girl, because in the movie

28. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.15.

29. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.20.

30. Garry M. Leonard, "The Woman is Perfected. Her Dead Body Wears the Smile of Accomplishment", p. 70.

31. Marilyn Boyer, "The Disabled Female Body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," *Women's Studies*, 33/ 2 (2004), p. 203.

32. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.21.

33. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.6.

“the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up alone.”³⁴ Garry M. Leonard suggests that “the implicit message of the film is that a woman must first divide herself and then banish the sensual half.”³⁵ Influenced by the media as the biopower, Esther decides to be an ‘imported’ girl like Betsy, and establish herself as a naïve and obedient girl by abandoning her emotions and desires for the sake of being a ‘nice’ and innocent girl.

Overall, in New York, Esther has been performing a pretty, sweet girl character like Betsy. Performance thus acts as her escape from the tension of being and feeling different among the other girls. But on her last night in, although she knows what she is supposed to want but it does not feel right, she throws her clothes out of the window, “rejecting the traditional image,”³⁶ signaling her longing to be a writer and a world traveler. Unfortunately when she returns home, she finds out that she was not accepted to the writing course to which she had applied.

‘All through June the writing course had stretched before me like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer. Now I saw it totter and dissolve, and a body in a white blouse and green skirt plummet into the gap.’³⁷

When she has finally managed to decide what she wants for herself, the decision is taken away from her. She is left at the point she started from: a place where the future ‘totters and dissolves’. Once again Esther is in a place where she does not see a future for herself. Rather than imitating what is presented to her as she did in New York, Esther decides to alienate herself from everything around her by being silent. The reason she opts for not imitating further, is that in New York, she tried to be someone by imitating because she still had hope for the future, but in Boston, she decides to be no one by being silent, because her hope for the future has been taken away from her. She decides to be silent, because the world is silent to her. Her silence is thus her resistance to the dominant ideology that directs her to be a domestic docile body. Although through her silence Esther seems to withdraw from her social environment and opts to become no one, in Foucauldian terms, the individual becomes an active member of society through resistance,

if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience. You have to use power relations to refer to situations? where you are not doing what

34. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.39.

35. Garry M. Leonard, “The Woman is Perfected. Her Dead Body Wears the Smile of Accomplishment”, p. 70.

36. Linda Wagner, “Plath’s *The Bell Jar* as Female Bildungsroman”, p.61.

37. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.110.

you want. So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance.³⁸

Previously resistance was conceptualized as saying ‘no’ to what is dictated, but Foucault suggests that it is more than negating. Resistance is an act of recreation, and changing the system by transgressing the dominant discourse. Power relations are thus mobile, reversible and not fixed. The possibility to change the relation signifies the freedom of parts, since in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* Foucault argues that “power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free.”³⁹ Given the fact that freedom is required to establish a power relation, and resistance is an essential ingredient of this relation, it can be deduced that resistance is a declaration of freedom. For that reason, Esther’s silence can be interpreted as her statement of freedom.

On the other hand, her silence is not a withdrawn, passive affirmation but an active one; as she uses it to humiliate others. Foucault claims that humiliating the others with silence is the satisfaction and “the very element of [the sufferers] liberty”⁴⁰ since the sufferer mostly enjoys the acknowledgment as he feels the presence of observation and attention. In Esther’s case observation is twofold. She is either the observer or the one being observed. When at home Esther observes people from her window, creating an alternative panopticon, and ducks down when she realizes that she is seen by Dodo Conway: a mother of six children. The moment she is in hiding is the Foucauldian moment of resistance to surveillance and the power relation that Esther creates allows her to be more powerful than the domestic ideology represented by Dodo. However, ducking down presents the idea that she fails her desire to be unseen, and that she cannot challenge the power dynamics. On the other hand, when at the office of Doctor Gordon the power relation is changed, since Esther becomes the one being observed by the male medical professional. When Esther is taken to Doctor Gordon’s office by her mother, she is presented to him to be treated. Her discomfort is the focus of the doctor, so as to say that her body becomes a signifier of the disease and her symptom is her language. Amid her disease and the symptoms, Esther starts feeling extremely exposed, similar to a prisoner in the prison. We can thus suggest that Doctor Gordon’s office becomes a Foucauldian prison, where the residents passed under the gaze of the guardians. Doctor Gordon’s clinic, without windows,⁴¹ is the medical panopticon, and he is the guardian. However, he is not

38. Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1994), p.168.

39. Michel Foucault, *Ethics*, p.292.

40. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.247b

41. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.122.

the invisible guardian, as in the panopticon. Esther hated him “the moment [she] walked in through the door”⁴² because she realized that her body is institutionalized by his gaze. She appears powerless when she feels she is objectified. However rather than obeying his power and gain her freedom, Esther resists his medical power by telling her version of her story, leaving details out on purpose and thus she “feels pleased at [her] cleverness.”⁴³ By humiliating others around her with her silence, Esther degrades them all the while dignifying herself with her “cleverness”.⁴⁴ That is why rather than interpreting her silence as her way of detachment, isolation and passivity, we see it as her strategy to change the power relation. Using silence as a way to accomplish this change may be seen as an ironic strategy in the sense that it appears as a reaction to her being rejected for a writing course, which reflected her desire to be able to verbally express herself, but as Susan Bordo suggests verbal expression is replaced by bodily expression, since it is more in tune with patriarchal ideology:

Loss of mobility, loss of voice, inability to leave the home, feeding others while starving oneself, taking up space, and whittling down the space one's body takes up- all have symbolic meaning, all have political meaning under the varying rules governing the historical construction of gender [...] The bodies of disordered women in this way offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter- a text that insists, actually demands, that it be read as cultural statement.⁴⁵

Bordo argues that women use their bodies as a language of protest. They silently turn within themselves and search for ways to negotiate with the system so as to be able to practice their most natural human desire: freedom of expression. If verbal expression is frowned upon, their bodies are to be used, since it is what they are left with. Their bodies are their new texts, allowing them to communicate not through words but through actions. In a way, rather than expressing their desires through a fictional character and a story, they literally create themselves as characters, and act their stories. By using their bodies as texts, they state that if it is domesticity and submission that is required, it is agoraphobia and total silence that would be given in return. Bordo's argument provides a strategy of resistance to Foucault's suggestion that the body is the object and target in power relations. Since the power is constructed through the body, any resistance that alters this relation would also be formed through the body.

42. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.123.

43. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.125.

44. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.125.

45. Susan Bordo and Alison M. Jaggar (eds.), *Gender and Body*, p.16.

In Esther's case, not leaving the house and refusing to communicate are her narratives of resistance to the dominant ideology. She locks herself indoors, which turns the sacred house into a prison; she attempts to commit suicide, which turns her live body to a dead body denouncing her social function. For Foucault, suicide is also a way of altering power relations because:

even when the power relation is completely out of balance, when it can truly be claimed that one side has "total power" over the other, a power can be exercised over the other only insofar as the other still has the option of killing himself, of leaping out the window, or killing the other person⁴⁶

Foucault suggests that although power relations need certain freedom of each part, if one part feels powerless in comparison to the other, the powerless side still has the freedom of ending their life. It is this kind of freedom that allows the powerless individual to feel powerful. In other words, the power of the individual may also come from his ability to end his life: suicide is therefore one way to alter power relations. Mortality becomes the glory of the individual against disciplining social norms, since it promises release from the power dynamic, without defeat.

However when Seccomb's argument that "Our outmost experience of dying is founded on a prior experience of the other's death" is juxtaposed with Butler's suggestion that performance as a way of 'becoming', we can see that suicide is still contained within the boundaries of the dominant ideology. When the individual decides to kill himself/herself, s/he looks at the examples in front of him/her, and imitates their methods. Therefore suicide becomes a performative act similar to gender construction. The body is still used to ensure the continuity of society. The hope to alter the power relation will still be approachable as long as ending one's life is an option and can be imitated.

When Esther decides to kill herself, she looks at the newspapers and analyzes what kinds of methods have previously been used. After reading the story of George Pollucini, who attempted to jump out the window, but was saved before jumping, Esther concludes that:

The trouble about jumping was that if you didn't pick the right number of storeys, you might still be alive when you hit the bottom. I thought seven storeys must be a safe distance.⁴⁷

In this period of researching suicide methods, Esther learned the method which would guarantee death. She tried cutting her wrist, which was very painful so she gave

46. Michel Foucault, *Ethics*, p.292.

47. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.131.

48. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.178.

up the idea, she tried hanging herself but she was poor at knots and also could not find anywhere to fasten the cord. She even tried swimming out until she was too tired to swim back. After careful calculations she settled on a death that may be pain free but still resulted in a definite death and decided to take an overdose, but when she opened her eyes in a hospital she knew she had failed. She was saved. She was defeated in a power relation that she tried to alter by killing herself. She was alive and started to feel the pressure of the bell jar “stewing in [her] own sour air [...] The air of the bell jar waddled around [her] and [she] couldn’t stir.”⁴⁸ The bell jar symbol occurs for the first time in the novel when Esther was saved from killing herself. The reason why it occurred at that moment is that, Esther has started to feel defeated in her struggle to be someone as well as her struggle to be no one. The bell jar also represents the power of observation and the enforcement of discipline- stripping Esther not only of her own power but continuing to observe her and forcing her to comply. Martin Smith suggests that with the feeling of being prisoned and isolated in the bell jar Esther “might be able to see out to others but [she] can’t touch them, can’t feel them, and might not be able to hear them.”⁴⁹ In Foucauldian terms, one can thus suggest that Esther has created her own panopticon and consequently becomes unseen. According to Sally Bayley, Esther’s “monitoring panoptic I is a statement of both self-defense and self-assertion against the intrusive gaze of the outsider.”⁵⁰ She alienates herself with the help of the bell jar, as a way of defending herself from the power imposed on her. The moment she feels powerless, is the moment the bell jar occurs.

After her numerous suicide attempts, Esther is taken to a private institution to be recovered from her sense of powerlessness and to be taken out of the bell jar and adjusted to the real life. In *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault argues that the medical field is “a space of free communication in which the relationship of the parts to the whole was always transposable and reversible.”⁵¹ He furthermore claims that the “unique character of the science of man [...] cannot be detached from the negative aspects”⁵² as long as it “related much more to health than normality”. He critiques the medical profession, which, as a patriarchal proxy, has been designated as a regulator of the female body and

49. Martin Smith, “Metaphors for Mental Distress as an Aid to Empathy: Looking through *The Bell Jar*,” *Journal of Social Work Practice* (2011), p.3.

50. Sally Bayley, “‘I Have Your Head on My Wall’: Sylvia Plath and the Rhetoric of Cold War America,” p.162.

51. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.38.

52. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, p.36.

the hospital as a patriarchal institution that reinforces corporeal discipline. He also suggests that the science of man should “begin by analyzing a ‘regular’ functioning of the organism and go on to seek where it had deviated, what it was disturbed by, and how it could be brought back into normal working order.”⁵³ In other words the medical doctor should find out where the patient is disturbed in the process of normalization.

Esther is taken to a private clinic, in which the medical gaze is unattached from any specific person or space, to be examined. What is first done in the institution is to place Esther among people in similar states of transgressiveness. Apart from being with similar people, the institution forbids visitors from outside and is thus convenient for Esther as she “kept feeling the visitors measuring [her] fat and stringy hair against what [she] had been and what they wanted [her] to be.”⁵⁴ She starts socializing with the other patients and feeling comfortable around them because she does not feel different and threatened. During this period, Esther’s reason for her disturbance in the process of normalization comes to light. She fears losing control of her body if she has a baby. When Dr. Nolan asked Esther if she would act differently if she had not needed to worry about a baby she says yes. The moment of her acceptance is also the moment of Dr. Nolan’s realization of what is disturbing Esther, which is that she wants to express her physical desire but is scared that she would end up having a baby and disappears from the social world, as in the story of a man and a woman under the fig tree:

What I hate is the thought of being under a man’s thumb. A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.⁵⁵

Esther realizes that she is disturbed because she feels that she is expected to conform to a heterosexuality that is limited to marriage (through her mother, Dodo and even her editor Jay Cee), and that the sexual emancipation of women is frowned upon (through Doreen). This disturbance leads her to question what is expected of her. She feels non-maternal and she is scared of being a mother before it is her time. As soon as Esther told Doctor Nolan she would act differently when this pressure is taken away from her, she scribbled a name of a doctor for fitting coil. Esther describes the fitting as her “freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person [...] just because of sex” and finally with the fitting she becomes her ‘own woman.’⁵⁶ “The next step was to find the proper

53. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, p.35.

54. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.95.

55. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.212.

56. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.213.

sort of man” and “practice [her] new, normal personality.”⁵⁷ She decided to “seduce”⁵⁸ Irwin, whom she met at the steps of the library. They went to Irwin’s house, Esther had her “first glass of beer” and they spent the night together. In her article ‘The Disabled Female Body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*’ Marilyn Boyer suggests that Esther “uses her body for her own expected pleasure by entering into the world of sexual relations.”⁵⁹ As a result, she becomes her “own woman.”⁶⁰ The change that occurs immediately in Esther is apparent to the reader. Previously in a similar atmosphere, when Esther went to a bar with Doreen, she created ‘Elly’ to be comfortable in the environment she was in. Yet now, she did not need to hide behind a fictitious character. As Mary Evans suggests “[w]ith the help of a sympathetic doctor, Esther has put together a self which can become sexually independent and assume a capacity for action which suggests a triumphant passage to heterosexuality.”⁶¹ Esther describes this moment as “being born twice- patched, retreaded and approved for the road”⁶² and that she is pulled back to life with a ‘magical thread’. In Foucauldian terms Esther has been explored, broken down and rearranged and hence adjusted to the present environment. In Foucauldian sense this adjustment is the “cure”.

The recovery of the protagonist, Esther, has set the agenda for a much later discussion. On one hand critics such as Marjorie Perloff and E. Miller Budick believe that Esther’s recovery is actual and that it is her rebirth as a woman. Diane S. Bonds explains that Esther is recovered because she rejects “others which seems to have played an important part in bringing about her breakdown.”⁶³ On the other hand critics such as Mason Haris believe that Esther’s recovery is putative because it “seems to consist more of resignation to prison than escape from it [...] a depressing return to her ‘old best self’ because nothing better has been found.”⁶⁴ However, Esther’s final silence allies with the latter argument that she is back to her ‘old self’.

57. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.216.

58. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.216.

59. Marilyn Boyer, “The Disabled Female Body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath’s *the Bell Jar*” p.219.

60. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.213.

61. Mary Evans, “Extending Autobiography: A Discussion of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*,” in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods. Transformations* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.86.

62. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.223.

63. Diane S. Bonds, “The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*,” *Women’s Studies*, 18/1 (May, 1990), p.52.

64. Mason Haris, “The Bell Jar,” in Linda W. Wagner (ed.), *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1984), p.38.

Pausing for a brief breath, on the threshold, I saw the silver-haired doctor, [...] and eyes I thought I had recognized over white masks.

The eyes and the faces all turned themselves towards me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room.⁶⁵

Esther, who has been performing what is expected of her, has presented her last performance, as a docile body, who is 'guided' by the others. She is again silent. It is this silence that may lead the reader to compare how Esther was before she was institutionalized and how she is after. Before, she was a girl whose self was dependent on the guidance of others. As a result of being institutionalized and her agreement with the doctor that she is ready to leave, it is expected that the reader will see that Esther has changed. Nonetheless, what is seen is an adjustment. She returns to her 'old self' yet this time she does not resist letting her body be both used as an object and a target of disciplining forces and that is why in the *Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan suggests that "adjustment to a culture which does not permit the realization of one's entire being is not a cure at all."⁶⁶ When Esther is inserted with a coil, the freedom that she thinks she possesses is given to her by the medical institution. In other words, more than individual freedom, the fitting serves as an instrument in the process of adjustment. This point is proven, seeing that Esther eventually becomes a mother, of the kind who would "cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with."⁶⁷ Thus her silence at the end can be interpreted as her docility that she was trying to resist but instead learned to submit to.

As a result, this article has discussed Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* as a fictionalization of an individual's process of adjusting to the changing conditions of the 1950s American culture. In the light of feminist perspective on Foucault's notion of "docile bodies", the novel presents one of the major changes that an individual requires to adjust as the formation of the self and suggests that the self is not a free agent anymore, but a body that internalizes social norms and learns to act accordingly.

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65. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.234.

66. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p.299.

67. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.3.

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