

Comparative Study of Feminist Voice: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Bell Jar*

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ABSTRACT: *In this paper, I intend to explore how female protagonists in The Handmaid's Tale and The Bell Jar negotiate with patriarchal narratives, which oppress them in the public and private spheres of their lives. There are points of similarities and departure in both these texts. In my point of view, both, the similarities and points of departure have their own theoretical significance. My purpose is to explore the feminist concerns in these texts and investigate if a dialogic possibility can emerge between two different genres. The paper examines the imagery, symbolism, and narrative technique in these texts to raise feminist concerns. The debasement of women is the key subject in The Handmaid's Tale and The Bell Jar. Through extensive textual analysis, drawing on Virginia Woolf's feminist theories, the feminist backlash movement of the 1980s, theory of 'simulacra and simulation' presented by Jean Baudrillard, the research establishes a need for females to develop their own discourse, which is not radical or extremist.*

Keywords: First and second wave feminism, numbness, patriarchal narratives, feminist backlash, simulacra

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In this paper, I intend to explore how female protagonists in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Bell Jar* negotiate with patriarchal narratives, which oppress them in the public and private spheres of their lives. There are points of similarities and departure in both these texts. In my point of view, both, the similarities and points of departure have their own theoretical significance.

This paper compares and contrasts the feminist voice in *The Handmaid's Tale* (THT) by Margaret Atwood and *The Bell Jar* (TBJ) by Sylvia Plath to demonstrate how feminist concerns have been raised by these two texts. The protagonists of both these texts are females telling their stories; the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* is constructed around the first person narrative voice of the protagonist, Offred; *The Bell Jar* is also a first person narrative revolving around Esther Greenwood's perspective. Luke Ferretter documents that Plath's major concern in *The Bell Jar* is the situation of women in the modern world. One of the predominant concerns is the outlook of these protagonists regarding free will in these stories. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, reveals, "Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus" (2). Esther's words lend an insight into the character's inability to steer her life in the direction she desires. The paralysed free will of Esther is a constant motif in the narrative. The strong image of "numb trolleybus" emphasises the subsequent suffocation felt by women during this time period.

The image of numbness is used extensively to represent the female characters in these texts. If Esther feels like a "numb trolleybus" (Plath, 2) who is being pushed by others, Offred refers to the handmaids as "unworthy vessels" (Atwood, 384). Serena Joy, the wife, represents a horrifying numbness as the narrator recollects, "possibly her skin's gone numb; possibly she feels nothing, like one formerly scalded" (Atwood, 352). The word 'scalded' is a vivid image that describes the intensity of numbness; the heat of patriarchal regime has paralysed her from within—burnt her. Scalded also alludes to the atrocities inflicted upon the wives; the restriction of physical activities, confinement to the allotted houses, and humiliation of the "ceremony" are a few examples which have rendered her numb at the hands of the autocratic rule of Gilead.

The operating patriarchal narrative categorically defines gender roles with relationship to their domestic responsibility, which serves as a

major cause of this numbness. Esther recalls Buddy Willard, his friend, telling her in a “sinister” and “knowing” way that she would feel differently about her passion of writing after having children (Plath, 76). Willard’s voice is representative of the patriarchal narrative that women must succumb to the pressures of society in giving up their passions and careers once they bear children. He clearly disregards her inner beliefs and it triggers Esther into thinking “maybe it was true” after all. May be having children was like being “brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (Plath, 76). I argue that the narrator is drawing attention to this patriarchal narrative; this is considered as one of the operating narratives of the society where women have to choose between a career and family almost always. Esther registers that bearing children has semblance to being indoctrinated into a narrative that would numb the creative faculties of a woman. As it has been done to women in the past, it has become an accepted norm. The second wave of feminism, which initiated in the “1960s and continued into the 1990s . . . unfolded in the context of . . . civil rights movements and the growing self-consciousness of a variety of minority groups around the world” (Rampton). It was the 1960s when *The Bell Jar* got published—the time period when women were considered a marginalised segment and were striving to get the Equal Rights Amendment to the constitution in United States guaranteeing social equality regardless of gender. This period is significant as the growing self-awareness of women was in direct contrast to their lack of fundamental rights including the right to vote, the right to contraception, and subsequent civil rights. These repressive policies stifled female growth and lead to rising mental health issues as projected by the feminine voice in *The Bell Jar*. This feminine voice raises concern for women conforming to the society’s expectation against their individual desire.

On the other hand, Offred’s status has been reduced to reproductive machinery in Atwood’s dystopia. The mere purpose of the handmaids’ existence is linked to just one bodily function, that is, reproduction. In this attempt, all her intellectual faculties have been curbed through medication, brainwashing, and isolation. This isolation is the resultant effect of the handmaid’s confinement within the fascist regime of Gilead. As opposed to *The Bell Jar*, the operating patriarchal narrative is more explicit and pronounced in *The Handmaid's Tale* because it is futuristic nightmare vision. In Gilead, for instance, the rules and regulations have been issued by the state and the handmaids have to

abide by them under strict supervision. There are some recurrent motifs, which demonstrate the oppression of women in the primary texts. Knitting is a key motif that is used to emphasise the prescribed customs for women; how they are supposed to behave and conduct themselves; perform chores within or outside the household and an array of behaviour that is sanctioned by the society. The character of Serena joy is often presented with the image of knitting, even when she is listening to one of her old recorded tapes in a low volume, “she sits in there knitting” (Atwood, 92). The image contains the dichotomy of freedom and repression; her recorded tapes serve as a constant reminder of the past when she could exercise her free will and sing but the tape is played in a low volume because she is forbidden to sing in Gilead. The act of knitting is what keeps the wives busy or at least gives the impression that they are occupied with some purposeful work. The role of the wives has been outlined by the Gilead Law, which deprives them of work outside the premises of their homes—among other restrictions. They have been stripped of any control over their lives. Knitting is one of the sanctioned activities that they could engage in. The narrator’s voice implies that knitting is medically prescribed to the wives like “ten rows a day of plain, ten of purl” (Atwood, 354). She mocks the controlling environment of Gilead and how it has a prescribed pattern for civilians, particularly the women. I contend that this, in turn, mocks the parameters set by the society for women; the norms which dictate which professions they should opt for, the customs they should adopt, the ceremonies they should deter from, etc.

Likewise, when Esther describes a scene from the hospital, “The women were all sitting up and knitting or riffling through magazines or putting their hair in pin curls and chattering like parrots in a parrot house” (Plath, 146-7). The asylum functions as an institution that rehabilitates women facing mental issues and knitting seems to be the sanctioned activity here as well. The women are either busy ‘knitting’ or ‘braiding’ or some other handy work that is considered appropriate for a lady. The narrative mocks the act of knitting as a means to condition women into conformity. ‘Braiding’ is yet another symbol that is intertwined with the status of women. For instance, the image of Mrs Willard “braiding the rug out of strips of wool” is mentioned to give an analogy of the treatment of women. She mentions how a man always seeks to “flatten out” a wife “underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard’s kitchen mat” (Plath, 76). This is a strong image, which she links back to her mother who reaffirmed this stance. Mrs Willard uses the rug as a

kitchen mat and Esther is disappointed because this undermines her skill and effort, as the mat will soon clog with dust and lose its vivid colour. Esther would have preferred to hang it on the wall. Her voice questions these routine practices that subdue female creativity and are symbolic of oppression.

It is significant to note that it was illegal to use, prescribe or provide information regarding contraception in Massachusetts in 1954. The use and spreading of information became legal for married women in 1967 and for single women in 1972 (Ferretter, 124). This serves as a critical example of patriarchal supremacy in dictating norms. In *The Bell Jar*, the prescription for contraception becomes an act of liberty for the protagonist to become her 'own woman' (202). Esther describes her feelings while she was at the examination table of the doctor as if she was "climbing to freedom". This freedom is referred as the freedom of "fear" (202). She did not want the fear of impregnating herself constantly loom over her head. She wanted to break free from such fears so that she would not have to marry the wrong person or someone out of necessity. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, the women do not have this option. It is cardinal for their survival that they conceive, particularly, the handmaids. Again, the underlying comment is that the patriarchal narrative has numbed the female voice. Irving Kenneth Zola stated that modern medicine has manifested in the form of an institution of social control, which is replacing the traditional law and religion and to a certain extent amalgamating these grand narratives into its medical discourse. Irving K. Zola was a prolific writer and, at the same time, an avant-garde activist in the field medical sociology and disability rights. He stated that medicine is "becoming the new repository of truth, the place where absolute and often final judgments are made by supposedly moral and objective experts" and this is all done behind the veneer of health (quoted in Ferretter, 124). The State of Gilead issues absolute truths, for instance. One of them is that there are no more men who are 'sterile' (Atwood, 104). Only women could be incapable of harbouring children in the patriarchal narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

A significant feminist critique found in *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid's Tale* is of the medical institutions—particularly the gynaecologist or the obstetrics. Ferretter writes that in *The Bell Jar*, Plath is most critical of these medical institutes as "patriarchal institutes" (125). He argues that within these institutes, the control resides with the patriarch; it alienates the women from themselves by assuming control. This manifests in the form of the apparent: the

appointment of male physicians as opposed to the female ones in both, *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Adrienne Rich reminisced about her own experience of childbirth, saying, "We were, above all, in the hands of male medical technology".

Michael Foucault emphasized the human body as the physical "space" for the operation of the social micro-practices associated with the concepts of bio-power, resistance, confession, and the repressive hypothesis" (Powers 20). Bodies can be considered terminal points in the web or grid of power relations between power/knowledge and resistance and the site of social action, power, and resistance. This control of the female body resides with the patriarch, as the physicians who examine the handmaids are always male. They assume control of the female body and provide declarative diagnosis. For instance, in Gilead, men are not sterile. Only women are declared to be infertile. This narrative negates scientific claim where humans may be in infertile irrespective of gender. Similarly, *The Bell Jar* highlights that the doctors who determine Esther's mental status are also men. A male physician represents the patriarch who has the control to declare a woman fit or unfit.

Budick states that the macrocosm of *The Bell Jar* is "explicitly sexist" which propels its sexuality through language. The language hegemony resides with the patriarchal discourse. Reference is made by Esther that Professors who teach subjects such as Physics and Chemistry are taught by male figures in a segregated college for females. The books are even written by male figures in order to "explain physics to college girls" (Plath, 33). The language of these books signifies an excruciating condescension to women (Budick). I argue that these subjects are merely taken as an emblem of knowledge and Plath directs our attention to how these narratives are imparted to women through acquisition of knowledge in school, colleges, and other academic institutors as well the social dogma. The analogy of a male teacher writing for female students implies how the male narrative has developed language and there is an absence of the female discourse. Therefore, females are forced to acquire the set norms and language. This can cause resistance within females.

This resistance manifests within the central characters of the primary texts. There is a constant struggle between what is expected of women and what they desire. The freedom that they exercise is often a veneer that conceals the pressure exerted by the society. Marjorie Perloff stresses that *The Bell Jar* is "an attempt to heal the fracture

between inner-self and false-self . . . so that a real and viable identity can come into existence” (102). I contend that the resistance within Esther causes her to lose touch with reality. She is in a constant agony of fighting against the expectations of the patriarch. Consequently, Esther is institutionalised where she is under constant supervision (of male physicians) and learns to conform in order to obtain normalcy. The resistance within Offred is implicit. There is a strange numbness that gleams through her voice; Offred too is conflicted as to what she actually desires. In her state of reverie, she says, “This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values . . . I am not being wasted. Why do I want?” (Atwood, 5). In the mentioned excerpt, Offred refers to the patriarch as “they”. The use of pronoun “they” for the patriarch and “us” for the handmaids, is deliberate in order to convey a collective voice. Her voice lacks individual identity as the handmaids have been stripped of individualistic personalities. They are all clad in same attires and follow the same pattern prescribed by the patriarchal authority in Gilead.

There is a chilling loneliness within the narrator, Offred. She is starved of a conversation and her voice is almost prosaic in the aforementioned example. Although she is bereaved deeply because of what has happened to her in the context but her narrative voice is so composed presenting a dichotomy in what she is saying and how she is saying it. In an interview, one of the leading writers from *The Wall Street Journal* pointed out that this bereavement of the writing about a woman, for whom everything has been decided for, is what makes the narrative painful (“CBC Archives”).

Images of blood are recurrent in *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Their treatment sometimes differs. Imagery is a conceptually different way of relaying information. It indicates a way that is quite unlike describing and is like visualising (Macinnis et al). This section is an attempt to indicate the direction in which the examination of blood imagery sheds light on these texts. Macinnis et al states, “The well-substantiated ability to move from words to pictures and pictures to words suggests that there is a representation in memory that encompasses both”. The authors further elaborate that once the knowledge structure is triggered, the imagery can be provoked from “information contained in that structure”. I propose that the state of Gilead infuses images of red into a pattern. For example, the prescribed dresses for the handmaids are red with red shoes and a cape like fabric

that protects their bodies. This induction of red in their physical appearance constantly reminds them (who wear the garb) and those who see them dressed in this red shroud—their purpose. Additionally, there are not “many subjects that could be spoken about” and this was one of them—the function of the handmaids to facilitate procreation (Atwood, 59).

Esther in *The Bell Jar* describes a scene of a woman giving birth through labour and after the umbilical cord is cut, “blood began to run down”. The visual colour is “a fierce, bright red” (Plath, 59). The red coloured liquid that is being referred to is the placental expulsion which is expelled out after the process of childbirth through the birth canal. This shows a contrast with the blood images used in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the process of childbirth, or child is absent all together. However, the focal point is the act of ‘ceremony’ and the vessels, that is, the handmaids who are supposed to carry the fetuses.

Sylvia Plath grew up in an age when marriage education movement in college campuses was on the rise—1930s. Albeit, this was rejected by the second wave feminism after 1960s (Ferretter, 117). “The consensus of expert opinion was overwhelmingly against premarital sex as damaging, both to the individual and to the society as a whole” (Ferretter, 117). The resonance of this age manifests in *The Bell Jar* as Plath herself met with this discourse in her own college. For example, Esther reports, “When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue.” (Plath, 73). The word ‘pureness’ is used synonymously with a virgin, underlying the significance of a virgin woman before marriage. She documents a serious issue concerning the society at the time and the dogma it was imparting through social scientists. Plath disparaged the double standards maintained by the patriarchal discourses, which were widely accepted (Ferretter, 119). Esther Greenwood is a rebel against these norms because she feels if she cannot find a “pure man” then she would rather not stay ‘pure’ herself (Plath, 73). The narrator uses the term “red-blooded intelligent man”, employing the colour imagery to associate with the reproductive cycle. This is a coinciding symbol, which is used in both the texts, *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Naomi Wolf describes that the “stupendous upsurge in violent sexual imagery” depicts the abuse of women (qtd in Bouson, 136). I feel that this extensive use of blood and body images is an exposition of the abuse against women. This abuse is two pronged, physical and emotional. The debasement of women is the key subject in *The*

Handmaid's Tale. Atwood explores the same thematic concern in her book named, *Bodily Harm*. It depicts how women are “bodily dissected and psychically damaged” due to the social constructs (Bouson, 319).

Violence, torture, and sexuality have been implied through the accumulation of the images of blood. For instance, “there is a bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend” (Atwood, 491). This is the rage felt by the narrator when a guardian is convicted of rape and is given a public punishment. When she is sceptical of what has happened to her only friend in Gilead, Moira, She feels the blood surging up inside her, “like sap in a tree” or “Blood in a wound” (Atwood, 295). This could be Esther screaming, “I’m bleeding!” (Plath, 208). The underlying comment is that she is bleeding from within. She is so frustrated with the traditions that had been holding her back that she feels that may be ‘blood’ was her answer—an answer to her bewildered self. I contend, the same motif is conveyed through *The Handmaid's Tale*. The blood is, rather the answer to the handmaids. Compare it to the totalitarian regime of Gilead or the 1930s of United States of America, the protagonist of both these settings feel strongly about blood being their ultimate answer. It is that one symbol that weighs their pureness or ability to procreate. Following are two vividly similar images used by the authors:

“Then the stories of blood-stained bridal sheets and capsules of red ink bestowed on already deflowered brides floated back to me.” (Plath, 208).

“In the corner of the room there's a bloodstained sheet, bundled and tossed there, from when the waters broke” (Atwood, 209).

Wilson points out the representation of female subjectivity as the constant image of “amputated” or “cannibalised” body, which is in synchronisation with the images used in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Bell Jar* (20).

This paper, on the whole, captures the feminist nuances from *The Handmaid's Tale* against those in *The Bell Jar*. I contend that some images configure in both these texts but they might manifest in different forms. For instance, if you have an ‘asylum’ in *The Bell Jar*, you have the prison-like life in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Particularly the gymnasium turned into prison for the indoctrination of the handmaids. Both these symbols are metaphors for prisons endorsing mental captivity; a place where people are held against their permission and forced into a prescribed routine, which pertains to their mental and physical health.

This symbol is significant because it captures the essence of mental supervision. Esther required some medication, shock therapy as well as monitoring. Offred, on the hand has been forced medication. She is also sceptical of some medication being injected to the handmaids without their conscious knowledge. The narrator (in *The Handmaid's Tale*) also reveals that her memory has been distorted. This leaves room for interpretation. It could have been done through ingesting medication or the constant brainwashing, which she is being exposed to. I also find this as a symbol, which points out how women are indoctrinated into the conduct of normalcy. The difference, however, is that Esther remembers everything (Plath, 215) while Offred sometimes “can remember” and at other times cannot recall even how she looked like in the past (Atwood, 287).

The protagonist in *The Bell Jar* is keenly involved with the beauty and cosmetic industry. There are numerous examples where she shows her fascination with the commodities of this industry. To begin with, she manages to acquire an internship at one of the leading fashion magazines in the country. The narrator has won a ‘fashion magazine contest’ and as a reward, she and the other winners are given a chance for a month’s job in New York as well as indulgence in the field they “desire”, i.e., the fashion industry (Plath, 2). There is a clear manifestation of Esther’s desire and involvement with the beauty industry. This argument can be divided in two domains. First, Esther has innocuously absorbed the ideological message of this industry, that is, a woman’s appearance is a crucial part of her being. This is a deliberate attempt by the author to show how the popular discourse (which in this case is promulgated by the fashion industry) is internalised within individuals. Second, it shows the author’s assertion that each woman should decide for herself what she desires. Even feminists should not prescribe a formula which is also the ideology presented by Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both these interpretations are discussed in the following section with a comparative analysis from scholarly articles:

Luke Ferretter reaffirms this idea that Esther has “fully interiorised the ideological message of the beauty and fashion industry” (139). I feel that the author is emphasising how the narrative of the fashion industry assimilates within each of us. Subsequently, after a certain point we can no longer make the distinction of what is real and what is artifice. While Esther Greenwood blatantly criticises the institution of marriage, medicine, contemporary laws and gender ethics

etc., she never rejects the simulacra created by the cosmetic industry. This is her deviation from the feminist movement of the time.

At this instance, I would bring the theory of 'simulacra and simulation' presented by Jean Baudrillard. According to Baudrillard, the postmodern culture has made the society so dependent on 'models and maps' that we have lost the connection with the real world that preceded these models. He enlists the following phenomena which contribute to the lost distinction between the simulacrum and reality: 1) Media culture; Contemporary media (television, film, magazines, billboards, the Internet); 2) Exchange-Value; 3) Multinational capitalism; 4) Urbanization 5) Language and Ideology (Felluga 2002). *The Bell Jar* encapsulates the theory of simulation because it touches upon all these aspects which give rise to the simulacra. To the extent that the assertion of the fashion industry and its propaganda makes Esther lose sight of reality and she has to be institutionalised. The novel being semi-autobiographical could also point out the state of Sylvia Plath herself growing up in the midst this decadence. Esther provides extensive description of how 'fashion conscious' Doreen's college was and this conscious attitude expressed itself in the students' dressing and accessorising. To an extent that the college students' pocketbooks matched their dresses (Plath, 4). Magazines and newspapers become recurrent motifs in *The Bell Jar* because they are at the centre of the 'media culture'. The author sheds light on the fact that media culture distorts reality to facilitate its own cause. A pertinent example could be the magazine features and images, which present a story, which is a far cry from reality. This contrast is projected when Esther sees her own image in a fashion magazine while she is in the asylum. Her reality at the time is so distant from the glamorous photograph that has been depicted in the magazine that she refuses to admit that it is her image. The photograph in the magazine "showed a girl in a strapless evening dress of fuzzy white stuff, grinning fit to split, with a whole lot of boys bending around her" while Esther was seeking help from a psychiatric facility (Plath, 188). The contrast is ironical too because of her current state.

The images of magazine also resonate in *The Handmaid's Tale* but in a different light. Offred alludes to magazines as things, which were once present. There is a strong absence, felt by Offred, of magazines in Gilead (Atwood, 38). References are made to the different kinds of magazines, which used to be available in the pre-Gilead time, for instance, fashion, pornographic or lifestyle magazines. This aspect

has been discussed at length in the first chapter, which explored various absences in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This is an attempt to point out the backlash of feminist movement of the 1980s. Susan Faludi contends in her book, *Backlash*, which was published in 1992 that “the media declared that feminism was the flavour of the seventies and that ‘postfeminism’ was the new story – complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women’s movement” (14). This backlash emerges in *The Handmaid's Tale* in the form of the Offred’s mother who was supposedly a product of the feminist backlash movement of the 1980s in the pre-Gilead phase. The author presents her as the symbol of this movement at various instances. For example, Offred sees a vision of her mother in a video being shown to the handmaids where she is dressed quite casually. The cameraman captures a few signboards including the following written in upper case letters:

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED
BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A
WOMAN'S PLACE IS ON THE, KItchen TABLE? Under the
last sign there's a line drawing of a woman's body, lying on a
table, blood dripping out of it (Atwood, 204).

Offred points out that the way her mother is attired in the video, according to aunt Lydia (who represents the voice of the puritans or religious extremists), she would be referred to as the “Unwomen” (203). In doing so, the author presents two extremist views and the resultant effect of both these views. According to Atwood, sometimes we take these declarations casually but when they are executed, it is only then that we realise how they worsen the scenarios for the marginalised segments instead of improving them. I agree with Fiona Tolan who writes that Atwood juxtaposes the flashbacks of 1970s feminist activism with present-day scenarios of Gilead. She adds further that in doing so “each informs the other” whereby *The Handmaid's Tale* has paradoxically met certain feminist aims and in effect given birth to a nightmare vision (145).

Susan Faludi counts Naomi Wolf among the new generation whose text *Fire With Fire* (1993) disputed, “the definition of feminism has become ideologically overloaded. Instead of offering a mighty Yes to all women’s individual wishes to forge their own definition, it has been disastrously redefined in the popular imagination as a massive No to everything outside a narrow set of endorsements” (62). These massive ‘no’ pronouncements, when met in the practices of Gilead, present a rather disturbing situation for women.

Offred reminisces the time when she attended a book burning with her mother and her feminist colleagues and how they were so jubilant about this act while encouraging Offred to burn the pornographic magazines (48). As discussed earlier, in Gilead, pornography has been banned and there are no more billboards or fashion magazines that objectify women. This is a feminist objective that Gilead has executed. However, the same scene is recalled when the commander provides Offred with a prohibited copy of the fashion magazine, 'Vogue'. The narrator contemplates at this juncture: how she was able to access these copies, despite the fact that they were supposed to be burnt but there was one right in front of her, a tangible copy in her hands (156). Atwood projects how these trends execute in reality, there will always be the illicit copy and people in the position of power will always have an access to them. The underlying comment is also targeting censorship and its resultant effect. It also shows how the only difference between these acts is the degree of censorship.

The ending of *The Bell Jar* resonates with her sense of identity integrated with her physical appearance. Her concluding note describes her attire in detail—what she wore for the committee of professors who would determine her mental status whether she is fit to leave the asylum or not. She is clothed in a 'red wool suit' (221). The symbol 'red' discussed extensively in the earlier sections as the colour signifying the female reproductive cycle. However, in this context, I feel it embodies her sense of freedom and control over herself. This could be a control over her sanity. Esther points out that her attire is 'flamboyant' as her 'plan' (221). She has finally taken charge of herself or perceives this as an integral step in being her 'own' woman.

There are a few significant narrative techniques adopted by both, Sylvia Plath and Margaret Atwood. For instance, the sour relationship of the narrator with the mother, a solitary first person female perspective, the flashback technique, colour imagery, blood imagery, suicide—all these aspects find themselves in the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Bell Jar*. Esther is estranged with her mother just as much as Offred. Offred was forced into participating in 'feminist acts' like the burning of the books along with her mother. Esther is embarrassed because she has been institutionalised which has tarnished the social status of her mother. Mothers become symbols of a certain social movement or expectation, respectively. This way the narrator presents opposing narrative views through tactful characterisation. Flashback technique is how the narrator alludes to her

past in *The Handmaid's Tale*. It also becomes a resonant feature of the narrative style because it blurs the time zone for the reader. You cannot pin down the narrative to a particular time period. This is a two pronged strategy: first, it is a futuristic tale and hence it does not anchor to a specific time zone; second, it alludes to practices that have occurred in different time periods so it cannot be a period piece for a specific era. In *The Bell Jar*, however, the narrator uses flashback to give another dimension to the narrative style. *The Bell Jar* speaks of a particular time period—1940s to 1960s—Plath's adult life until she committed suicide. The novel was published under a pseudonym, 'Victoria Lucas' in 1953. The novel got published in her own name, posthumously five years after her death, that is, 1967.

As for the suicide, reference to it in *The Handmaid's Tale* is implied. Offred's stream of consciousness has alluded to the final 'escape' on different occasions. In *The Bell Jar*, on the other hand, the motif of suicide is quite explicit. Esther Greenwood indulges in her monologues about death and suicide in her stream of consciousness. For instance, the opening note of *The Bell Jar* speaks of death through electrocution by alluding to the death scandal of the 'Rosenbergs' and how that disturbs the narrator. The thought is so terrifying that it physically jolts her but in spite of that she cannot help but contemplate on the idea of death (Plath, 1). Esther is clinically depressed and makes repeated attempts to take her own life. She says at one point that the only thing she remembers through her reading is somehow related to 'mad people' while everything else seems to have skipped from her mind (Plath, 140).

Mental health is a pertinent subject, which is present in both the texts. I contend that the purpose of using the symbol of madness is to show the damage done to the human mind, particularly those of the females because they are unable to express themselves through writing. Offred is forbidden to read, write or converse with anyone. She has a strong urge to share her story. Esther has always dreamed of being a writer but people like Buddy Willard keeps telling her that she will have to let go of the idea to lead a normal life. It is a constant battle of the self against the society. If we draw a comparative analysis from the critical essays of Woolf, she reminds us of a saying by Miss Nightingale, "women never have an hour . . . that they can call their own" (65). Choices were often imposed on women, choices they were not willing to make. Woolf, while talking about the Victorian woman, registers that people's feelings were always impressed on a woman and "her personal

relations were always before her eyes” (65). Atwood has subverted the feminist narratives of the twenty-first century in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Feminist narratives, which promote women as equal citizens who participate in everyday discourse just as men; they work outside home among men, they are free to make a lot of choices for themselves, they are free to move and travel. The environment of *The Handmaid's Tale* subverts this discourse and confines the woman within the four walls and a chaperoned existence.

Woolf refers to Jane Austen's life in the 1800; “she never travelled; she never drove through London in an omnibus or had luncheon in a shop by herself” (66). Atwood's real life travel experiences in some of the ‘former Soviet socialist satellite countries’ reveal this disposition faced by people. In some of these states, she could not talk to people freely in their cars, their hotel rooms etc. because they did not feel safe communicating. They felt that at any moment there might be surveillance and they were sceptical of you that you might blather about them in the west of “what they might have said to you”. The author also explains how it is difficult for people who live in “a fairly open society” to comprehend this fear. I feel the author is highlighting the underlying fear, which is operated through totalitarian regimes and how it curbs the voice of the civilians. This is, in a way, another form of restricting the voice of the writers. It is unfathomable to imagine the lack of freedom of speech and/or expression, in this time and age, but it happens all around us. Some people actually asked Atwood why these people did not protest and carried out marches to raise their objection. Atwood confesses that people who have not experienced this sometimes find it hard to understand the full import of such measures. She suggests that they should find evidence through history about German Nazis for instance because that explains what happened to people who protested in such regimes. We have to realise the gravity of situation for people in these scenarios. That is what is emphasised by Margaret Atwood (“Margaret Atwood - *The Handmaid's Tale*”).

Atwood was asked what chilled her most about her latest novel, *The Heart Goes Last*, during a BBC interview on *The Handmaid's Tale* in the context of the newly published novel. *The Heart Goes Last* got published during the research of this dissertation in September 2015. The author responded by saying that the fact that people would “blithely say that it can't happen here” is what chilled her the most, “because in fact, all of this kind of thing can happen right here given the right

amount of social disruption and turmoil” (“Margaret Atwood - The Handmaid’s Tale”). These social disruptions could be the extremist views of religious sects, right or left wing politicians, sectarian fanatics, social activists such as feminists, laws governing reproduction.

The Handmaid’s Tale is presented as a ‘future nightmare vision’—At this instance, I would like to bring an opposing view presented by Mary Mccarthy in *The New York Times*. In fact, this was one of the only disparaging articles, which questioned the ideology behind *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Mccarthy documents in this article that the book did not identify for her the trends, which she should watch out for. Quoting her verbatim, “the book just does not tell me what there is in our present mores that I ought to watch out for unless I want the United States of America to become a slave state something like the Republic of Gilead whose outlines are here sketched out” I also understand the concerns of the reviewer because thirty years from the time when the book was published, reading *The Handmaid’s Tale* is reading it in a different paraphernalia altogether where we have seen totalitarian regimes like the one in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran etc., we have also experienced how the control over reproduction laws and policy are at the heart of any campaign who is running for office in the United States of America. We have also experienced the one child policy in China, the human trafficking across the globe and monarchy in Saudi Arabia. However, the biblical allusions and Puritan movements have been present all along, it is hard for a writer to miss something that obvious. It is always difficult to fathom future in this light. Particularly when on the face of it, feminist movements have made remarkable progress. As admitted by Atwood herself that there has been progress for women, from a lack of basic human rights to gaining substantial rights for women. However, sometimes the solutions presented by extremist movements can manifest in a worst form of system than the current one.

As for the dire ramifications of China’s one child policy, there were millions of families who conceived in violation of China’s one-child policy. This had to happen because no amount of contraception or stringent policy could ensure a hundred percent plan. There is no contingency plan for such circumstances. These totalitarian regimes fail to apprehend the negative impact or the fall out of such utopian policies. Consequently, as far as the state is concerned, millions of children do not exist. Dawn news’ article refers to these children as the ‘black children’ who have no legal standing or rights in the country. These

include the right to healthcare, education or as the writer rightly points out, “an alien in” their “own country — unable to join a public library, get legally married or even take a train” (“The Dark Lives of China’s ‘black Children’”). What is the substitute policy to facilitate these citizens who have no rights according to the state law? These rhetorical questions are raised by Margaret Atwood through her dystopian fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Why are these factors not taken into consideration before such radical policies are put into motion? Yet, we wonder how this could happen to us.

My contention is that *The Handmaid's Tale* shows a social disruption that holds semblance with the one-child policy of China, and such practices are happening around us, and Margaret Atwood awakens this realisation. All we need to do is look around us with a close eye and we will be surprised how such practices have taken place across various regions under different political or religious banners and they continue to happen.

When this policy was enforced in China, people were forced to adopt extreme measures, “often brutally enforced with abortions and sterilisations, the rules have had complex and enduring repercussions” (“The Dark Lives of China’s ‘black Children’”). Just like in Gilead, if Offred is unable to conceive, she is offered to indulge in an illegal sexual encounter with either the doctor or the driver. Such is the predicament that the wife arranges this encounter for the handmaid. This would of course happen with other handmaids too and there will be more propositions for them. What would be the ramification of such propositions; and will there be collateral damage? Of course, there will be, there always is and it never ends well. If they are unable to produce an offspring then what is the ultimate punishment for these handmaids? They are, of course, no longer significant because they cannot serve the ‘purpose’ anymore. They are discarded in the state of Gilead because it means a death sentence for them as reported by Offred (Atwood, 169).

The research compares and contrasts Sylvia Plath’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* with *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to illustrate the feminist concerns raised by both, Plath and Atwood. It relates it back to the idea of a feminine voice, through the narrative of a female protagonist, presented by Woolf.

Conclusion

This paper explores the negotiation of feminist narratives of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Bell Jar* through its symbols, images, and narrative technique. It establishes that a dialogic possibility has emerged between two different genres. The feminist concerns raised have demonstrated the oppression faced by women in both, their public and private spheres; the resulting oppression renders resistance within the females.

It critiques the medical institutions and their assumed control by patriarchal narratives. The research scrutinises and traces its symbolic usage in both genres. It scrutinises the images of blood, which are intertwined with the images of female body. A detailed examination of this motif and its linkage with the art of storytelling and imagery through the oeuvre of literature available lends a novel dimension to this study.

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