



# The Construction and Resistance of the Female Other in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Xiyuan Chen

School of English, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an 710000, China

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**Abstract:** Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) is an influential work in feminist literature, which offers profound exploration of gender roles, identity and mental disorders. This paper discusses the construction of the Female Other in this novel through feminist theory, especially through the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "Otherness". It argues that Esther Greenwood's identity crisis comes from the patriarchal structures that considers women as subordinate and fragmented objects. Meanwhile, the novel also represents Esther's different kinds of resistance, including psychology, narrative and symbolism to try to regain her autonomy. This study reveals how Plath critiques 1950's America's gender norms while anticipating contemporary feminist discourse through the analysis of key motifs such as fig tree and the bell jar.

**Keywords:** Sylvia Plath; *The Bell Jar*; Female Other; identity; patriarchy; 1950's America

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## 1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963), a significant figure in American literature often positioned alongside poets such as Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop, created a body of work that remains influential today. While primarily celebrated for her poetry, her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, stands as an equally crucial and theoretically rich work which portrays the psychological breakdown of Esther Greenwood navigating the conflicting expectations of 1950s American society. This novel has long been interpreted as a critique of patriarchal ideology, particularly the protagonist's nonconformity to female identity in Cold War America (Gill 79). Under this framework, Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Female Other" offers a useful theoretical tool.

According to de Beauvoir, women are culturally positioned as the "Other," defined not as autonomous subjects but in relation to men (Beauvoir 26). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther is consistently faced with such limiting idea and thus leading to her feeling of alienation. As Horner notes, the novel reflects the oppressive limitations placed on women's potential in 1950s America (Horner 1).

This paper argues that Plath constructs the Female Other through social norms, medical perspective and spatial confinement, while simultaneously describing Esther's resistance through narrative voice and symbolic defiance.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theories on the "Other"

Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Otherness offers a foundational framework to this paper. In patriarchal societies, men occupy the position of the subject, while women are relegated to the status of the Other — passive, dependent, and objectified (Beauvoir 28). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's identity is formed by this concept. She is expected to follow the predetermined roles such as wife and mother instead of pursuing independent self. This reflects what historians have identified as the con-tradictory social expectations placed upon women, who were expected to be both "the weak and demure wife and the strong and stable mother" (Cahill 10).

What's more, this novel can also be interpreted through Foucauldian lens, under which institutions such as psychiatry act as control mechanisms. Scholars have shown how psychiatric institutions function as "sites of control, normalization, and surveillance". In *The Bell Jar*, Esther suffers from this kind of disciplinary mechanism, especially in medical and social spheres, where her deviation from traditional women is considered as pathological. Therefore, the construction and discipline of Female Other in this novel is closely related to institutional practices that controls female identity. Esther's painful and inhuman treatment process becomes "a tool of control that seeks to render patients docile" (Podnecká 28).

What's more, the concept of Female Other is not only an abstract philosophical notion but also a real social condition that shapes women's daily experiences. In this light, Esther's struggle is not only personal but also reflects broader systemic condition. Through these theories, this paper emphasizes how women identity is formed through ideological and institutional forces. Meanwhile, this framework makes an exploration of resistance possible, since power relations always includes the possibility of subversion.

### 3. The Social Construction of the Female Other

#### 3.1 Expectation of Womanhood:

The construction of the female other is most evident in the stereotypical gender roles imposed on Esther. The fig tree metaphor vividly illustrates her dilemma: each fig represents a possible future, yet she is unable to choose, resulting in paralysis (Plath 77). Esther's aspirations conflict with social expectations of women. Although Esther was eager to achieve some achievements in her intelligence and occupation, she cannot free from the social expectation which prioritize marriage and family life. As critics observe, women in the 1950s were largely confined to roles as wives and mothers (Đorđević 45).

Male character like Buddy Willard strengthen these anticipations. Buddy assumes that Esther will give up her ambitions, reflecting the patriarchal concept that women's identities are secondary to men's (Plath 84). As one critic observes, Buddy "expects that she will need to wed, have babies, and dispose of all her desire to turn into a housewife" (Nazeer et al. 13). Therefore, social norms construct Esther as the Female Other.

#### 3.2 The Female Body and Medical Control

Another aspect of Otherness is the regulation of women through medical discourse. As Elaine Showalter observes, in the 1950s, women's "expressions of dissatisfaction were routinely pathologized" (qtd. in Podnecká 12). Esther's experience of psychiatric hospitalization embodies how institutional authority controls female identity. Drawing on Foucault's concept of the medical gaze, Podnecká argues that such institutions "strip individuals of their humanity and reduce them to objects of medical scrutiny" (32), transforming patients into mere "external facts" to be classified and surveilled (16). In this framework, Esther's mental illness can be interpreted not only as a personal condition but also as a response to social oppression, a protest against a society that pathologizes any deviation from prescribed gender roles. The bell jar itself becomes a powerful symbol of this condition. As Podnecká notes, the bell jar "distorts her perception of the world and traps her in a space where she is forced to breathe the stagnant air of her own despair"; it is "a metaphor not only for her personal emotional struggle but also for the societal expectation surrounding gender, success, and conformity" (43). Esther fears that "the bell jar, with its stifling distortions" might someday "descend again" (Plath 185). Thus, the metaphor of the bell jar captures both the psychological confinement of depression and the social constraints imposed by a patriarchal, normalizing society.

Moreover, the medical control reflects a broader cultural tendency to interpret women's peculiarity from others and dissatisfaction toward the society as madness and illness rather than as a normal response towards inequality. As Foucauldian scholars argue, "madness is not simply a medical condition but a social construct that changes according to historical and political contexts" (Maharani and Nirmalawati 36). Esther's painful treatment in hospital, especially the electroconvulsive therapy she suffered, showing how institutional authority uses power to discipline and normalize individuals. The medical system tries to correct Esther's behavior instead of addressing the roots of her pain, thus worsening the problem. This phenomenon also reveals the ideological function of psychiatry in keeping patriarchal society's order. By pathologizing nonconformity, the system effectively suppresses women's resistance and strengthens gender norms as "compliance with institutional norms is rewarded while deviation is punished" (Maharani and Nirmalawati 35).

#### 3.3 Spatial Confinement and Identity

Space plays an important role in constructing the Female Other. Esther shifts on different environments, from New York to hospital, whose change also embody her changing identity. Jiang argues that these spaces function as both sites of oppression and potential resistance (Jiang 925). For instance, in New York city, the Amazon Hotel's corridors and lobbies with mirrors create a cultural atmosphere of visibility in which "femininity is literally produced through space — through decorum, fashion, and display" (Jiang 924). This spatial production of gender blinds women by imposing rigid expectations on their appearance and behavior, reducing them to objects of the male gaze. Meanwhile, the psychiatric hospital "reproduces the disciplinary gaze in medical form," enforcing conformity through "surveillance, temporal regulation and spatial segregation" (Jiang 926). Under these controls, Esther's identity is regulated both mentally and physically. The spatial dynamics from prosperous New York city to the psychiatric hospital revealing the extent to which Esther's identity is formed by external forces, thus strengthening her status as the Other. By illustrating her own sense of dislocation in space, Esther transforms the bell jar into a critical lens, thereby exposing and questioning the patriarchal space.

These spaces also provides opportunities for resistance. Esther's awareness of her displacement enable her to critically reflect on the social norms. By realizing the artificial nature of the space constraints, she begins to question their authority. In this sense, space can be a potential place of resistance.

## 4. Resistance and Agency

Despite the overwhelming forces of Othering and fragmentation, *The Bell Jar* also portrays multiple forms of resistance.

### 4.1 Psychological Resistance

Esther's refusal to conform reflects her form of resistance. Her depression not only reflects her despair but also reflects her rejection of social expectations of women. As Mohammed observes, Esther's "disavowal of conventional femininity" functions as "a revolt against stifling ideology" (8). Her alienation stems from the fact that she "cannot figure out how to pursue her ambitions within the narrow confines of 1950s American womanhood" (Mohammed 4). In this sense, Esther's melancholia is not only a private breakdown but a psychological refusal to accept the pre-programmed roles of wife and mother. Her depression becomes a silent protest, a rejection of a world that cannot offer her meaningful places.

This revolt takes concrete form in multiple refusals. Esther repeatedly declares, "I never intend to get married" (Plath 81), directly challenging the era's imperative that women's ultimate fulfillment lies in domesticity. She describes herself as "unmaternal" (Plath 43), rejecting the assumption that motherhood is a natural or desirable destiny. When her mother urges her to learn shorthand as a practical fallback, Esther resists, refusing to prepare herself for a life of secretarial submission. Each of these rejections constitutes a small but cumulative act of psychological resistance – a refusal to let her future be written by others.

On a deeper psychological level, Esther's resistance functions through the failure of internalization. The expectations of mother, wife and housewife have always been an external imposition on her instead of part of her authentic self. The inner rejection is a psychological reflex that her mind refused to accept what society has instilled in her. Therefore, Esther's psychological resistance precedes language and behavior.

Moreover, Esther's revolt often takes the form of negation. For example, she declares "I never intend to get married" (Plath 81) and describes herself as "unmaternal" (Plath 43). She is rejecting the cultural script that has already been written for her future.

### 4.2 Narrative Resistance

The novel's first-person narration allows Esther to assert her subjectivity. By telling her own story, she resists objectification and reclaims agency.

In novel writing, the act of narration itself has transformative power. Esther "loses control over her self on different levels — her body and mind cease to cooperate," yet under this breakdown, "the text gains authority as the most reliable witness of her pain" (Fisak 189). Despite Esther's estrangement from her own body, she paradoxically "regains control over the body of the text" (Fisak 189–190). Thus, writing becomes a form of control, a way to maintain self-coherence when the external world offers no such control. Through narration, Esther reclaims the ability of saying "I am, I am, I am" (Plath 199), embodying her declaration of existence.

From a broader theoretical perspective, autobiographical narratives fulfill a fundamental function of identity construction. As Nadeem argues, they constitute "a selective reconstruction of the ruminative past" that aims "to explain, for the self and others, how the person came to be whom s/he is at present" (Nadeem 2). Esther's narrative of her mental breakdown and her recovery is just such reconstruction. By revisiting the scenes that disintegrate her: the magazine internship, the failed romantic relationship, the traumatic electroconvulsive therapy, Esther pieces together those fragments into a coherent life story.

The fragmented and non-linear structure of *The Bell Jar* is an aesthetic choice made deliberately by the author. It reflects Esther's disjointed consciousness and refuses the well-organized, linear life story that the patriarchal society expects from a "decent" woman. In this light, narrative resistance is built into the form of the novel.

### 4.3 Symbolic Resistance

In this novel, Plath uses many symbolic images to represent the construction of the Female Other and the possibility of resistance. Among those images, the fig tree and the bell jar are the most remarkable ones. On one side, the bell jar is a symbol of confinement, isolation, and social expectations. As de Villiers points, "the bell jar serves as a barrier between Esther and the outside world," emphasizing her disconnection from reality and her inability to communicate with others (de Villiers 7). This enclosure is both psychological and social, reflecting the broader patriarchal system which restrains women within the gender stereotypes. Moreover, the bell jar possesses family functions which reinforces the women's objectification, as it "implies... the woman as an object of male desire," placed in a position for display (de Villiers 10). Thus, the bell jar symbolizes both oppression and the internalization of patriarchal values.

On the other side, the fig tree shows the different choices available to women. As de Villiers notes, "each fig represents

a possible form of femininity... choosing one meant losing all the rest” (de Villiers 9). This reflects a reality that women is narrowly defined by the society and unable to balance multiple identities. Furthermore, Esther’s paralysis in front of the fig tree highlight the consequence brought by this psychological pressure. As Håkansson argues, the analogy encapsulates Esther’s “fear of making irreversible life choices, her internal conflicts, and the societal pressure she faces,” leading to a state of “paralysis and anxiety” (Håkansson 15). This imagery shows that the problem fundamentally lies in the impossibility of achieving all socially constructed expectations.

All these symbols collectively reveal a paradox that although facing with multiple possibilities, Esther is still trapped in a system where the true freedom is unattainable. However, Plath turns these symbols into tools of resistance. The fig tree challenges the notion of one predetermined path of female role, while the bell jar contains the possibility of breaking and escaping. In this way, the symbols become a tool of helping Plath critiques the patriarchy and expresses the possibility of female autonomy.

#### 4.4 Resistance through the Female Body

Esther takes the initiative to control her own sexual behavior represents another form of resistance. In 1950s American society, women’s sexuality was closely related to purity and marital obligation and thus strongly regulated as women were expected to function as objects of male desire and to fulfill roles as wives and mothers (de Villiers 8).

Through rejecting these expectations, Esther challenges the culture that defines her as the Other. Esther’s decision of controlling her own sexuality means her attempt to reclaim the ownership of her own body. As Arce Álvarez argues, “the female body turns fundamental for a feminist struggle... to deconstruct the imposed female roles” (Arce Álvarez 59). From this perspective, Esther’s behavior is not just a personal choice but a broader sense of resistance to the ideological structures of women identity.

At the same time, the text also highlights the resistance’s complexity. Esther’s resistances show that the process is full of tension and contradiction. One of the most remarkable examples is her heavy bleeding due to her first sexuality. Her body acts as both sites of oppression and resistance. As critics suggest, the “disintegrated body” in the novel can function as “the location to resist and subvert the dominant discourses” (Arce Álvarez 59).

Therefore, Esther’s control over her body embodies a form of resistance. She refuses to be defined as the Other and moves toward a more autonomous self-awareness.

### 5. Conclusion

Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* provides a powerful exploration of the construction and resistance of the Female Other in a patriarchal society. Through social expectations, medical discourse, and spatial confinement, the novel illustrates how these external forces under patriarchal systems shape and constrain female identity. Esther Greenwood’s experience illustrates the ways in which women are placed as subordinate subjects, defined in reference to male norms and expectations.

At the same time, the novel presents multiple forms of resistance which challenge this construction. Through psychological refusal, narrative expression and symbolic imagery, Esther challenge patriarchal structures and open up possibilities for transformation.

Importantly, the ambiguity of the novel’ ending reflects the continuity of the struggle against the construction of the Female other. *The Bell Jar* emphasizes the complexity of identity forming and the durability of social constraints.

By integrating classical feminist theory with recent scholarship, this paper demonstrates that *The Bell Jar* remains a vital text for understanding both historical and contemporary issues of gender and identity.

The interplay of both construction and resistance in this book reveals the complexity of female identity under patriarchal society. Esther is not only a victim but also a new force of resistance. More importantly, this novel offers no practical and easy solution. The ending is ambiguous, implying that the struggle still exists. This ambiguity reflects a broader feminist cause, which seeks to both critique and transforming existing structures.

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## Author Bio

Xiyuan Chen; Female; Han; Meishan, Sichuan Province; Master's student; School of English, Xi'an International Studies University; Research Interests: American literature.