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Unraveling Fragmented Identities: A Literary Journey Through Psycho-Existential Displacement in Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Abstract: The human psyche, with its experiences, relationships, and perceptions all woven into it like threads in a tapestry, can sometimes fray and begin to tear apart, and this creates an internal split and alienation. In this displacement, usually psychologically and existentially grounded, people are lost and unconnected to themselves and their surroundings. This phenomenon, described in the best terms as fragmented identity, is a major theme covered in both Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. This paper will look at the literary travels of Esther Greenwood and Clarissa Dalloway to discuss the experiences of psycho-existential displacement and fragmented identities from the standpoint of psychological studies. Finally, to enumerate the characters who epitomize the harmful effects of fractured identities and their struggles, we can point out Joan and Septimus Warren Smith. In trying to understand their internal battles with society and their deep-felt sense of isolation, one can understand better this difficult psychological condition and how it manifests in modernist as well as confessional writings.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, psycho-existential displacement, fragmented identities, psychology.

The philosophical concept of psycho-existential displacement complements the psychological understanding of fragmented identities. Psycho-existential displacement is the feeling of being adrift, without purpose, and disconnected from oneself and the world. Existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus explored the inherent freedom and responsibility of human existence, highlighting the anxiety that arises from the lack of preordained meaning (Sartre, 1943; Camus, 1942). When people are subjected to this freedom and bounded by societal expectations, then they can feel deeply alienated. Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who was a survivor of the Holocaust, highlighted the very core human need for meaning in life. In his logotherapy, he opined that frustration of such needs leads to existential frustration and neurosis (Frankl, 1959). Both Esther and Clarissa are seeking a sense of purpose, for both of them the void of meaning, the interrogation of their positions, contributions, and existences inside the world. It reflects deep internal struggles toward genuine contacts and meaningful life within their societies, where everything pushes them to suffocate under society's pressure. Many psychologists have explored the concept of fragmented identity, each providing different insights into its origins and manifestations. According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, identity formation is a lifelong process, but especially crucial during adolescence. A failure to solve the identity versus role confusion crisis results in a lack of diffusion of the sense of self—a sense that is diffuse, lacking direction, and lost or fragmented, according to Erikson (1968). Another radical psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, further studied in depth "the divided self" in his master book, *The Divided Self*. He further postulated that individuals under intense existential anxieties and social pressures may develop a split between their "true" self and a "false" self, presented to the world for protection and acceptance (Laing, 1960). More recently, contemporary psychological perspectives emphasize the role of narrative in constructing and maintaining a cohesive sense of self. The theory of narrative identity posits that individuals make sense of their lives and experiences by constructing internal stories that integrate the past, present, and future (McAdams &

Pals, 2006). When such narratives are disrupted by trauma, societal pressures, or existential questioning, the sense of self becomes fragmented, leaving individuals feeling disoriented and a lack of agency.

Unconceived facets of identity can also emphasize this conflict according to the concept of "shadow self" of Carl Jung; for in such a conflict the individual has to struggle through the conscious and unconscious forces working within them. In fact, Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory throws light on the "identity crisis" as an inevitable stage when unresolved tensions tend to end up in heavy displacement especially when societal and personal expectations clash. Rollo May, an eminent existential psychologist, continues, "Man exists on an inescapable journey toward meaning within a void of chaos." According to May, dislocation and hopelessness arise when an individual is unable to reconcile their concept of self with the ambiguity surrounding them. Man's Search for Meaning, as provided by Viktor Frankl, further extends this conversation on the importance of purpose and how it reduces the pangs of existential anxiety. He says that such a clear "why" to life can result in what he calls an "existential vacuum," which is this void paralleling that of the psycho-existential displacement. This, as Leon and Rebecca Grinberg state, is displacement that can activate unconscious processes challenging one's sense of self. It is deep enough that it threatens an identity of its own. Here again, there emerges a paradoxical relationship because displacement is the disruption needed to rebuild a hybrid self. According to the American Psychological Association, defence mechanisms are psychological processes that shield people from distressing emotions or unacceptable thoughts, according to the theory of Sigmund Freud. These defence mechanisms provide temporary relief through actions like displacement, but repeated use tends to cause problems in a relationship and emotional distancing.

Existentialism provides a framework for understanding fragmented identities and psycho-existential displacement. As existentialism posits, life is inherently devoid of meaning, and individuals are tasked with creating their own meaning amidst contradictions. Viktor Frankl, in Man's Search for Meaning, asserts that understanding one's purpose can help overcome even the harshest adversities (Frankl). This philosophy underpins existential psychology, which focuses on existential conflicts such as responsibility, choice, and mortality. These internal struggles shape an individual's identity, often fragmenting it when meaning is lost. According to Erich Fromm, anxiety—both normal and neurotic—plays a crucial role in these conflicts. While normal anxiety aids survival, neurotic anxiety distorts reality, triggering catastrophic thinking and preventing individuals from fully engaging with the present (Fromm). Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a touching portrayal of the existential crisis of Esther Greenwood. Esther's problems illustrate the assertion made by Viktor Frankl that when meaning is lost, there is a complete despair (Frankl). Her identity fragmentation mirrors neurotic anxiety described by Erich Fromm as she struggles with catastrophic thoughts of her future (Fromm). A bell jar becomes a metaphor for her isolation and alienation from reality, in which she cannot reconcile the expectations of society with her inner self. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* delves into the fragmented psyches of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, offering insights into existential psychology. Clarissa's preoccupation with time and mortality echoes existential questions about the passage of time and the inevitability of death (Fromm). Septimus's neurotic anxiety, shaped by his war trauma, embodies the destructive potential of unprocessed existential conflicts. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique captures these inner battles, emphasizing the inescapable interplay between the present and the fragmented self.

The historical and social contexts under which these novels were written offer the background to understand the themes of fragmented identities and psycho-existential displacement. *The Bell Jar* was published in 1963, a time of huge social change in America with the civil rights movement underway, the beginning of the feminist movement, and growing awareness about mental illness. Exploring Plath's personal struggles with mental health and the societal roles placed on women in the 1950s and 1960s should constitute a part of the understanding of the issues portrayed in the novel. The limited scope available to women at the time contributes greatly to Esther's feelings of isolation and fragmented self. *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in 1925, explores the effects of World War I and its profound impact upon the social culture of Britain. This war changed social hierarchies and gender dynamics, and the novel is a very strong statement of disillusionment and seeking meaning in a world that had just come out of war. Being an important member of the Bloomsbury Group, Woolf challenged the norms of her time through her literature and explored the complexity of identity and consciousness. Both Plath and Woolf employ their literary works as a voice for questioning the dominating social conventions and expectations that significantly contribute to the breaking of identity and the process of psycho-existential dislocation. *The Bell Jar* questions the narrow female roles assigned in the 1950s and early 1960s, highlighting how such restrictions aggravate Esther's mental health issues and her sense of estrangement. In a similar fashion, *Mrs. Dalloway* scrutinizes the strict social norms prevalent in post-war British society and their effects on personal identity and psychological health.

The theme of psycho-existential displacement is subtly portrayed through the titular character of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa Dalloway appears poised from the outside but struggles through a deep sense of fragmentation and disconnection. This displacement is a result of societal expectations, internal conflict, and deep existential questioning of who she was. Clarissa, in her struggle to define an authentic self within her social role and thus find a reconciliation of her private anxieties with her public persona, becomes apparent while she is preparing for the party— "She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown" (Woolf). Although Richard provides her stability, her marriage is a compromise as it suppresses the deeper emotional as well as intellectual desires unfulfilled by her.

Stream-of-consciousness narration by Woolf provides a rich narrative that allows the reader to witness the fluctuating nature of Clarissa's thoughts. Her musings upon the passage of time, how she is growing old, and how her youth is fading reveal a distance from her former self in which there is a sense of alienation. Her reflection, "She had the perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day," carries such an overwhelming sense of loneliness and vulnerability that permeate her existence. This widespread anxiety over the fragility of life conceals an even deeper, existential anxiety revolving around the breakdown of identity and the fear of dissolving in a world of increasing alienation. The fragmentation of identity, for Woolf, is also a product of internal dissension and the crushing force of expectations from the outer world. Her complicated relationship with her past underscores the fragmented nature of her self. Her memories of Sally Seton and the passion she once had for her contrast sharply with her present life. The dissonance between her present identity as a wife, mother, and hostess and her earlier desires and aspirations reflects the psychological tension that arises from unfulfilled dreams. Encapsulating Clarissa's inner battle, Woolf observes, "She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on." Her body and the mind are divided into separate and often conflictive entities and evoke the fragmentary characteristic of her identity. Woolf powerfully captures the sense of alienation as the whole weight of expectations and obligations from society, advancing years, and the unresolved yearning of her youth threatens the identity of Clarissa herself.

Although the parallel narrative of Septimus Smith, the war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, offers a stark contrast to Clarissa's experience, the two characters also share a common sense of dislocation. The horrors he witnessed have shattered his sense of self, leaving him unable to reintegrate into postwar society. His fragmentation is evident in his inability to engage meaningfully with his wife, Rezia, and his pervasive hallucinations and paranoia. His hallucinations and his disassociation from reality underpin his inability to reconcile his traumatic experiences with the demands of society. The ghost of Evans, the comrade he lost to death, is the unresolved trauma that haunts him throughout his life, reminding him of the senseless violence and loss of innocence. The pressure of society, through the doctors Sir William Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes, makes him feel further dislocated. Their attempts to impose "proportion" and "common sense" on his fractured mind alienate him further and underscore the incapacity of society to understand and accept the invisible wounds of war. His cries for help fall on deaf ears when answered by Dr. Bradshaw, who prioritizes conformity over care. Dr. Bradshaw insists that Septimus be taken away from his wife and secluded for rest, which reflects a systemic failure to deal with the root causes of psychological distress. His tragic suicide can be seen as the last desperate act of existential defiance and regaining agency in a life he perceives as being helpless and dispossessed and brings to attention the worst consequences of unresolved displacement. Septimus reflects that "The world itself is without meaning" and resonates with the existential crises of both him and Clarissa as they are trying to find their way in a meaningless world. His suffering is exacerbated by the horrors that he witnessed during the war, yet his feelings of estrangement and alienation are matched by Clarissa's silent agony. This common storyline of psycho-existential dislocation reveals how personal and social traumas can break up a person's sense of identity, leaving them lost in an unreachable world.

Clarissa's reaction to Septimus's suicide is also telling. When she learns of his death, she reflects, "She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they all went on living." This shocking response highlights the deep existential questioning that underlies her character. Clarissa, too, feels disconnected from life, questioning its inherent value, and searching for meaning in a world that often seems indifferent. Her empathy with Septimus's despair and her own sense of existential frustration reveals the profound fragmentation of her identity, a fragmentation shaped by the pressures of society, the passage of time, and the search for an elusive sense of purpose. Woolf mused, "Mrs. Dalloway is always giving parties to cover the silence," indicating how her social life and apparent communal success formed a smoke screen to hide the unhappiness and isolation she felt inside. This need for external validation and constant social interaction becomes a coping mechanism, a way for Clarissa to distract herself from her existential fears.

The psychological fragmentation that Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, undergoes is depicted by Sylvia Plath through an intricate and psycho-existential dislocation. She struggles internally to reconcile her innermost aspirations with the societal constraints that bound her. Esther's experiences in the novel are similar to the psychoanalytic theories created by Freud, especially about the concept of displacement, which is an act of diverting negative emotions from more intimidating sources due to a psychological defence mechanism. For Esther, this includes her involvements and rising emotions as she tries to cope with her fear of failure and the social stigma associated with mental health problems. This phenomenon is well depicted by her overwhelming sense of alienation, and the silence surrounding her had become oppressive: "The silence depressed me. It was not the silence of silence. It was my own silence." It summed up her emptiness within that she was undergoing as this was a consistent theme while reading the novel. There was disconnection with what was happening in the space around her; she could not escape from this binding isolation represented by the "bell jar." Esther's musings on her double aspirations—to be part of society and to fulfil her intellectual ambitions—bring into light the intensity of her psycho-existential displacement. The 1950s American cultural environment sets strict roles for women, allowing very little room for self-definition beyond the archetypes of wife, mother, or secretary. This conflict is beautifully encapsulated in the emblematic "fig tree" metaphor of Esther: "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest." Each fig represents a possible future; when she cannot bear to choose one of the lives, the weight of which paralyzes her while the figs wrinkle and fall. This paralyzing becomes a great metaphor for her fragmentation, signifying her inability to assimilate her aspirations with the roles that society prescribes for her. The fear of being ordinary and living a life without authenticity looms large, hence amplifying her internal division and feeding into her feelings of displacement.

The fractured narrative of the novel reflects Esther's deteriorating mental state and emphasizes the deepness of her identity crisis. Her failed engagement, societal pressure to conform, and dissatisfaction with the paths traditional for her accentuate this sense of being hemmed in. Sylvia Plath's bell jar metaphor dramatically illustrates this entrapment, sealing Esther out from the world and even from herself: "Herself a baby and sick and for twenty years a baby, the world itself is a bad dream." Esther comments, expressing the stifling weight of her alienation. This feeling is further emphasized in her relationship with Buddy Willard, whose conventional expectations collide with her intellectual aspirations. The inability of Buddy to see Esther as an equal heightens her feelings of alienation, which find their climax in the societal constraints that squeeze her individuality. Esther's mental health path also demonstrates the pervasive theme of displacement. Her descent into mental illness, punctuated by episodes of depersonalization and derealization, is a struggle to find a stable sense of self amidst the conflicting demands placed upon her. Her attempts at suicide, moments of extreme despair, symbolize her desperate attempt to escape the unbearable weight of her fragmented existence. With deep poignancy, these attempts evoke the aftermath, wherein Esther claims, "The floor seemed wonderfully solid. It was comforting to know I had fallen and could fall no farther." This moment bears a kind of despair alongside the implication that grounding the self from hitting rock bottom is there, too-small though it seems—a silent validation of this resilience that sleeps within this fractured identity.

Joan Gilling, Esther's peer and foil, offers a parallel investigation of displacement and identity fragmentation. Joan's ambitious exterior covers a deep internal conflict, especially as she grapples with her emerging lesbian identity in a society resistant to such expressions. Her fight to reconcile her desires with societal constraints mirrors that of Esther, but it is from a different perspective. Joan's trying to make Esther fall in love with her, which Esther labels as aggressive, can be interpreted as a last desperate attempt by Joan to connect with someone who feels the same kind of otherness as she does. Being institutionalized becomes then her breakdown but also her opportunity to explore her identity within the walls of the psychiatric system. In this way, a tension of duality underlines a deep displacement that both women feel. Constraints of society and constraints of self-render real self-expression almost impossible in both cases. Plath artfully threads the themes of psycho-existential displacement and identity fragmentation, portraying mental illness and societal constraint in stark, unflinching detail. In the mind of Esther Greenwood, there is a haunting sense of acknowledging her inner conflict: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am." This is both a declaration of existence and a painful reminder of her alienation from the world and from herself. It is how one's attempt to deal with outside pressures and inside conflict cannot reconcile, ending in complete alienation from the self.

The exploration of broken identities through psycho-existential displacement in the two novels, *The Bell Jar* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, resonates powerfully with modern readers. These novels illuminate a complicated interplay between psychology in the individual and society in general and the world. By giving voice to the inner turmoil of the protagonists, Plath and Woolf critique societal constraints but probe the human condition by looking at the potential fallout from displacement and the kind of environment that fosters growth and self-discovery.

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