



## WOMEN STEREOTYPES IN *THE BELL JAR* BY SYLVIA PLATH

Mutiara Salsabila

Andalas University

email: <http://mutiara.s.student.sasingunand@gmail.com>

### ABSTRACT

This article aims to explain how the author Sylvia Plath in her novel *The Bell Jar* reflects a social problem, namely the stereotypes of women. Women stereotypes are a widespread problem and can be found in women's lives. The stereotypes that have been attached to women can then discredit or vilify women in various ways, including those felt by the main female character in this work, Esther Greenwood. This article uses qualitative method and applies feminist theory to analyze the novel, *The Bell Jar*. This research reveals that women's lives seem to be regulated and labeled by society, especially what is experienced by the main female character in this novel, Esther. Therefore, the article answers questions regarding what are the stereotypes of women shown in the novel *The Bell Jar* such as 1) women are required to stay at home and only do housework, 2) women are inferior creatures, and 3) women should look beautiful.

**Keywords:** gender stereotypes, female stereotypes, feminist

### INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotyping is a term that sticks in everyone's mind. Especially for women, there are various views of society regarding them. Previously, gender stereotypes, according to Hentschel in her article, is a perception in which men and women are characterized as they should be (Hentschel, 2019). Therefore, the stereotype of women can be expressed as how the views, or labels given by society to women themselves.

In several journal articles and theses that have been read, the problem of how stereotypes are accepted by women is mostly related to the characteristics that women should have and their actions. It also includes how women deal with this general view. For instance, Ann Sofia-Rothschild's thesis was entitled "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: A Reflection of the Tension Between Conformity and Rebellion in the Life and Times of Mary Wollstonecraft." This thesis provides a summary of how the protagonist of *Wollstonecraft* faced society's expectations of women at that time who insisted that women should not be

independent and how the definition of beauty, as well as tenderness, was attached to women (Sofia-Rothschil, 2009).

Even, the same issue is also discussed in an article entitled “Analyzing Gender Stereotypes in Eva Ibbotson's *Which Witch?*” (1992) by Zahra Nurul Aliyyah. Her findings related to social problems such as gender stereotypes led to a comparison of the female protagonist and the female antagonist. Belladonna as the protagonist has all the common traits that are stereotyped as loving, passive, and gentle. Meanwhile, Madame Olympia, the antagonist character, has traits that are contrary to female stereotypes, namely competitive, aggressive, and argumentative (Aliyyah, 2018, p. 128-129).

In addition, Jenna DeForte finds the same problem in the classic novel *Pride and Prejudice* with her discovery, entitled “An Unfounded Universal Truth: A Contemporary Feminist Understanding of *Pride and Prejudice*.” In this journal article, the same discussion appears about the character of Lizzie who does not care about the stereotype of women who are more concerned with education and will not marry the man she chooses or choose the best man to marry herself. This is certainly contrary to the stereotype of women where women should not be too smart because usually men rarely marry smart women (DeForte, 2016, p. 3-4).

Then, Saima Akter in her writing entitled “Re-reading Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House: A Modern Feminist Perspective*” tells readers that the issue of stereotypes about women is also raised in one of Henrik Ibsen's works. The explanation given is accompanied by evidence from the main source, this novel, about how Nora, the main female character, ignores the stereotype of women where women must look gentle and more passive than men by refusing to marry because women will not benefit because of it (Akter, 2021, p. 82-84).

A journal article entitled “The Stereotype of The Main Character in Amanda Brown's *Legally Blonde*” Novel by Rina Lestari relates to the problem of female stereotypes, especially with blonde-haired women, as in the female character in the novel studied by the author, named Elle. In everyday life, blonde-haired women are depicted as women who have no manners, lazy, evil, and stupid. But Elle breaks it all by proving that she can become a famous assistant lawyer and solve murder cases (Lestari, 2021, p. 237-241).

Furthermore, in *a Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, Guerin as the writer explains the feminist theory. According to Guerin, the feminist approach examines problems such as the marginalization or discrimination of women in a patriarchal society. Moreover, feminist approaches can also challenge other approaches if they allude to the wrong things

related to women. There are several types of feminism included by Guerin in his books, such as multicultural feminism and Marxist feminism. In multicultural feminism, for instance, terms like black feminism are discussed in it. While Marxist feminism discusses how the marginalization of women due to the capitalist system. Guerin also stated that feminism is also closely related to gender studies which study how gender is less determined by individual traits (Guerin, et. al., 2005, p. 222-238).

The persistent problem of women stereotypes certainly causes all forms of rebellion, especially by women. It is women who feel they do not accept the views or labels from the society that are considered excessive and even considered detrimental to women. So this prompted the emergence of several movements, such as demonstrations, and some writers voiced their opinions through the works they wrote. In this case, Sylvia Plath the author of *The Bell Jar* reveals the stereotype of women in this one work.

*The Bell Jar* itself is a novel published in 1963. This novel tells about the life of a teenager, Esther Greenwood, including the various problems she faces. In addition to being faced with the complicated life of teenagers in general, Esther is also faced with the views of the social community in other words the stereotypes of society against her as a woman. In this work, Sylvia Plath explains to the readers that generalizations or stereotypes attached to women are a real issue in many parts of the world. Therefore, the writer of this essay is interested in discussing what are the stereotypes of women expressed in the novel *The Bell Jar*.

## RESEARCH METHOD

According to Ferdinal, Seswita, and Sandika (2020), literary critics can examine literary works from several angles, either qualitatively or quantitatively, by using various methodologies and theories. The method used by the author is qualitative and also a descriptive technique. According to Pritha Bhandari, an interdisciplinary researcher, the qualitative research method is a method in which data is collected and then analyzed intending to gain an understanding of the opinions, as well as concepts (Bhandari, 2022). In analyzing, the writer uses the main data in the form of a novel *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. The novel is then read carefully and understand the contents of the works. As for the second data, the writers took it from articles, journals, and books obtained from the internet.

In addition, a feminist approach is also used. Feminist criticism is one of the many approaches to literary analysis from a feminist perspective. Feminist criticism criticizes how women are told in literary works and criticizes patriarchal ideology in literary work. Guo also

stated that there are two feminist waves, the liberal feminist in the first wave and the women's liberation movement in the second wave. (Guo, 2019, p. 453-456). By using this approach, the writer can then identify the existing phenomena related to women stereotypes depicted in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Plath reveals in *The Bell Jar* that women's jobs are to stay at home and take care of the household well is one of the women's stereotypes. Based on Silvia in her journal, the woman is expected to do the household chores such as serving the meal, taking care of her husband and her child, and many more in society (Silvia, 2022, p. 50). Arifatin, in his journal articles also found that women are better off not working and staying at home (Arifatin, 2019, p. 81). It causes the division between what work women should do, what they cannot do, and what they do not have to do. A clearer view is made about the term household is still attached to the image of women. In Sylvia Plath's novel, the female main character, Esther Greenwood character lives in a neighborhood where her neighbors follow this woman stereotype. In the book, Esther's neighbor, Mrs. Ockenden is a married woman who likes to spend her time just peeking at Esther through her window. She was a retired nurse beforehand (p. 145). Mrs. Ockenden indicates how the phenomena of stereotyping look tangible that women often will quit their job or just stay at home to take care of their husbands as speaking at Esther from her window for a long time. Another neighbor of hers is Dodo Conway told by Plath that Dodo Conway is also a neighbor who fits the stereotype of women:

Dodo Conway was a Catholic who had gone to Barnard and then married an architect who had gone to Columbia and was also a Catholic. They had a big, rambling house up the street from us, set behind a morbid façade of pine trees, and surrounded by scooters, tricycles, doll carriages, toy fire trucks, baseball bats, badminton nets, croquet wickets, hamster cages and cocker spaniel puppies—the whole sprawling paraphernalia of suburban childhood. (p. 146)

The quotation shows that Dodo has no job and prefers being a housewife and taking care of her husband just like Mrs. Ockenden does. Dodo has many children as seen in the many kinds of toys in her house. It also reflects how Dodo takes care of her children well by providing them with toys and taking them for walks as Esther saw when Dodo wheeled her baby stroller down the street and the rest of her children followed as a typical housewife would. It looks like society as if forming and embedding that the term household is something crucial for females.

*The Bell Jar* shows gender stereotypes which include that women are inferior to men. In VOA news, Reuters states that many people assume that women are inferior to men. It can be seen by how many Indian, Russian, and Chinese believe that men are good at attaining an education than women (Reuters, 2017). Even, Sylvia Paull, founder of Gracenet, says that how the community is still firm in their thoughts that men are superior to women in all nations. It is proven by many questions that come to mind about a woman president electing is considered unthinkable in the US (Paull, 2000). Haleem, in his finding also stated that women cannot be as good as men, especially in terms of intelligence (Haleem, 2014, p. 59). The three pieces of evidence show that females seem to be considered the lowest creature in any way, such as how they do not recognize the importance of education and prefer to do jobs that are considered easy like taking care of the household. This stereotype of women can be seen in *The Bell Jar* which Buddy Willard, Esther's boyfriend presumes that Esther will not want to write a poem after she got married, "I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more" (p. 105). What Buddy meant to Esther already implied that women will focus to be a good housewives rather than having a career. Buddy indirectly states the public's view so far that how women do not care about their education as well as their career for the future. Those statements surely are a major lie and a bloomer. It is because most females still pursue their dream careers and consider having a good and better education.

Finally, another gender stereotype found in *The Bell Jar* is that women must look as beautiful as possible. Based on research conducted by Sundgren, the stereotype attached to women is beauty. Women are required to look beautiful by using make-up and also to look presentable (Sundgren, 2022, p. 10). Furthermore, Martinez in her thesis mentions the same fact that beauty is a must for every woman (Martinez, 2015, p. 19). This explains how society views women by setting a standard of beauty for them. So that the view that women must be beautiful with white skin, neat straight hair, slim body, and many more certainly makes women not infrequently feel insecure about themselves. This is what happened to Esther where as seen in chapter 16, when she visited the hospital to meet doctor Nolan, the hospital visitors seemed to pay attention to her, more precisely, they noticed Esther's fairly disheveled hair, namely her "fat and stringy hair" and then guessed what makes Esther look that way (p. 258). From here, hospital visitors reflect how society today always measures a woman's beauty from her physical and outer appearance. In the eyes of the other visitors, Esther was like a sloppy and

unkempt woman. Surely, it does not reflect the stereotype of women who have to look impressive, rapid, and beautiful.

## CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath the writer of the novel *The Bell Jar* notices that there are still many stereotypes of women in the societal environment. Plath indicates in her book that women often assumes by people that they are a housewife so they have to take care of the household only. Moreover, *The Bell Jar* expresses how women are considered inferior being rather than men, and they have to look charming with the existing female beauty standard. Not infrequently many people still have this fairly conservative view or mindset toward women. The view then can form a stigma for women so that they do not get proper treatment from society.

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