

REFLECTION

When your fictitious version gets THE HAPPY ENDING

On Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar' and why it's a timeless narrative



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

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If you're someone who tends to pay attention to details, you will find a CliffsNotes for *The Bell Jar* on the coffee table next to Heather Chandler's dead body in the 1988 cult classic, *Heathers*. A decade later, we find the same book in Kat Stratford's hands in *10 Things I Hate About You*, which is also the year that had the narrator in *Fight Club* annoyed at Martha for corrupting "the one real thing" in his life, as he furiously explained to her that, "in the Tibetan philosophy, Sylvia Plath sense of the word, I know we're all dying. But you're not dying the way Chloe is dying." And again, as the world ushered in a new millennium, we had Rory from *Gilmore Girls* following in on the tradition, when she showed up with her copy of *The Bell Jar* in the 17th episode of the show.

60 years since her death, Sylvia Plath is still astoundingly inescapable, deemed an icon—a feminist icon, a "femcel" icon, by Hollywood standards and teenagers on the interwebs alike. 60 years since the publication of her only novel and the name Sylvia Plath has become a buzzword in itself, something synonymous with a strange

romanticisation of depression, the kind that impressionable young girls seem to believe is necessary in their pursuit of a personality that will accurately fit the role of an "intelligent, interesting girl".

The Bell Jar is famously described as the story of a young poet who wants to end her life, which she ultimately does. The book follows Esther Greenwood, one of 12 chosen girls travelling to New York City for a month as guest editors for a teenage fashion magazine. Esther arrives in New York with "fifteen years of straight A's" behind her and no idea about how much to tip the taxi driver or what drink to order at the bar.

The change from suburban New England to the crowded and lonesome New York is overwhelming to say the least, and not exactly in a good way, considering how the opening line of the book immediately startles you with the topic of execution: "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York." This really sets the tone of the novel as the plot progressively gets darker, with Esther grappling to disown her inability to experience the

same joy that everyone around her seems to find so easily. She prefers to bury her head under the pillow so she can pretend it's still nighttime, because she did not see a point in getting up—she had nothing to look forward to. She feels "dreadfully inadequate" and depressed by her own silence, and then comes the heartbreaking realisation: "I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old". There are repelling images of Esther lying in a pool of her own vomit; Esther bleeding out in the emergency room after her first sexual encounter and uncomfortable relatability shows up in the form of the famous "fig tree analogy", where Esther is confronted with the difficulty of having to choose one future or fig from an infinite number of figs, and ultimately starving herself from indecision in the process; or the one truly disturbing mention of Esther crawling between her bed's mattresses because she wanted so desperately to get the feeling of lying in a grave. Plath's approach to this book is accompanied by an earnest sense of intimacy and honesty when she describes Esther losing touch

with herself, in the way she chooses to describe her heart beating after trying to drown herself in the ocean, "I took a deep breath and listened to the brag of my heart: I am I am I am", this deliberate use of the verb "brag", like her heart and her body is mocking her that she is still miserably alive.

Plath leaves enough room for the readers to immerse themselves into Esther, as the plot moves through recollections of old memories and anecdotes, through the past and present, reading like a letter you have received from a close friend. It is surprisingly easy to accept Esther's hopelessness as our own. I stumbled upon this book at a particularly depressing point in my life, when my infallible detachment from everything and everyone I cared about threatened to occupy a state of permanency. And when it felt too difficult to not be so terribly lonely in my impassivity, Esther and her drab commentary accompanied me with a welcome reassurance. Even as she continuously chose to be apathetic, allowing herself to be stifled and stuck in her glass bell jar, and reassurance sometimes gave away to annoyance—

Esther still managed to retain her vulnerability because of how honest she was. She was full of contradictions and she was not afraid to show it. And perhaps that is because Plath has made her own share of trips to the psych ward, just like Esther, where she faced the irony of first describing the electric power just as a method of torture that killed the Rosenbergs, to having to accept the same electric power as medicine when it came in the form of therapy later on.

After Sylvia Plath's suicide, her hometown paper, 'The Townsman of Wellesley', actually reported her death as having passed away from a "virus pneumonia". In addition to that, there was a strange reluctance to address the book for what it was, no one wanted to associate it with the word 'suicide'. But that is in fact what happened, Sylvia Plath did indeed kill herself two months before *The Bell Jar* got published, two months before her fictitious version (Esther) decided to step into Dr Nolan's room in front of a board of specialists for her final psych assessment. It is hard to read *The Bell Jar* without any preconceived opinions pertaining to the autobiographical aspect of the book given how heavily handed it is with its associations to Sylvia Plath's personal life. Whether Esther succumbed to the same fate as Plath is a question that has varying answers, after all, all Esther had done was walk into Dr Nolan's room when the book reached its final page. But I am of the personal opinion that Esther did survive. Because the ending of *The Bell Jar* always reminds me of the famous Sylvia Plath quote that goes, "I can never read all the books I want; I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want. I can never train myself in all the skills I want. And why do I want? I want to live and feel all the shades, tones and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life. And I am horribly limited," just like her use of the verb "brag" to describe her heart beating, the choice to describe a life as "horribly limited" at only 30 years of age sounds so incredibly sad. Even in her final hours Sylvia Plath was more concerned about blocking every crack in her children's bedroom door before she turned on the gas in the oven, and I like to think that in another universe she found it easier to reserve some of that kindness for her own self, because the fact that a novel written 60 years ago can still feel so timely is a real testament to the genius of her mind, and we could do with a lot more of that.

And this is why, in my heart of hearts, I truly believe Esther has had a different ending than Sylvia, because she deserves to live and feel every shade, tone and variation of life that Sylvia Plath was never able to.

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CREATIVE NONFICTION

Patuatuli and a young girl's love for glasses

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

My love affair with spectacles has long been regarded by my mother as nothing but a symptom of my dramatic nature.

At the age of three, swaddled on a rickshaw between the folds of my grandmother's saree, I made my way across the bustling streets of Old Dhaka to Patuatuli, the ultimate hub of quality glasses. The street was caged on either side by rundown brick buildings with their plasters falling off at various spots and the color on the shutters of their windows peeling away.

I remember the rickshaw stopping at a tiny shop located on the ground floor of one such building, and, to my chagrin, my grandmother (whom we all affectionately call Moina) insisting on entering it despite its appearance of disuse. I remember gasping at the sight of the hundreds upon hundreds of glasses with frames of innumerable shapes and colors. And I remember the pleasant smile that spread across Moina's face when the shopkeeper

presented her with her new glasses. I was mesmerised by these glasses whose lenses were thicker than my pudgy fingers, and whose frame was smooth and polished. My love for glasses had ensued.

This love persisted till the age of 10 when, screaming and crying, I exited the office of a rather befuddled ophthalmologist. After years of wanting glasses, my wish had come true. But the idea of my eyesight being permanently impaired was incredibly frightful to a 10-year-old me. The fear remained throughout the long rickshaw

Still, I love this place. Every time I am there, I find myself looking at the faces around me, trying to make out the stories of love, sadness, and simplicity they carry in their etched lines.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

ride to that old shop in Patuatuli with my mother. Yet, entering its compact premises and trying on all the frames it had to offer, my fears melted away to be replaced by the thrill of getting an accessory that I could cherish. I loved the pair I chose with all the love I could muster. It lent me a look that brought me closer in appearance to Ma and Moina, it strengthened my identity as their daughter and granddaughter.

That day, as a reward for all my tears, Ma led me by my still tiny hands to Kusum, a bakery located just a few blocks away. The shop greeted us with nearly all the delicacies that Old Dhaka has to offer—gigantic parathas, meringues, and bakorkhani, the ultimate comfort food. Enjoying that delightfully light pastry with Ma, sitting high atop a stool with my newly acquired glasses, I felt more happiness than I could

possibly contain.

A number of broken glasses and even more numerous inexplicable urges have repeatedly brought me to Patuatuli over the years. Sometimes with Ma or Moina, other times alone, I have found myself roaming the street on an open rickshaw, basking in all the curiosities the place presents. And, every time, I try to deduce what it is about that place that draws me in.

The main street is barely wide enough to allow two rickshaws to pass at the same time. Yet, it is always jam-packed with vehicles and people. The whole area is impossibly loud under the sound of cars and hawkers, hopelessly entangled in its archaic buildings and telephone poles. Looking up during these rickshaw rides, I am only able to see slivers of the sky because the countless telephone wires mostly blot it out. They allow passage to sunlight only in snippets so the street below is thrown into a maze of dark shadows.

Still, I love this place. Every time I am there, I find myself looking at the faces around me, trying to make

out the stories of love, sadness, and simplicity they carry in their etched lines. And I love the stories I find there. The owners of the glass shops, the confectioners at the bakeries, the hawkers and the children on the streets, the dying buildings and the overflowing gutters, the Bakerkhanis and lassis—they all tell a story. Their stories make up the story of the street, and this story has become intertwined with mine over time. The memories I've made here, the times I've spent with my loved ones enjoying a delectable snack at Kusum or choosing a pair of glasses that lends my appearance just the right touch of drama or chatting with the shopkeepers about their day-to-day activities, have made a rather permanent mark on my character. What started as a love affair with glasses has evolved into an irrevocable love affair with Patuatuli.

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