

Tracing Matrophobia in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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Abstract:

Patriarchy as a systematic organization not only has changed the essence of relation between men and women during the years, but also has affected the nature of women's strongest connections one of which is mother-daughter relation. This article is a study of Sylvia Plath's novel The Bell Jar with the use of Adrienne Rich's notion of matrophobia.

Key Words: *identity, matrophobia, mother-daughter relation, patriarchy.*

Introduction

During the history, mothers' relation with their children has mainly been described with the most inspirational and positive adjectives that could have ever been associated to any human relations. But one can expect any deformities in a deformed condition. Considering patriarchy as a malformation, the focus of this study is to discuss how the nature of mother-daughter relation can lose its positive function in a patriarchal society and turns to a destructive element. Under the first title "Motherhood as a Patriarchal Institution" the readers read about the difference between "mothering" and "motherhood", the very engaging concept of "matrophobia" and the consequences of this phobia on the daughters and mothers. The second section, "Breathing in the Mother-made Bell Jar: Mother as a Barrier to Identity-formation", presents a reading of Sylvia Plath's only novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) through which the following points are illustrated: how matrophobia is manifested throughout the novel and how the process of identity formation on the part of Esther, the protagonist, is under the influence of her matrophobic relation with her mom.

Motherhood as a Patriarchal Institution

Adrienne Rich in her landmark book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), distinguishes between 'mothering' and 'motherhood'. Mothering is the "potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children" and motherhood is a patriarchal institution "which aims at ensuring that that potential- and all women- shall remain under male control" (1986:13). In patriarchal structures, maternity is metamorphosed from a *potentiality*, mothering, to a patriarchal *institution*, motherhood, and it

sparks off some problems in mother-daughter relation. It is important to find out how and why this change comes about.

One strategy for patriarchy to socialize men and women to its politics is through role, temperament and status. In a patriarchal structure, roles are allocated to men and women according to principles of temperament that this structure defines. Describing women as passive and docile, patriarchy assigns "domestic service and attendance upon infant", that is motherhood, to women as their role (Millett, 2000:26). Consequently, mothers, as the female members of a patriarchal society, not only are expected to be passive and docile both in their family and society, but also, as the first and the most accessible models for their daughters, they should teach their daughters not to transgress borders of passivity and docility. By this policy, motherhood acts as a mediator between patriarchal doctrines and women of next generation. This means that patriarchy, in the first instance, provides mothers with what being a mother and a woman mean, and then mothers transfer this learning to their daughters. These instructions not only make daughters mentally ready to accept further creeds of patriarchy easily and without objection, but also give patriarchy the chance to control half of the society without direct interference. So by considering motherhood as an institution and controlling it, patriarchy uses mothers as a medium to spread its own ideological framework: "The mother serves the interests of patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience, and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions" (Rich, 1986: 45).

Patriarchy's institutionalization of motherhood, although of maximum utility to its endurance, has left a profound effect on daughters and their relation with their mothers. Facing the restricted roles of their mothers in patriarchal structures, daughters not only blame their mothers but also condemn them. In Rich's words,

Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were performed transmitted. Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her (ibid: 235).

For many daughters, their mothers have changed from an indisputable, unchallengeable model they had in mind and desired to be to the one that is scary for them to be like that. This change led to the introduction of 'Matrophobia' which Rich defines as "fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother" (ibid.).

Astrid Henry believes that a process of disidentification is at work in matrophobia. According to Diane Fuss disidentification is "[...] an identification that has already been made and denied in the unconscious" (cited in Hallstein, 2010: 28), or as Henry herself puts it, it is an "identification against something"(ibid.). It means rejecting an identification that is done in the

unconscious but cannot be accepted in the conscious. Identifying against the mother or disidentifying with her is because of the fear daughters have to be recognized like their mothers or sharing the same destiny with them. In fact daughters are identifying against the restricted roles and positions of their mothers. Jane Flax writes: "To the extent that the mother lacks the power and the esteem of others, she has already betrayed her daughter. The fear of failure is a fear of being a damaged person like the mother" (cited in *ibid*: 37).

Matrophobia, as the direct consequence of analyzing motherhood from the vantage point of patriarchy, creates immense problems not only for daughter-mother relation but also in the formation of daughter's personality and character. Unable or reluctant to see the complex and systematic design that is at work in the restrictions imposed on mothers, daughters blame their mothers as the only responsible agent for the degraded positions of women in a patriarchal structure. Therefore, the potentially powerful connection that could exist between mothers and daughters and could have been the source of energy and inspiration for both of them is distorted because "[...] patriarchal attitudes have encouraged us to split, to polarize[...]and to project all unwanted guilt, anger, shame, power, freedom, onto the 'other' woman" (Rich, 1986: 253). It is the female tragedy, as Rich names it: "the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (*ibid*: 237).

By rejecting their most accessible models, daughters try to form their personalities and characters by cutting all the similarities that tie them to their mothers. In other words, their endeavor is to move beyond their mothers' positions, roles and lives and be a thoroughly different person from what their mothers demand them. Nancy Friday puts it this way: "for as long as I can remember, I did not want the kind of life my mother felt she could show me"(cited in Hallstein, 2010: 37). It comes as no surprise that growing up becomes an obstinate and complex process on the part of daughters likened to a surgical attempt:

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery (Rich, 1986:236).

Accordingly, when patriarchy enters the mother-daughter relation, it acts as an intruder and changes maternity from a potentiality to an institution. The results of this intrusion are a distorted and degraded image of mothering in the minds of both mothers and daughters and a painful, surgical attempt on the part of daughters in the formation of their identity. What Rich suggests in the continuation of her discussion as the solution for eliminating 'matrophobia', is to give a

woman-centered definition of mother-daughter relation and let women push back the boundaries of patriarchy and outline mothering and femininity themselves.

Breathing in the Mother-made Bell Jar: Mother as a Barrier to Identity-formation

In her essay 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' (1979), Elaine Showalter puts *The Bell Jar* in the category of matrophobic novels and declares that "the heroine's mother is the target for the novel's most punishing contempt. When Esther announces to her therapist that she hates her mother, she is on the road to recovery" (p. 99). Showalter refers to this hatred as the "feminist enlightenment of the fifties and sixties" which is "a metaphor for hating oneself" (ibid.).

The Bell Jar is the story of Esther Greenwood's breakdown; her split between her self and the numerous, inconsistent models that she witnesses around her. Everything changes for her from the time that she steps out of her suburban, isolated life to New York, a bigger world, where her identity scatters into pieces and she falls into vertiginous difficulty of selecting:

New York is for Esther [...] - the Great Good Place where one's values are put to the test. Prior to her summer in New York, Esther's world has been safely circumscribed: like a racehorse, she has been 'running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another' for as long as she can remember. Now for the first time, she is presented with real alternatives (Perloff, 1972: 512).

Unfortunately for Esther, at this abstruse moment of her life that she has to undergo vital decisions, her mother is not much help as Esther's matrophobic view prevents her from picking her mom as her ideal ego or role model. In her first reference to her mother in the novel, she blatantly introduces her as the cause of her bewilderment: "I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do. My own mother wasn't much help" ¹ (p. 42).

These words not only imply Esther's dissatisfaction with her own self-image, but also her "rage at her mother for being unable to offer her but a mutilated reflection of herself as a woman" (Martínez Reventós, 1996: 286). Esther's preference for Jay Cee, the intellectual editor of *Ladies' Day*, also announces both her rejection and rebellion against what her mother bestows on her. In this sense, as it is the case in some other matrophobic novels, Esther's body becomes a 'matrophobic battlefield' because as Frigga Haug says, "the body often becomes for women the decisive pivot around which identity is defined, by linking the female body's beauty to 'weightier' issues" (cited in Martínez Reventós, 1996: 287). Mrs. Greenwood has always warned Esther "never under any circumstances to go with a man to a man's rooms after an evening out, it could mean only the one thing" (p. 88). Additionally, when Esther was at college, her mom sent

¹Plath, S. (1971). *Bell Jar*. New York: Harper and Row. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be indicated with page numbers only.

her an article which "gave all the reasons a girl shouldn't sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married" (p. 89). Esther revolts against her mother's teachings when, despite all her admonitions, experiences a sexual relationship with Irwin. So like Joan in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, Esther "fights a war of identity against her mother, in which 'the disputed territory' is her own body" (Martínez Reventós, 1996: 286).

"In the female literary tradition of matrophobia, the worst mothers are those who fail to give adequate love and attention, with the consequent negative effects for the daughter's narcissism" (ibid: 288). In *The Bell Jar*, this lack of maternal affection and attention for the daughter transpires when Esther becomes evidently psychotic and suffers from long hours of insomnia and hunger. What the reader expects is Mrs. Greenwood's support and sympathy. Instead, in a platitudinous suggestion, Mrs. Greenwood naively asks her daughter to help people in need in order to stop thinking about herself: "my mother said the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody who was worse off than you" (p. 182). Even when Esther decides not to visit Doctor Gordon any more, her mom replies triumphantly "I knew my baby wasn't like that [...] I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (p. 163). At the end of the novel also, as Doctor Nolan is informing Esther that her return to the society, outside the asylum, may not be pleasant and people may avoid her, the first person that comes to Esther's mind is her mother:

My mother's face floated to mind, a pale, *reproachful* moon, at her last and first visit to the asylum since my twentieth birthday. A daughter in an asylum! I had done that to her. Still, she had obviously decided to forgive me (p. 267, italics added).

"We'll take up where left off, Esther," she had said, with her sweet, martyr's smile. "We'll act as if all this were a bad dream" (ibid.).

These quotations reveal a key point about the nature of relation between Esther and her mother. It is undeniably significant that the picture of Mrs. Greenwood in Esther's mind is associated with the adjective "reproachful". Ironically, as Esther's tone denotes, she knows, consciously or unconsciously, that she herself is the one who should be blamed not only for her situation, but also for causing her mom to face the dishonorable experience of having her daughter in an asylum and her mother, is the one who should *generously* forgive her. That is to say, Mrs. Greenwood, a "hopelessly rigid, strong-willed, loveless person who has survived the battle of life only by reducing it to neat little proverbs and formulas" (Perloff, 1972: 513), is too self-assured of her motherhood that she cannot take her share of the blame in Esther's breakdown:

Mrs. Greenwood is a paragon of parental indifference because she clearly does not hear what Esther tells her, nor does she respond to Esther's needs in any meaningful way [...]. Nothing can jar her complacent belief that she knows all about everything, that she is the perfect mother to a perfect set of children, children whose only responsibility is to present themselves to the world so as to validate their mother's goodness (Wagner-Martin, 1999: 38).

No matter how hard Mrs. Greenwood tries to exonerate herself from Esther's suffering and mental illness, she is an accomplice in her daughter's suicide efforts. This complicity is metaphorically expressed by the fact that Esther tries to hang herself with the silk cord of her mother's yellow bathrobe and that she stole fifty sleeping pills from her mother's closet (ibid: 39).

Anita Brookner's novels, *Look at Me*, *A Start in Life* and *Hotel du Lac*, are considered as the prototypical models of the "representation of the daughter's wounded narcissism" in which the relation between the daughters and their mothers are "based on the polarity of domination/subjection [...] the 'master'-mother and the 'slave'-daughter" (Martínez Reventós, 1996: 288-289). The daughters of these novels, like Esther, are the powerless subordinates "to their mothers' narcissistic needs" (ibid. 289). The same master/slave relation exists between Esther and her mom, in which Mrs. Greenwood represents the "common pattern of the frustrated, disappointed mother who projects all her thwarted desires onto her daughter" (ibid. 286) and Esther a captive of her mom's desires. As Janet Stallard says:

Esther's life can be seen as a metaphor for the wishes of her mother. Mrs. Greenwood has sacrificed her interests to participate vicariously in her children's successes. From her labors she has produced the 'right' kind of children, children who can compete and succeed in upper class worlds as noted through Esther's much-praised writing and her brother's mastery of German. This creates a constant conversation around Esther since she has become a cash cow-a way to purchase respect, scholarship money, and social status. [...] Esther takes her mother's sacrifices seriously and fears she is an inferior version of the self described in the stories told about her. This has enslaved Esther's sense of self to her mother's perceptions and reflections (2008: 69-70).

As a matrophobic reaction to her mother's control and in order to avoid her mode of conventional femininity, Esther tries to escape becoming her mother's double by refusing to do what her mother encourages her:

My grandmother and my mother were such good cooks that I left everything to them. They were always trying to teach me one dish or another, but I would just look on and say, 'Yes, yes, I see,' while the instructions slid through my head like water, and then I'd always spoil what I did so nobody would ask me to do it again (p. 83).

Even, in spite of her mother's constant persistence, she resists learning shorthand because she does not want to "serve men":

My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand was something else again. Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter. The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters (ibid.).

Unlike her matrophobic relation with her mom, Esther had a better connection with her father as she confirms that she had always been his favorite. According to Carolyn Heilbrun:

The masculine identification of women has a strong psycho developmental base, specially in girls with 'a will to difference', who need to appropriate the possibility of 'human autonomy and self-fulfillment' they see in the male world (cited in Martínez Reventós, 1996: 287).

Esther believes that her mother never could create the same happiness that her father has given to her so that she did not experience happiness anymore after his death, when she was nine:

I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old. After that- in spite of the Girl Scouts and the piano lessons and the water-color lessons and the dancing lessons and the sailing camp, all of which my mother scrimped to give me, and college, with crewing in the mist before breakfast and blackbottom pies and the little new firecrackers of ideas going off every day-I had never been really happy again (p. 82).

She thinks that if her intellectual father was alive, he would be much help:

I thought that if my father hadn't died, he would have taught me all about insects, which was his specialty at the university. He would also have taught me German and Greek and Latin, which he knew [...] (p. 187).

Conclusion

From a matrophobic point of view, one main reason for Esther's breakdown is the clashes of 'ego boundaries' between this mother and daughter and consequently an 'impeded' identity-formation on the part of Esther. As Judith Kegan Gardiner asserts:

Without a firm individual identity, mother or daughter may react to the other's self, body, habits or life-style as though they were her own. This tendency toward a confusion of ego boundaries is exacerbated by a society that defines women in terms of their bodies and physiological processes (1978: 148).

Mrs. Greenwood is the picture of a controlling mother who has manipulated her children on the "chessboard of her egotism" (Wagner-Martin, 1999: 39). Linda Wagner-Martin asserts:

The Bell Jar shows the ways in which Esther Greenwood is the unquestionable product of her ambitious mother and family, and the ways in which she must deny the influence of those elements before she can come into her own fully defined birth (ibid: 34).

Esther's hidden hatred and antagonism toward her mom surface when she fantasizes that the only way to make the irritating snore of her mother silent, "would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands" (p.138). But the span of Esther's fear and hatred is much broader than her own mother and spreads to motherhood as a whole. This antipathy emerges from the very first moment that she arrives home from New York and steps out of the train: "I stepped from the air-conditioned compartment onto the station platform, and the *motherly* breath of the suburbs enfolded me" (p.126, italics added). When read in connection to the next sentence, this quotation implies unpleasantness of this 'motherly' breath for Esther: "a summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything, like death" (p. 127) (Wagner-Martin, 1999: 38). To make it clear, some examples of the images of motherhood presented through the novel would be helpful: The ever-pregnant Dodo Conway, mother of seven children is described as:

A woman not five feet tall, with a *grotesque, protruding* stomach, was wheeling an old black baby carriage down the street. Two or three small children of various sizes, all pale, with *smudgy* faces and bare smudgy knees, *wobbled* along in the shadow of her skirts. (p. 129, italics added)

Her description of Dodo ends with: "children made me sick" (p. 131). The baby born scene and the description Esther provides of what she is witnessing, also embody a negative attitude: "she seemed to have nothing but an enormous *spider-fat* stomach and two little *ugly spindly* legs [...] she never stopped making this *unhuman whooing* noise" (p. 72, italics added). What the reader notices is Esther's painful transition to adulthood; an endeavor to separate herself from her mother by avoiding being a copy of her. As Macpherson notes *The Bell Jar* can be read "as a daughter's case of matrophobia [...] Esther's fear and hatred of her mother entrap her within a misogynist version of motherhood that is potentially lethal" (1991: 59).

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