

Inner Worlds and Silent Struggles: A Comparative and Psychological Exploration of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

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Abstract

This research is based on impact of mental illness in 20th century American literature and it focuses on the psychological perspectives portrayed in the primary sources *The bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.

Mental illness is constantly evolved in American literature from 19th century Gothic literature till psychological aspects of modernism. The American literary texts signify both personal experience as well as another individual's experience that is portrayed through a text.

During the 20th century, mental illness is portrayed with much efficiency and details in the 20th century American literature, where every text went deeper regarding mental health issues. Even the texts targeted the mental issues faced by women where they were not able to share their feelings and emotions to anyone and then they themselves start writing about their stories to express their feelings.

When it comes to American Literature, mental illness plays a major role in describing the life of the characters portrayed in every American novel, short stories, poems, etc. The texts describe each and every character's mental health. Many people overcome it yet many people commit suicide as well.

Keywords: Psychological perspectives, Modern relevance, psychological disorder, Stream-of-Consciousness. Therapeutic treatment.

Introduction

To understand how people think, we must not limit ourself to limited approaches. Psychologists believe there can't be just one way in order to find out what an individual is experiencing mentally. Each psychological perspective is different in its own way and provides a different insight into an individual's mind. "The behaviourist perspective primarily focuses on our life experiences, and how individuals learn through interaction with these" (Wilson, 1). There are various psychological perspectives that provide different approaches to the same situation, such as- behaviourist perspective, psychodynamic perspective, cognitive perspective, humanistic perspective and biological perspective, etc. Each of this even though provides a different approach, but their approaches became true in case of the situation provided.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath is a novel that focuses on 20th century American women, their sufferings, their mental health issues and the rules and regulations of the patriarchal society they had to follow while

ruining their life. The novel is influenced by psychological perspectives specially the psychodynamic, cognitive, humanistic, and biological perspectives. The novel also examines the themes of identity crisis, mental health issues, societal discrimination and pressure, gender discrimination and the mental health issues and struggles the main protagonist of the novel Esther faces throughout the novel. The novel relates to Sylvia Plath's personal life as well as Esther's character reflects Plath's journey with her mental illness. Virginia Woolf explores psychological approaches in the novel *Mrs Dalloway* particularly through the method of stream-of-consciousness making the novel filled with psychological perspectives, making the novel a modern discussion on trauma, identity crisis, unconsciousness and consciousness.

Psychodynamic Perspective

Psychodynamic perspective refers to the reasons behind human behaviours. The reasons can be personal including childhood experiences, conflicts, traumas, etc. Sigmund Freud developed this perspective. Later on, many theorists used this for their research purposes.

Esther, the main protagonist of the novel struggles with unresolved battles regarding her mental health issues. She was facing issues because of the conflicts from her past mainly after her father's death, her not so good relationship with her mother and the expectations of the society she had to deal with to be a perfect woman the way society wants her to be. According to Sigmund Freud, Esther's situation and her struggles can be related to restrained traumas and the personal conflicts between her wishes (id), reality (ego) and societal pressures to be the perfect woman (superego). "I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old." (Plath, 75). This explains how she felt like she was happy until she was nine and after that her father passed away that took away all her happiness and filled her life with sadness, depression, something she couldn't get rid of.

According to Sigmund Freud the Psychodynamic theory is all about past trauma, depression, senseless thoughts. The major characters of the novel Clarrisa and Septimus struggles with dominated emotions, fears and conflicts throughout the novel. Clarrisa, the main protagonist of the novel explains about her emotions and conflicts regarding love, impermanence and identity. She talks about her desires and wishes she was passionate about that are suppressed now. "She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street" (Woolf, 10).

On the other hand, Septimus a veteran of World War I suffers from PTSD or Repression of trauma. He is diagnosed with depression after the World War I due to the suffocating war memories and also because he couldn't get out of the grief after his friend Ivan's death. "Septimus was talking to himself again—it was awful, awful!" (Woolf, 66). His wife, Lucrezia starts acknowledging his condition which was occurring due to post traumatic experiences from the suffocating memories of war.

Cognitive perspective

Cognitive perspective focuses on people's thinking and memory and how they process those for gathering information. It acts as a response to behaviourism and doesn't focus on mental processes.

Plath explains how Esther's thoughts indicate the feeling of helplessness making her feel lonely, distant and disconnected from the world. "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree" (Plath, 62). This perspective reflects how Esther's negative thoughts became a major reason behind her mental health issues. Her feeling of helplessness refers to her feeling trapped under a bell jar and thinking that she won't be able to do anything with her life suggests failures that got repeated and she thinks now there

is no escape left for her. She even gets suicidal thoughts, that forces her to think that this is the only way to get rid of the cruel world around her. “The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower” (Plath, 94). This suggests how she felt detached from the whole world which felt very normal to her because of her declining mental state. The expectations of the society on her to meet the traditional roles of marriage and motherhood, creates conflict between her life and her desire to be independent. This conflict, at the end of the day causes psychological anguish in her life.

Comparison of Mental Illness in 20th century with Today’s Generation

In today’s generation, therapies and medicines are available for mental illnesses, but the disgrace when women come out talking about their mental health issues is still there in many conservative families. Even today, there is a lack of medical facilities available for mental health issues in certain parts of the world. “I knew my mother would think it was my fault” (Plath, 136). When Esther says this, she mentions the problem of a huge number of families where parents don’t understand the problems, the mental health issues, their child is struggling with. Instead, they blame them for everything they do or happens to them. Both the major characters Clarrisa and Septimus struggle to find the meaning of their life. Septimus commits suicide thinking his life has no meaning left anymore as the society is too harsh and cruel on him as they separate his wife Lukrezia from him as a part of his treatment, who was his only comfort. This situation is quite common in modern day as the society forces individuals to be better in everything including studies, better career and a better life, that turns into traumatizing the individuals making them even commit suicide in many cases. But unlike Septimus, Clarissa chooses to live the life and work according to the society to be the perfect in every role explains the situation of many women who tolerate everything and do what the society wants them to because they think that their life has the only motive to be perfect in terms of being a woman, a wife and a mother.

Once the society will start prioritizing every individual’s mental health, no one will commit suicide thinking it’s the only way to get rid of their problems. There should be awareness regarding medical facilities provided for mental health issues so that people can take proper treatment and get rid of their illnesses.

Mental illness is not a joke, it is also related to one’s physical health. A person who is mentally happy, his physical health improves automatically. Everyone living in the society should make sure their surrounding people are mentally happy. It should be considered a social work as many individuals who find it difficult, coming out with their mental health issues can find it comfortable and express themselves.

Conclusion

This research explores the study of mental illness during 20th century in America that includes a deep and evolving study of psychological struggles, mostly among women and war veteran soldiers. It also involves the situation of 20th century where women were forced to be perfect in all the roles in order to live in the society. As a result, many women suffered from mental illnesses yet couldn’t come forward with the illness. It is because women believed there is no point of talking about their issues as society will ignore them. Being the weaker section of the society, they are also forced to be a perfect daughter, a perfect wife and a perfect mother. It reflects the situation of American women as they were taught to be dependent on the males surrounding their lives. If one talks about the veteran soldiers, their life can be compared to hell as they often face traumas related to the violent wars which ultimately turn into depression and anxiety.

It also explains the psychological perspectives used in the two novels, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf to reflect the real- life experiences and sufferings of the individuals through the main characters. This research also involves a comparative study on how mental illness is handled during 20th century and today.

Works Cited

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