

* Simina-Ioana Anton
 Cambridge Centre Suceava
 Ana Ipătescu Boulevard 2, 720021, Suceava, Romania
 E-mail: simina.ioana.anton@gmail.com

WOMEN'S CONDITION AND SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS:
 FEMALE CHARACTERS IN
 SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR* AND SILVIU ANGELESCU'S *THE FORGERERS*

Abstract

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is the story of Esther Greenwood. She struggles to overcome the expectations of the 1950's American society, as she explores her sexuality, breaks down taboos and questions well-established gender roles. Silviu Angelescu's *The Forgerers* showcases an author that employs a humoristic, archaic language in order to present, allegedly, the 18th-century Romanian society, while hinting at the 1980s communist Romania. This paper aims to debate on the woman's condition and self-identity issues, both in the 1950's American society and the 18th century/late 20th century Romania, while discussing the judgmental view of patriarchal societies on women characters exploring their sexuality the way men do. Moreover, it aims to define women's gender identity in male-controlled societies, as exemplified by different countries, cultures and historical periods.

Key words: gender roles, social expectations, female sexuality, self-identity, patriarchal society

Introduction

Ideas regarding gender identity, gender roles and sexuality have always been quite controversial in universal literature, especially when it came to female sexuality, the LGBT community, the feminist movement or society's expectations and requirements regarding gender roles.

The Bell Jar is a 1963 novel written by Sylvia Plath and set in the 1950s United States, a time which sets the States as a country with a socially conservative mindset led by extreme materialistic ambitions and also by the emergence of disapproving ideas regarding traditional social expectations and sexuality as a taboo subject. *The Bell Jar*, which is considered to present features of a semi-autobiographical novel, tells the story of Esther Greenwood who navigates the requirements of the 1950s American society by trying to overcome them, by reeducating herself on the gender roles and by trying to explore her sexuality despite her wish to give up her chastity.

*The Forgerers*¹, on the other hand, is a Romanian novel written in the 20th century by Silviu Angelescu, whose plot takes place in the 18th century and whose purpose is to showcase how Romanians have always been as people and individuals, while the author employs a playful, jovial, folkloristic and sometimes foul vernacular to describe the characters as well as their habits. This paper focuses on women's sexuality at that time, especially the ruler's wife, Lady Mărioara's sexuality that is often brought into the story.

In this paper, I want to discuss the woman's condition and issues of self-identity, both in the 1950's American society and the 18th century/late 20th century Romanian one. I also want to touch on how easily judged are both the women and the women characters, whenever they try to explore their sexuality. Moreover, I aim to define their gender identity in patriarchal societies, belonging to different countries, cultures and historical periods.

Encyclopedia Britannica defines the term *gender identity* as "an individual's self-conception as a man or woman or as a boy or girl or as some combination of man/boy and woman/girl or as someone fluctuating between man/boy and woman/girl or as someone outside those categories altogether" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). It also expresses the opinions of specialists in the field on what establishes and constructs the gender identity as such: "So-called essentialists hold that gender identity is fixed at birth by genetic or other biological factors. Social constructivists argue that gender identity,

* Simina-Ioana Anton holds a B.A. and a M.A. from Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava.

¹ My translation of *Calpuzanii*.

or the manner in which gender identity is expressed, is “socially constructed”—i.e., determined by social and cultural influences” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).

In the Encyclopedia of Adolescence, the article entitled “Sex Roles and Gender Roles” discusses the relationship between the two terms mentioned in the title:

The terms sex roles and gender roles often are used interchangeably to denote a repertoire of emotions, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions that are commonly associated more with one sex than with the other. Individuals are deemed to adopt a gender role self-concept, which is the amount of gender stereotypical traits and behaviors that persons use to describe themselves and to influence their dispositions. These traits reflect expectations a society holds toward men and women (Levesque, 2014).

The Oxford Dictionary defines the term *self-identification* as “the act of recognizing that you have a particular characteristic or belong to a particular category” (Oxford Dictionary), while the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences states that

Self-identity refers to a person’s self-conception, self-referent cognitions, or self-definition that people apply to themselves as a consequence of the structural role positions he or she occupies or a particular behavior he or she engages in regularly. Self-identities reflect the “labels people use to describe themselves” (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2020).

Plot and character as telltale signs of gender emancipation

First of all, in *The Bell Jar*, Esther’s desire to alienate herself from the rest of the world takes its roots in the high expectations that the American society of the 50s had of women her age. She does not know whether she should confine herself to the gender role the society pressures her to take or to explore her self-identity. She compares her life with a fig she read about in a story, a fig on whose branches hang both her future professional and career-wise aspirations and the future choices that she is socially and morally pressured to make. Among the professional aspirations there is the chance to use her knowledge and skills to get a proper job or to evolve professionally and intellectually (“another fig was Europe and Africa and South America [...] and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion”) (Plath, 1982: 80). Furthermore, she wants to build a successful career in the literary field (“and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor”) (Plath, 1982: 80). Although her intellectual capacities bring her awards and career opportunities and respect, people around her pressure her to get married and bear children.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (Plath, 1982: 80).

Moreover, her female colleagues scorn her for studying so diligently, but change their attitude when she starts dating a popular man, Buddy. Buddy also expects Esther to give up her studies and career after she marries him and has a child, which makes Esther doubt that she will be able to handle both her academic aspirations and motherhood.

In *The Forgerers*, the reader encounters many instances when the patriarchal dominance is well underlined, instances that mention violence and traits of toxic masculinity:

And the women were looking at the baker so fondly and were hinting each other and were joking, inviting him to fight them too! Which words, hearing Sotir, he told them that he doesn’t dare, that he’s not sure and that he’ll better stay and fight with the moor. For those words, of many women I have heard to also be beaten by men who were more jealous, even though there were only words of laughter and joy, as weddings are (Angelescu, 1987: 124).²

² My translation of “Și se scurgeau ochii muierilor tot cătând la pitar și-și dedeau coate și glumeau, poftindu-l să se lupte și cu dânsel! Care vorbe, auzind Sotir, le-au zis că nu se-ncumetă, că nu-I bizuit, și mai bine rămîne de se luptă cu harapul. Pentru acele vorbe, de multe muieri am auzit și bătaie să fi primit de la bărbați, care-au fost mai zuliari, măcar că nu ereai decît vorbe de rîs și veselie, cum e pe la nunți.” (Angelescu, 124).

Moreover, the author mentions in his novel how Lady Mărioara fulfilled her expected gender role and her duty to give the ruler heirs. At the same time, readers find out that the princely couple had too many children, not to mention that she was effectively controlling her husband:

And good for breeding has proven Lady Mărioara to be, as she was breeding like rabbits and she had nine children who in such a mob didn't know who their father was. The Lady, for what reason again is not known, had great power over the ruler, who never revolted against her, although, on many occasions, the ruler suspected her, but couldn't prove his suspicions as she was highly cunning and the ruler was that kind of man whose wife would tell: don't believe, husband, what your eyes see, believe what I tell you! (Angelescu, 1987: 18).³

Second of all, Esther tries to explore her sexuality as she feels vexed by Buddy's actions, who has an affair with another woman, but expects her to keep her chastity until she marries him. She marks her first sexual experience as an independent act leading to adulthood, but not as much for her own sake, as to get rid of the mental pressure of her innocent status.

When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue. Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another. I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line (Plath, 1982: 85).

All this pressure leads Esther into a deep depression, as the society she lives in offers her limited choices: pure or easy, passive housewife or a lonesome, but successful career woman. The passiveness of a housewife is reflected in the lack of a career, regardless of the chores that keeps her body busy the whole day, her intellectual capacity is wasted. At the same time, although surrounded by her family, a housewife can also live a lonely life, as she does not have the opportunity to meet new people, to befriend her peers at work, to make acquaintances. Her life revolves around her home, her children and her husband. At that time, a woman could not possibly have both, which was the ideal life that Esther was striving for. She was supposed to either have a career or a family.

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. So I began to think maybe it was true what when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state (Plath, 1982: 89).

Although Esther decides to lose her virginity with a man that she will not wed, she struggles to contour her own gender identity. Nevertheless, the men in her life do not help her too much. Buddy has traditional beliefs regarding gender roles, although he himself does not live up to the same expectations he sets for Esther. As for Eric, he despises sex and refuses to sleep with a woman he has feelings for, while Marco belittles Esther by calling her a "slut" (Plath, 1982: 114) while trying to sexually assault her. However, even after losing her virginity, Esther does not feel the sexual independence that she strived for. Yet she does experience a sense of a relief inasmuch as the burden of innocence was gone and of the freedom that came with her acts kicked in.

On the other hand, in *The Forgerers*, we can notice the same downgrading label applied to women in different circumstances. This is self-evident the moment women characters go beyond the social norms in exploring their sexuality: "He didn't think that, by saying that, he mocked his people, he didn't refine them, by saying that his ancestor was a whore and that she received a forbidden man in

³ My translation of: Iară de prăsilă s-au arătat bună Doamna Mărioara, că se plodea ca iepuroaicele și-au făcut noo copii ce-n atata gloată bine nu s-au știut cine-au fost tatăl lor. Doamna, din care pricină iară nu se știe bine, avea putere mare asupra lui Vodă, ce din vorbă nu-i ieșea, măcar că, în multe rînduri, au avut Vodă prepus asupra ei, dară n-au putut-o dovedi că erea șireată foarte, iară Vodă au fost bărbat de aceia de le zicea muierea: nu crede, bărbate, ce vezi cu ochii că e, ce să crezi ce-ți spui eu!" (Angelescu, 18)

her bed, while she was wed in the church with another one” (Angelescu, 1987: 17).⁴ Moreover, the reader comes across exchanges between men debating over how much of a woman’s control on her own sexuality influences their choices and pleasures: “How do you think, Sir that it would be fitter for the woman to be: ugly, but with the locks untouched, or beautiful, even with the locks unfettered? And he said that it seems wiser to him to eat a pie with more men than to eat turd by oneself” (Angelescu, 1987: 119).⁵

However, Lady Mărioara seems to ignore any social norms regarding marriage and her gender role in the marriage, as everybody seemed to know and accept that she had multiple affairs outside the wedlock. The Romanian society at that time in history was far from being open minded. Her lifestyle was far from being considered normal and approvable for the ruler’s wife:

And Sotir said, as he understood from Smaranda, that, if the Lady considered that a man was not too much for her, she took a lover, next to whom she had Ionita Sikeliotis, chancellor of clerks, who was twenty years younger than the ruler. To that Ionita, the baker said that the Lady had written some epistles where she said a lot and without care. And Ianache Drakinos, paying attention to the Lady’s weaknesses, used some Greek skills to get more allowance (Angelescu, 1987: 109-10).⁶

As a counterargument regarding women’s improper condition, the stigmatization of female sexuality in the American 1950s society and the Romanian 18th century society, as well as the interpretation of the two novels as feminist discourses, I would like to mention the fact that, although the plot of *The Forgerers* is set in the 18th century, the novel was published in the 1980s, i.e., at the height of Romanian national-communism. Thus, the plot can be interpreted as the spitting image of those times. Somewhat surprisingly, as *The Bell Jar* was written in the 60s America, this helps us read both novels through the same lens: the mindset regarding women’s sexuality and self-identification in the 1960s US and 1980s Romania were quite alike, regardless of the strikingly different countries and political cultures. Romanians’ culture and mindset are greatly influenced by their Christian Orthodox Church and its traditions that promote a clear separation between gender roles and social responsibilities. Christian traditions focus on the woman’s unwavering role in the family, to bear and raise children and to take care of the household, while the man is the bread-earner of the family (Sănduleasa, 2014: 24). The woman’s emancipation process, both in Romania and in the whole world, has great influences on the evolution of the concept of family, on notions of gender roles and, also, on society as a whole. During the communism in Romania, women gained access to politics, jobs, social status and education on higher levels. However, women did not represent their own interests, as their rights and opportunities were limited by the party interests. Despite of the fact that women had more opportunities to have a proper job, their jobs were much easier and thus the salaries were lower. Moreover, because of the abortion prohibition, women were forced to have as many children as possible, which made it hard for them to evolve professionally (Bonea, 2018: 81-2).

Meanwhile, the 50s America did not present a much different situation. The patriarchal society’s expectations regarding woman’s role were very clearly established: to get married early, to have children early and to take care of the household. Women spent most of their time doing chores and were entirely dependent on their husbands’ income. Furthermore, their career paths were limited, even for highly educated women. Their wages were also lower than men’s as employers were sure that they will leave anyway once they get pregnant (Coontz, 2011: 42).

⁴ My translation of: “Nu l-au dus pe el capul că, zicându așa, lui-și porcea neamul, nu că-l subția, zicându de strămoșă-sa c-au fost curvă și-au primit în așternuturi bărbat ne-ngăduit, fiindu ea măritată-n biserică cu altul” (Angelescu, 17).

⁵ My translation of: “- Cum cugeți, arhonda, c-ar fi mai brodit sa fie muierea: urătă, dar neumblată la zăvoare, au frumoasă, măcar și cu zăvoarele desferecate? Și dânsul i-au zis că-i pare mai înțelept lucru să măninci o sarailie cu mai mulți decat un căcat singur!” (Angelescu, 119).

⁶ My translation of: “Și-au zis Sotir, după cum au înțeles de la Smaranda, că, dacă s-au socotit Doamna că un bărbat nu-i erea prea mult, și-au luat ibovnic, lângă care-au mai avut, pe un Ioniță Sikeliotis, vătaf de ceauși, ce-au fost cu doăzeci de ani mai tinerel decât Vodă. Cătră acel Ioniță, au zis pitarul, au scris Doamna unele răvașe în care-au zis multe și cam fără fereală. Iar Ianache Drakinos, luind aminte la slăbiciunile ce-au avut Doamna, au umblat cu meșteșuguri grecești pentru a dobîndi mai multă trecere (Angelescu, 109-110).

All of these issues led to compromises from women. They got used to their status and to the general mindset that it was “what they were supposed to do” and how society encouraged them to live. Esther is surrounded by the society’s voice which keeps repeating her that she needs to start a family and give up her personal ambitions. Her mother insists on her acquiring an easy skill, shorthand, in order to ensure herself an ordinary and comfortable job, while her boyfriend hopes that she will give up on her career aspirations after she experiences motherhood. Esther is conflicted by her status in the society and this desperation and unfairness leads her to depression. Lady Mărioara, on the other hand, is judged for having too many children and also accused of adultery multiple times. She is not judged for her adulterous behavior as she is judged for her looks and for embracing her own sexuality.

Nevertheless, we can notice certain differences in approaching the above mentioned issues. While Sylvia Plath made sure that her novel is read as a feminist manifesto and forced her readers to acknowledge *The Bell Jar* as such, Silviu Angelescu does not push a feminist agenda and simply allows readers to approach and interpret *The Forgerers* as they want. Moreover, in *The Forgerers* I do not find the narrator’s tone as judgmental or moralistic regarding female characters (Lady Mărioara, as well as the odalisque, Smaranda) as his only role is to tell the story and entertain the reader. The general public’s opinion might be that what Lady Mărioara did was wrong anyway, because she was married, regardless of her self-identity. More importantly, she was married to the ruler of the country, which could have brought serious consequences. Angelescu resorts to various literary techniques in order to advance his agenda. The main plot is meant to be a detective plot, as suggested from the original title, “calpuzanii”, (which stands for “falsificatori de bani”, i.e. “money counterfeiters”). However, the charm of Angelescu’s novel stands in the humorous parallel stories, such as the baker’s affair with the odalisque Smaranda, Dumitrăchiță’s troublesome wedding or the leader granting his horse a noble title.

Furthermore, Plath makes use of different narrative techniques as well. She uses many instances of flashback, as she recalls different memories, which creates a non-linear narrative. Flashback fulfills different roles in the narration. It mostly showcases Esther’s mental state: “And then I wondered if as soon as he came to like me he would sink into ordinariness, and if as soon as he came to love me I would find fault after fault, the way I did with Buddy Willard and the boys before him” (Plath, 1982: 86-7). It also reveals information regarding Esther’s past: “My German-speaking father, dead since I was nine, came from some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia.” (Plath, 1982: 34). Plath also foreshadows certain decisions of Esther’s, for example, her wish to keep her celibacy: “I’m never going to get married” (Plath, 1982: 97) and her suicidal thoughts: “The interior voice nagging me not to be a fool – to save my skin and take off my skis and walk down, camouflaged by the scrub pines bordering the slope – fled like a disconsolate mosquito. The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower” (Plath, 1982: 101).

Conclusions

In both novels, the representation of morals and lack of it helps readers ponder on the mentality of those times. Much like Lady Mărioara, Esther was conflicted on why she should normalize double standards on sexuality: “What I couldn’t stand was Buddy’s pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he’d been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face” (Plath, 74). One way or another, her possible future mother-in-law seemed to share the same opinion on men and women keeping their purity until marriage:

Buddy was amazingly close to his mother. He was always quoting what she said about the relationship between a man and a woman, and I knew Mrs. Willard was a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both. When I first went to her house for supper she gave me a queer, shrewd, searching look, and I knew she was trying to tell whether I was a virgin or not (Plath, 1982: 74).

Esther’s mindset could be integrated in the feminism ideology, as what bothered her was not the fact that Buddy slept with another woman before her, but the fact that he would not admit in front of everybody, wanting to keep the appearances: “Well, I had just decided to ditch Buddy Willard for once and for all, not because he’d slept with that tarty waitress but because he didn’t have the honest guts to admit it straight off to everybody and face up to it as part of his character...” (Plath, 1982: 74).

In conclusion, the backlash regarding feminism, women's sexuality, the gender roles and self-identity was quite similar, both in the communist Romania and in the 50s United States. What was different was the approach employed by the two authors. Plath openly expresses her views and her judgmental ideas to the readers through the main character and through the semi-autobiographical style of the novel. In contrast, Angelescu allows the readers to form their own opinion. He employs a playful, humorous narrative, coupled with an obsolete vocabulary to create the illusion that the novel describes pre-modern times, while the reactionary worldview of social intercourse in 1980s communist Romania is plain to see in his writing. Literature always presents instances in which the double standard regarding the gender role is strikingly vivid. No matter the country or the times, there will always be this kind of mindsets dominating the society. Esther broke out of the shell by requesting equality, whereas Lady Mărioara, although cautious because of her husband, was portrayed as ahead of her times through her sexual behavior and experiences, proving Angelescu's point that: "Wherever there is a woman, the devil is useless" (Angelescu, 1987: 184).⁷

As noted above, Plath and Angelescu did not depict two much different images of the social attitude towards women's role, their self-identity and expression of their sexuality in the 50s America and the 18th century/late 20th century Romania, respectively. One notices that in both cases, although belonging to different times and cultural backgrounds, women are belittled for exploring their sexuality, for expressing their sexual desires, for trying to defeat social taboos regarding traditional gender roles and for defining their self-identity. In both novels, the female characters are demanded to fulfill certain social expectations i.e. to refrain their sexual desires before and after marriage, although this rule is not applied to the men in their lives, to be loyal and obedient and to limit their competence to the traditional responsibilities as a housewife, regardless of their career plans and intellectual capacity. Esther expresses her feminist views through Plath's words, who limits the readers to the general picture that she paints, whereas Angelescu focuses more on the flaws of the society and the abusive politics, leaving the readers the freedom to interpret the humoristic description of his female characters without placing a moralistic tone to it. However, the other characters, through their acts or openly asserted opinions, thoroughly express the social general views regarding gender identity, female emancipation and freedom of sexual expression.

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⁷ My translation of "unde e muiere, nu mai are dracul treabă." (Angelescu 184)

⁸ My translation of "Emanciparea Femeii in Societatea Românească și Violența Intrafamilială. Aspecte Teoretice și Viziuni Socioistorice". *Calitatea Vieții*