

“I am and I am not”:

Autofictional Narrative Construction and the Divided Psyche in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*

Mithra S

Research Scholar, Department of English,

Ethiraj College for Women, Chennai.

#### ABSTRACT

Plath never lets Esther Greenwood fully own her story. There is always something withheld, some part of the narrating voice that watches the rest of it speak, and that watching creates a problem that neither the character nor the novel ever resolves. This is not a flaw in *The Bell Jar* (1963). It is the novel’s entire argument about what happens to a self when language becomes the only tool left for holding it together, and the tool keeps slipping. Schmitt’s thinking on self-narration matters here because it stops the readers from reading the novel as a confession. Autofiction does not recover experience. It makes something in the act of reaching for experience, and what gets made is unstable, contradicted by the next sentence, qualified into near-disappearance. Esther does this constantly. She says one thing and her syntax quietly unsays it. Schechtman’s Narrative Self-Constitution Theory gives this instability a name: a self only persists when its story stays coherent enough to be inhabited. Esther’s cannot be inhabited. Her time fractures, her emotional responses arrive displaced, and the first-person pronoun she uses starts to feel like a placeholder for something that keeps relocating itself. What Kristeva’s abjection opens up is the body underneath all this. Esther’s mirror scenes, the suffocating enclosure of the bell jar, the women deteriorating beside her in the institution, these are moments where she tries to make herself strange to

herself and fails. The self she wants to expel keeps returning as her own reflection. By the novel's close, psyche and narrative have done equal damage to each other. Esther steps forward, but what steps forward with her is unresolved, and Plath, deliberately, leaves it that way.

Keywords: Abjection, Psychic disintegration, Self-narrating identity, Confessional subjectivity, Sylvia plath.

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