

Trauma, Gender, and Society: Mental Health in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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Abstract—The present study aims to examine the representation of mental health in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). Additionally, the study attempts to analyze societal expectations and gender roles to explore the theme of isolation and identity. To achieve the objectives of the study, both works are analyzed through the theory of trauma. The concluding statements explore how both novels reflect mental illness and trauma while also highlighting the role of society in influencing the psychological state of characters and their identity. Both literary works are regarded as literary reflections of mental illness. The study fills in the gap in literature by adopting an interdisciplinary framework that offers a more comprehensive understanding of trauma within its social and gendered dimensions. It examines the character's traumatic experiences, whether caused by society or previous experiences.

Index Terms—mental illness, trauma, gender role, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Bell Jar*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) offer a powerful representation of mental illness shaped by societal pressure that contributes to the psychological breakdowns of their protagonists. In both novels, characters experience mental disorders in a society that fails to acknowledge their struggles. According to Damiani (2016), both *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1925) and *The Bell Jar* (Plath, 1963) reflect the complexity of trauma, memory, and identity. Both novels portray the lives of their female protagonists, Clarissa Dalloway and Esther Greenwood, respectively, as profoundly shaped by their struggles with mental illness. Clarissa's experience is characterized by a constant, flowing stream of memories, while Esther's psyche becomes fragmented under the weight of repeated trauma.

The 20th century was marked by profound social, political, and economic change and was shaped by events such as World War I and World War II, the rise of modernity, and the gradual erosion of traditional values and societal customs (Yousef, 2023, 2024; Abuhassirah & Salameh, 2024). These transformations led to a state of confusion and doubt, causing people to grapple with fundamental questions about identity, purpose, and the meaning of life. This shift prompted writers to develop innovative literary forms of writing that could address these existential concerns and reflect the turbulent state of the world. García (2022) argues that worldwide crises of the 20th century, such as WWI and WWII, influenced literature and attitudes around mental illness, which, in turn, impacted the evolution of societal beliefs surrounding mental health. During this period, the psychological repercussions of war, along with developments in psychiatric theory, profoundly influenced literary expression and left a lasting impact on psychiatric practices.

Caruth's (1996) poststructuralist trauma theory explores the depth of trauma through the intricate interplay between trauma, memory, and the act of narrating the past. She argues that trauma is not limited to the moment in which traumatic events are experienced; rather, it is limited by the way it relentlessly haunts the individual long after the initial experience. Trauma disrupts the boundaries of memory, identity, and the cognitive process of understanding the traumatic events, which are held in memory. At the same time, individuals oscillate between the need to forget and the compulsion to remember.

Similarly, Toremans (2003) explores the role of literature in expressing the suffering of individuals who experience traumatic events, while also explaining the difficulties they encounter throughout their lives from the moment they confront a shocking event. Toremans states that literary works address the profound aspects of an individual's emotions that are difficult to express through any other means. In contrast, Herman (1992) provides a clinical trauma model focused on actual lived experiences. Her work highlights how trauma impacts identity formation and recovery, stressing the role of empathy, validation, and social acknowledgment.

On the other hand, Kurtz (2018) argues that previous studies that discuss the theory of trauma need to be expanded. He explains that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has had a tremendous impact on addressing the subject of trauma and shaping the way it is understood. Kurtz (2018) explains that trauma is not limited to major events like war and disasters, but rather it includes daily experiences that may seem minor but can have lasting impacts on a person's mental health.

Mrs. Dalloway (Woolf, 1925) and *The Bell Jar* (Plath, 1963) offer insight into 20th-century societal norms, as well as diverse perspectives on the concept of mental health. These insights prompt us to examine societal pressures, their impact on individuals' well-being, and how literature portrays these themes. Both Woolf's and Plath's novels were drawn from the authors' personal experiences with mental illness to enrich their narratives. David (2011) argues that modern literature describes the way in which it presents the human mind through the interaction with the external world, highlighting the interconnection of an individual's thoughts and actions with what is going on around them. According to Herman (1992), modern writers reflect the broader context of the human mind, portraying the way in which external pressure affects an individual's identity, decision, and perception of the world.

Mental health is a fundamental aspect of the human condition, influencing individuals' emotional and psychological state, as well as their ability to navigate daily challenges and achieve personal growth. What is more, the concept of mental health evolves, influenced by many factors. Bhugra et al. (2013) define mental health as a state of emotional and psychological well-being that enables individuals to manage and regulate thoughts, feelings, and actions, all of which foster a sense of control, self-esteem, and emotional stability. Moreover, mental health is also significantly influenced by external factors, including societal structures, the surrounding environment, and social dynamics.

In their examination of the socio-psychological aspects of mental health, Moreno and Roda (2003) investigated how social structures interact with an individual's psychological well-being, which, in turn, influences their mental health. Their analysis highlighted the interconnections among social integration, stress management, and the experience of alienation, noting that strong community ties and a supportive social environment reduce stress and feelings of alienation, thereby enhancing overall well-being. Furthermore, they highlighted how alienation, which occurs when individuals are disconnected from society, affects self-esteem and psychological health.

Society plays a profound role in shaping psychological well-being. Mental health issues are not just personal struggles; instead, they are deeply intertwined with societal context. Demir (2023) suggests that mental health should be considered a structural problem affected by broader social, economic, and political aspects. Central to this discussion is Marx's concept of "alienation," historically associated with "madness" as a reflection of the disconnection between individuals and their social environment, a disconnection that is further exacerbated by the alienating effects of societal structures.

In the context of trauma theory, an individual's mental well-being is affected by a complex interplay of personal and external experiences, as well as the pervasive societal pressures surrounding them, often resulting in memory and identity disorders while also intensifying emotional instability, leading to a great sense of disconnectedness and isolation from their surroundings. According to Caruth (1996), trauma manifests through the unconscious mind due to recurring events that are difficult to fully comprehend or immediately articulate after they occur.

Although trauma and mental illness are often closely linked, each refers to a different conceptual dimension. Trauma may include acute event-based experiences, such as Septimus's exposure to war in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) or Esther's psychological breakdown in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), as well as more pervasive structural forms shaped by long-standing societal pressures, including rigid gender roles. In contrast, mental illness refers to psychological conditions that may arise from such trauma or be exacerbated by it.

In both novels, mental illness is a concept that is stigmatized by the society in which the characters live, highlighting society's misunderstanding of mental health issues and their significant impact on the individual. Rigid societal expectations imposed on men and women, such as specific gender roles, confine individuals to narrowly defined identities. This neglect of their true selves, imposed by these standards, contributes to their psychological and emotional suffering. Therefore, this study aims to explore how society affects the characters' mental well-being, as represented in *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1925) and *The Bell Jar* (Plath, 1963). This study also seeks to examine the portrayal of trauma and its role in shaping the character's journey and status.

The current study attempts to explore the application of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates trauma theory with gender and social perspectives to enhance the understanding of psychological suffering, identity formation, and societal influence in *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1925) and *The Bell Jar* (Plath, 1963). It also investigates the role of society in shaping and exacerbating the individual's mental illness, which in turn contributes to their internal and external conflict. This study delves into the depths of trauma as a fundamental force influencing the individual's journey and personal development. The analysis of these two literary works is conducted through the lens of trauma theory, which provides a critical framework for examining the dynamic intersection between personal suffering and societal influence. The study fills in the gap in literature by adopting an interdisciplinary framework that offers a more comprehensive understanding of trauma within its social and gendered dimensions. It examines the character's traumatic experiences, whether caused by society or previous experiences.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Several scholars have examined the complications faced by characters within literary narratives when confronted with societal pressures. Ghalandari and Jamili (2014) examine *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1925) as a literary manifestation of

Woolf's personal battle with mental health, interpreting characters such as Septimus Warren Smith, Clarissa Dalloway, and Dr. Holmes as conduits for Woolf's emotional turmoil and critique of societal constraints. Through these figures, Woolf expresses her dissatisfaction with a society characterized by emotional and physical detachment, where individuals lack meaningful connections.

Fäcks (2015) analyzes the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1925) through the lens of trauma theory, highlighting that unresolved trauma, as presented by Woolf through the character of Septimus, significantly influences the individual's identity and personal relationships. Such traumas result in social isolation and difficulty in expressing experiences. In addition, Fäcks addresses the Theory of Mind (TOM), where Clarissa was able to understand Septimus' suffering without meeting him personally.

Ovaska (2022) examines Virginia Woolf's portrayal of mental illness, highlighting its complex formation through individual social, cultural, and environmental factors. Ovaska's analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1925) suggested that Woolf's portrayal of characters demonstrates how external influences, including trauma, social integration, and personal beliefs, contribute to each character's psychological state. Aggarwal (2025) explores the theme of existential psychological displacement and identity fragmentation in *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1925), emphasizing how societal pressures foster Clarissa's sense of alienation and psychological suffering. The study also underscores Woolf's use of narrative techniques, including stream of consciousness and fragmented narration, to vividly portray the characters' internal conflicts and their quests for selfhood.

Moving to the studies that explore the relationship between societal expectations, mental illness, and trauma in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Matović (2017) examines Esther Greenwood's experience of trauma in the novel, which was caused by the surrounding society, particularly the strict standards placed on women in the mid-20th century, contributing to her mental breakdown and isolation. Esther was in a perpetual conflict between her personal aspirations and the suffocating weight of gender-based expectations. Matović also highlighted that Plath's novel is an attempt to escape from these internal conflicts and traumas, which stem from both personal and cultural reasons.

Biroğlu (2019) delves into the trauma and societal pressure that shape Esther Greenwood's mental health, emphasizing that these external powers navigate her identity within a patriarchal society. She highlights that social pressure alienated Esther due to the expectations placed on women. Esther's alienation is deeply intertwined with her relationship with her mother, a figure she neither trusts nor feels emotionally connected to. This estrangement plays a crucial role in her psychological breakdown, as she perceives her mother as an embodiment of the restrictive femininity she desperately seeks to reject. Esther's mental state serves as a profound critique of the oppressive structures that constrain women's autonomy, illustrating the devastating effects of these societal limitations on individual identity and psychological well-being.

Regoli (2020) offers a convincing interpretation of the symbolic role that patriarchal expectations play in *The Bell Jar* (Plath, 1963). According to Regoli, Esther's depression is exacerbated by the constraints imposed by a male-dominated society, where she feels alienated and judged, and where her self-worth and identity are constantly measured against the rigid, traditional idea of womanhood, with her value largely determined by her potential as a wife or woman. Regoli (2020) argues that these expectations contribute to Esther's disconnect, as she is unable to align her personal goals with the demands imposed by others. Rolfsson (2022) discusses the impact of gender roles and societal expectations on the protagonist's experiences, focusing on the limitations placed on women compared to the freedoms granted to men. Anika and Barman (2023) explore Esther's journey towards self-discovery, emphasizing the constraining effects of cultural restrictions and patriarchal norms in America in the 1950s. They argue that Esther's profound sense of alienation, from herself and her environment, stems from a conservative society that reinforces restrictive domestic roles for women.

Stevanović (2024) examines Plath's 1963 novel through the lens of trauma theory, exploring its impact on Esther's identity and mental state. Focusing on the psychological struggles experienced by Esther and the societal pressure in America in the 1950s, Stevanović uses the concept of trauma to analyze the experiences of female characters in a patriarchal society with limited opportunities for women. She also discusses how the treatment Esther was subjected to exacerbates her trauma and raises the question of whether Esther's recovery is truly subjective or influenced by the pressures of the society surrounding her.

The study current study is different due to the fact that it analyzes *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1925) and *The Bell Jar* (Plath, 1963) through the lens of trauma theory, with a particular emphasis on gender and feminist perspectives to examine themes of isolation, identity, and societal pressure. By applying these theoretical frameworks, the study offers a critical understanding of how external societal expectations, rigid gender roles, and traumatic experiences shape the character's psychological struggles. Both Plath's and Woolf's works delve into the theory of trauma and the breakdowns their characters go through. The application of trauma allows for an in-depth understanding of how past experiences, society, and gender roles shape the character's mental health. In literature, the study of trauma enables a nuanced examination of how painful experiences influence an individual's identity and life decisions.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study analyzes *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Bell Jar* through the lens of trauma theory, with a particular emphasis on gender and feminist perspective to examine themes of isolation, identity, and societal pressure. By applying these theoretical frameworks, the study offers a critical understanding of how external societal expectations, rigid gender roles,

and Traumatic experiences shape the character's psychological struggles. Both Plath and Woolf's works delve into the theory of trauma and the breakdowns their characters go through. The application of trauma allows for an in-depth understanding of past experiences, society, and gender roles shape the character's mental health. In literature, the study of trauma enables a nuanced examination of how painful experiences influence an individual's identity and life decisions. Caruth (2016) states that trauma is a sudden and fragmented "wound" that affects a person's psyche and ability to understand themselves or their surroundings (p. 3).

Similarly, Herman (2011) defines trauma as a psychological condition that affects an individual when experiencing painful events. They feel trapped, unable to express themselves or escape from reality (p. 49). Herman also discussed how trauma impacts an individual's identity: "The identity they have formed prior the trauma is irrevocably destroyed" (p. 79), thus leading to their isolation. On the other hand, Balaev (2018) discusses the "Pluralistic Trauma Theory" as an alternative to Caruth's traditional theory, which focuses on trauma as an indescribable experience that haunts individuals. In the pluralistic theory, trauma is understood as an event influenced by cultural, historical, and societal context. Its impact varies based on these factors, suggesting that trauma is not only influenced by an individual's past experiences but also by the broader environment (pp. 366-368).

IV. DISCUSSION

Representation of Trauma in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) reveals the character's mental breakdowns and highlights the complex nature of trauma arising from societal expectations, especially those imposed on women in the mid-20th century. Herman (1992) states that "traumatized people suffer in silence" (p. 159), a concept that resonates with the experiences of both Esther Greenwood and Joan Reddit. Both characters struggle to communicate and express the depth of their psychological suffering due to the external factors that affect both their identities and life journeys.

The societal pressures that Esther faces play a significant role in the trauma she experiences. During the mid-20th century, women were expected to conform to rigid gender roles that prioritized marriage, motherhood, and following standards over personal ambition or intellectual freedom. Esther struggles under these expectations, as society imposes specific standards of success and happiness on women. They are expected to marry, have children, and adhere to their traditional roles in the home. Beauvoir (1953) discusses society's perceptions of women and how marriage is linked to a woman's identity and social status. She also explains that women often seek marriage and associate it with their happiness or suffering due to the societal expectations surrounding them. Esther views the societal expectations as confining women to a passive role, where their lives are defined by marriage and their role as wives. She expresses her criticism of these expectations by stating that women are "simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other" (Plath, 1963, p. 4). Esther rejects the standards set for women, as she believes that they are instruments of societal manipulation designed to change their beliefs and make them conform to society, "it was like being brainwashed" (Plath, 1963, p. 89). The impact of societal pressure on women gave rise to the concept of trauma; Esther was aware of the limited opportunities available to her as a woman. The pressure she faces is not limited to marriage alone but extends to her career, appearance, clothing, and life. She feels trapped and under pressure to achieve professional success while also meeting societal expectations: "I felt myself shrinking" (Plath, 1963, p. 17). This creates a sense of fear and stress as she struggles to live up to the expectations of her surroundings. In addition, adopting traditional roles, such as marriage and childbearing, as well as meeting expectations related to appearance, plays a major role in her traumatic experience. These expectations create a sense of restriction, as Esther feels forced to conform to a specific path that limits her freedom and prevents her from pursuing her own goals. The idea of being defined only as a wife and mother, rather than as an individual with personal ambitions, causes her to feel anxious and disconnected from her identity.

Esther believes that the role of women in society is rigidly defined compared to that of men, reflecting a restrictive social image of women. In her view, society perceives women as destined to follow strict social expectations, such as marriage, raising children, and prioritizing family life, while men are granted the freedom to pursue careers, make independent choices, and define their own paths, underscoring the idea that men are seen as ambitious, while women are confined to limited roles that support men's ambitions. Rolfsson (2022) discusses Esther's frustration with gender roles as she rejects societal norms that grant men absolute freedom in their behaviors and life decisions. Her interaction with Buddy Willard, who represents the male-dominated gaze, reflects this clear disparity in rights and expectations. Willard believes that women should adhere to marriage and traditional standards, and any woman who deviates from these rules is viewed as insane. Willard's description of Esther as "crazy" mirrors society's perception of women who refuse to conform to imposed norms. This negative view reinforces her sense of depression and mental illness, as she experiences the psychological pressure of being rejected by her surroundings when resisting their constraints. Social discrimination is not limited to the issue of marriage; rather, it extends to the evaluation of women's work compared to men's work. Willard's comparison of Esther's work in poetry to his work in medicine devalues women's careers. For him, poetry is less important than medicine, a profession he perceives as inherently male-dominated. Willard dismissively refers to poetry as "a piece of dust" (Plath, 1963, p. 58), emphasizing his belief that it lacks value compared to his medical career. This comparison demonstrates how society marginalizes women's roles in professional life and undervalues their social contributions.

These contradictory double standards that Esther feels when dealing with her surroundings reinforce her sense of trauma and psychological breakdown. Similarly, Esther's trauma stems from the pressures and limitations imposed on her ambitions and desires. Feeling constantly trapped by the expectations that restrict her ambitions and dreams, Esther contemplates her future, envisioning her life as a fig tree with branching paths, each path representing a distinct perspective. Although she rejects societal norms, she is uncertain about her ability to survive without them. These paths traumatize her, as she is unable to decide which one is right to follow. This uncertainty makes her anxious about remaining stuck in the same place, watching her life fade away.

The trauma resulting from Esther's suffering is linked to her feelings of depression. She begins to show symptoms of depression during her training period in New York. Her psychological state deteriorates due to the expectations of her surroundings, an environment that always made her feel that what she wants and what she could achieve would remain secondary because of her gender as a woman. Similarly, Joan's character reflects the conflict that Esther faces, as the two characters are deeply intertwined. Joan represents both a parallel and a contrast to Esther. Her attempt is like Esther's in that she escapes the societal pressures imposed on her as a woman. However, while Esther strives to survive and seek help at the end of the novel, Joan collapses under these pressures and decides to end her life. Joan's suicide at the end of the novel stands as a stark testament to the devastating impact of trauma on women, exacerbated by society's oppressive and unrealistic expectations. Her suicide reflects the inner suffering of women; although she is loved and successful on the outside, her internal struggle leads her to end her life.

External and Internal Conflict and Identity

The traumatic events that Esther faces, including societal pressures to conform to a certain role, her time spent in psychiatric hospitals, and the family expectations tied to gender roles, significantly contribute to her conflict. Her rejection of these ideas leaves her torn between her personal desires and societal expectations. According to Anika and Barman (2023), Esther's inability to make a clear decision about her future has pushed her towards psychological instability. Esther faces significant challenges in building a cohesive identity; her ambition to become an independent writer contrasts sharply with the expectations placed upon her. This conflict has created Esther's fragmented identity, where her attempts to adopt the fake name "Elly Higginbottom" represent her feelings that her identity is unacceptable and insufficient, reflecting a state of confusion and a sense of self-loss.

Another important factor in Esther's identity formation is her relationship with her mother, Mrs. Greenwood. According to Budick (1987), Esther's mother reinforced patriarchal expectations of her rather than supporting her in expressing her identity. Mrs. Greenwood pushes her daughter to conform to societal norms, even though she herself rejects them. Her mother's role in her life is not just one of emotional neglect; she also contributed to the trauma that led to Esther's breakdown. According to Esther, mothers can have a devastating impact on their children's lives. She says, "Of course his mother killed him" (Plath, p. 163). Here, the word "kill" is a metaphor for her own destructive relationship with her mother, which makes her feel like Mrs. Greenwood is restricting her identity and independence because of her expectations and emotional distance. The unresolved trauma and frustration that Esther's mother carries over her husband's death, who died when Esther was nine years old, and the burden of all the responsibilities she bears, are passed on to Esther. Her mother's experiences contribute to her feelings of despair and disappointment, as the absence of a father figure in her life also adds to her own trauma. Yujie and Jiangbo (2012) discuss the psychological trauma Esther experiences because of the loss of her father at an early age. According to them, the sudden impact of her father's death left her with a constant sense of loss, which affected her identity.

Joan's trauma is also linked to the pressures she faces as a woman. At the beginning of the novel, she appears to be the quintessential woman, conforming to societal standards. For Esther, Joan represents a successful, beloved, and accomplished woman who is praised by her surroundings. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that she is, in fact, traumatized by the external pressures imposed upon her. By witnessing Joan's collapse, Esther realizes that apparent success does not necessarily equate to happiness or stability but can instead conceal deep suffering. Her suicide serves as a warning to Esther, as she recognizes the need to find her way to heal and shape her identity. Joan's tragic fate becomes a mirror reflecting Esther's own fears and inner struggles, helping her to process her pain in different ways.

Theme of Isolation

When individuals experience traumatic events, their sense of belonging is affected, causing them to become isolated from their surroundings. This isolation overlaps with the internal and external pressures Esther faces, as she endures profound isolation that takes many forms throughout the novel, whether physical, social, or psychological. She begins her journey into isolation at the start of the novel when she goes to New York City for a journalism internship at a fashion magazine. Esther feels physically and emotionally detached from both the city and her surroundings. Unlike other girls, Esther feels isolated and helpless. The enthusiasm of the girls around her traps her in emptiness, as she is unable to interact or engage with this excitement. Her inability to change or influence her reality makes her feel lost. Despite the chaos surrounding her, her sense of stability reflects her inner isolation. For her, distance exists not only within the framework of the outside world; she also feels that she is becoming "smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier" (Plath, 1963, p. 17), which reflects the depth and increase of her emotional isolation.

Plath presents Esther's psychological suffering and unresolved trauma through her exacerbated sense of disconnection and her inability to bond with either herself or the world around her. Axelrod (2010) analyzes Esther's sense of isolation and its impact on her worldview. This isolation is not only a result of her failure to adapt to society but also of her

detachment from herself. Esther is unable to balance her identity, which represents her inner desire, with the expectations of the outside world, as her internal and external isolation overlap in her experiences. She feels disconnected from herself, unable to “feel a thing” (Plath, 1963, p. 196). Esther is traumatized by the events she has experienced, as she cannot escape the pressure placed on her. Her inability to connect with either her inner or outer world illustrates how attached she is to her isolation.

Plath (1963) uses the metaphor of “the bell jar” to depict the extent of Esther’s isolation because of traumatic events; her feelings and thoughts become trapped inside her, just as she is trapped inside the bell jar. She is unable to control herself because of the incidents she experienced; when her doctor urges her to dismiss her experiences as merely a bad dream, she resists, refusing to minimize the depth of her trauma. The memories she retrieves during treatments, such as the fig tree, Dr. Gordon, and other incidents, have become an integral part of her identity. Esther tries to separate herself from these memories, but instead, she finds herself attached to them, describing them as part of her. They continue to haunt her like nightmares, transforming into her “landscape,” where she tries to isolate herself within these traumatic memories.

Meurman (2024) discusses how Esther’s sense of detachment from society drove her to attempt suicide, feeling alienated from her surroundings. She also analyzes Esther’s suicide attempts as a manifestation of her fear of submitting to a future she refuses to accept. Esther’s suicide attempts take many forms; she tries hanging herself, slitting her wrists, overdosing on pills, or jumping off a bridge. These attempts represent her wish to break free from the mental and physical isolation she experiences. Esther’s recent suicidal attempt through pills signifies her decision to take her own life in the secrecy of the cellar. This dark and secluded spot echoes her profound isolation and detachment. The cellar, isolated from the remainder of the residence and the external environment, further amplifies Esther’s sense of alienation from reality. Her decision to end her life in the cellar reflects her desire to escape to a place far from sight, away from everything and everyone.

Self-Discovery and Personal Development

Herman (1992) discusses the progression of a traumatized person through three stages of recovery. The first stage is the “safety” stage, where the individual regains a sense of control over their life and distances themselves from any harmful situations. The second stage is “remembering and mourning” (Herman, 1992, p. 20) which involves acknowledging those past events. The third stage is “reconnection with ordinary life” (Herman, 1992, p. 204). Herman also states that to begin the recovery process, the traumatic events must be identified. Esther’s psychological breakdowns stem from complex experiences linked to societal pressures, personal experiences, and unresolved traumas. At the beginning of the novel, she is unable to process the events she is experiencing, which drives her into a state of depression and a loss of control over her life. Her recovery process begins with Dr. Nolan, her psychiatrist, who helps her identify and understand what she has been through. Dr. Nolan does not dismiss Esther’s feelings, as society, her mother, or Doctor Gordon did; rather, she reinforces and supports Esther’s feelings. The doctor provides her with a sense of safety away from the outside world, which helps her express and explore her pain. This sense of safety allows her to remember all the traumatic situations she has experienced.

Representation of Trauma in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*

Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) portrays the mental illness suffered by its main characters, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. The novel examines the influence of societal pressure and gender expectations on individuals while also highlighting the lasting impact of past events on the present. According to Caruth (1996), traumatic experiences cannot be fully understood immediately after they occur. Septimus represents the visible and devastating effects of war on both individuals and society. While Clarissa’s trauma appears to be more “unspoken,” she is torn within her fragmented self between her past and what she has become in the present, influenced by gender roles and societal standards placed on her as a woman.

Demir (2023) emphasizes that beyond the war’s immediate consequences, it fractures social structures and frequently induces lasting psychological effects, including the development of psychiatric disorders. Woolf portrays the impacts of the First World War on society (Woolf, 1925, p. 4). Although the war has ended, the traumatic events it left behind continue to affect all aspects of daily life, as they remain present in individual memory and influence interactions with the outside world. The “violent explosion” that frightened Clarissa and stopped the passersby serves as a symbol of collective trauma that remains firmly in consciousness after a traumatic event.

Clarissa represents a socially integrated woman, as seen throughout the novel in her preparations for the party she plans to host. Externally, Clarissa performs her duties as a wife while maintaining a balanced social presence. However, she suffers from hidden traumas between the life she has settled into and the one she aspired to live. Wang and Xie (2017) argue that Clarissa experiences oppression within the patriarchal society in which she lives. This oppression is embodied in her submission to society’s expectations, particularly regarding women’s roles and marriage. Her marriage to Richard Dalloway is stability and tradition, but it lacks the emotional pull she felt during her earlier relationship. She married Richard, but she is still drawn to Peter Walsh. She harbors a deep love for her childhood friend, Sally Seton, reflecting the intricate emotional landscape she navigates as she grapples with the tension between past and present.

Similarly, Smith reflects the societal expectations of a wife of a man traumatized by war. She faces not only Septimus’ psychological breakdown but also her own emotional collapse because she can no longer bear it. Caruth (1996) states that trauma resists a complete understanding of the experience, which Rezia embodies through her sense of disorientation and

helplessness. Rezia tries to support her husband; nevertheless, her trauma lies in her failure to understand her life journey. Her emotional suffering becomes evident as she questions the reason behind her pain (Woolf, 1925).

On the other hand, Septimus Warren Smith's trauma was apparent as he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Caruth (1996) defines post-traumatic stress disorder as a loss of self-control, which intrudes upon individuals' present and manifests in the form of hallucinations or sudden memories. Although Septimus was physically present, he mentally hallucinated about the violence of war. Herman (1992) says that trauma lies in the fact that the survivor cannot confront the feeling of inadequacy of not having been able to save the individuals whose lives they witnessed being destroyed. These feelings constantly torment the survivor, intruding on their ordinary, everyday life and influencing their major decisions. They manifest through hallucinations that blur the line between past and present. This phenomenon aligns with Freud's idea of trauma "fixation," which he explained in his 1920 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. According to Freud, the mind repeatedly relives the traumatic event through dreams or disturbing memories. These repetitions do not express the fulfillment of desires, but rather a primitive attempt by the psyche to cope with the anxiety associated with the trauma. Therefore, Septimus's continuous vision of his friend Evans and the horrors of war can be understood as an expression of the deep impact of trauma on his psychological state.

During the war, Septimus witnesses the tragic death of his friend Evan, yet he sees him among the trees, hears his voice, and feels his presence despite his death. This indicates that he was emotionally disconnected from reality and victimized by societal expectations and gender roles. Conner (2015) reflects society's marginalization of war traumas suffered by men, as Septimus embodies the mental illness that affects many men exposed to such incomprehensible horrors. They are expected to return from war stronger than before and, consequently, are often undiagnosed and untreated as traumatized individuals. His behavior is misunderstood by those around him; thus, it is neglected even by Dr. Holmes, who casually insists, "Nothing's the matter with him" (Woolf, 1925, p. 48). Dr. Holmes does not realize the depth of the suffering Septimus is enduring. As a result, he attempts to silence him instead of acknowledging his pain. On the other hand, Sir William Bradshaw, his psychiatrist, believes in adhering to societal standards. He knows that something is wrong with Septimus, yet Bradshaw's treatment separates Septimus from his wife, insisting, "He must be taught to rest. Bradshaw said they must be separated" (Woolf, 1925, p. 105), only exacerbating the impact of his trauma.

Septimus kept thinking of suicide as an attempt to communicate his pain. His fragmented thoughts reveal his awareness of the importance of expression. "Communication is health; communication is happiness, communication," he muttered (Woolf, 1925, p. 67). Although he was hallucinating a lot throughout the novel, Septimus knew that communication was an important part of understanding what he was going through.

External and Internal Conflict and Identity

The pressures of society that Clarissa experiences, such as marrying Richard because he is suitable for her social status and hosting prestigious parties as a means of escaping the tragedies of war, have profoundly affected her personality (Woolf, 1925, p. 8). Her personality and identity were refined when she got married; the transition from being Clarissa to becoming Mrs. Dalloway encapsulates both the internal and external conflicts she experiences. Not only did she marry, but her entire identity as the independent individual Clarissa was effectively erased to such an extent that society recognized her solely as Richard's wife. The expectations imposed on her as a wife and mother made her feel "invisible; unseen; unknown" (Woolf, 1925, p. 8). She came to realize the necessity of conforming to a specific role yet simultaneously felt entrapped by the desire to preserve her own independence amid the societal role that was imposed upon her.

Clarissa's inner tension contributes to a sense of detachment from herself. This confusion is what Caruth (1996) describes as a significant consequence of traumatic events, wherein individuals find themselves ensnared between their consciousness and unconsciousness. Clarissa's inability to reconcile the different versions of herself is expressed in her admission: "Now I remember how impossible it was ever to make up my mind" (Woolf, 1925, p. 30), indicating that Clarissa is caught in a liminal space between her past and present. The internal conflict she endures may not be readily apparent to those around her; nonetheless, she grapples with profound internal disappointment. She frequently revisits her past and compares it with her current life in London as a wife and hostess. Her mind keeps oscillating between her former self at Bourton, her choices regarding her relationships with Peter and Richard, and her present life in London as a wife and hostess.

Similarly, Lucrezia's sense of self is deeply tied to her role as Septimus's wife. Lucrezia's identity is intrinsically connected to her role as Septimus' spouse; her existence is no longer defined by her own aspirations but as wholly contingent upon fulfilling the obligations of a wife to bear children and provide emotional support. As she reflects on her sacrifices, Rezia internalizes the belief that "Everyone gives up something when they marry" (Woolf, 1925, p. 47). Although she entered matrimony with Septimus out of love, she assumed the position of a caregiver rather than that of a wife, resulting in a loss of her sense of self. Rezia no longer possesses an independent identity as she once did in Milan (Woolf, 1925, p. 17). She continually reminisces about her former self and compares it to the life she has chosen to settle in—a life she describes as "torture" (Woolf, 1925, p. 47). Rezia has been exposed to a new life and a different culture, prompting her to question both her identity and her choices: "Why not left in Milan? Why tortured? Why?" (Woolf, 1925, p. 47), while simultaneously grappling with an internal conflict between her aspirations and her current reality.

Likewise, the societal standards imposed on men significantly shape their self-perception. Conner (2015) asserts that, following the war, Septimus was incapable of fulfilling the masculine roles dictated by society, disintegrating his sense

of identity. Septimus exhibits neither physical nor psychological strength; he no longer possesses solidity and cannot express his feelings: "He was not Septimus now" (Woolf, 1925, p. 17). His pre-war identity differs from his post-war self. Before the debilitating effects of the war took hold, Septimus represented society's conception of a traditional man—brave, cultured, and patriotic. He enlisted out of duty and romanticized ideals. He was profoundly influenced by literature and plays, so much so that he found beauty even in war. However, the traumatic events he experienced during the war imposed a different identity that completely shattered his personality. In an unexpected turn, Septimus's experience diverged from the conventional narrative of a play. Instead of returning from the war as a hero, he emerged as an emotionally broken person struggling with his identity and his life's purpose.

Theme of Isolation

Clarissa endures her feelings of loneliness and disconnection in silence; she attempts to escape these emotions through social gatherings and public appearances. For Clarissa, bringing people together and hosting parties is not just for fun but rather represents a mask in which she hides her inner isolation. She perpetually senses, as she observes the taxi cabs, that she is "out, out, far out to sea and alone" (Woolf, 1925, p. 6). Despite all her efforts, Clarissa still feels invisible and strange in relation to her environment, husband, and herself. She lives with the apprehension of loneliness and loss, even before its occurrence. The traumatic experience she endured during her separation from Peter continues to resonate within her; although she is still in a relationship with Richard, she imagines that he left her and she is alone again forever.

Rezia's pain remains invisible and unacknowledged (Woolf, 1925, p. 17). Rezia experienced profound isolation from the external world, as she was unable to articulate her suffering to those around her, including Septimus. Despite her deteriorating mental and physical condition, Rezia's suffering went unrecognized by those around her. Rezia's sense of loneliness is expressed in her crying, "I am alone; I am alone!" (Woolf, 1925, p. 17), which reflects her internal conflict. Her despair deepens whenever she reflects upon her past, the unfulfilled aspirations she could not realize, and the loneliness she experiences in her present. These inner conflicts made Rezia face her unresolved traumas for the first time and grieve for her life.

The main factor in Rezia's sense of isolation was her marriage to Septimus. After the end of the war, Septimus isolates himself in his inner world. As she walks alone, reflecting on her suffering, she observes her husband from a distance and notes that he is no longer the man she once knew. After the suffering of war was over, Septimus remained trapped in its horrors, which led him to lose interest in what was happening around him, as he always sat alone under the shadow of the hallucinations of what remained from the war.

Septimus's feeling of isolation becomes more apparent now when his solitude reflects the experience of death itself. Rezia, observing her husband's growing detachment, senses that no one, including herself, can truly understand his suffering. Nevertheless, despite the pain that comes with solitude, he can be free from traditions, relationships, and pain and die alone.

Self-Discovery and Personal Development

For Septimus, his decision to commit suicide stemmed from the constant pressures to which he was subjected. He did not feel safe, as no one could understand what he was going through, and instead of listening to him and trying to make him feel secure enough to communicate his pain, society, Dr. Holmes, Bradshaw, and even his wife urged him to forget about what occurred during the war and strive to live a normal life. Septimus did not have the chance to remember properly and grieve his suffering except through hallucinations. Consequently, he could not reconnect with his surroundings and chose to throw himself out of the window. Ironically, Clarissa's healing comes from the end of Septimus's suffering. Septimus's external suffering reflects the internal conflict Clarissa is experiencing. As Caruth (1996) argues, a traumatized person learns from the experiences of others. Septimus's death brings Clarissa a sense of satisfaction. Although she did not meet him, she believes that the suffering Septimus endured resonates with her own experiences. Clarissa views Septimus's suicide as a way to communicate and reconnect. For her, his action represents the end of suffering and a new beginning; thus, she realizes that she must live with her trauma.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, both Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) portray the effects of society on their characters. Plath's and Woolf's novels represent the impact of society on the characters' mental health. In addition, both novels embody the traumas that resulted from these pressures, based on themes that support gender roles, isolation, and identity. Both Woolf and Plath portrayed their characters' conflicts through different narration styles. Both authors also presented the impact of societal pressures on their mental health, as they depicted the external conflict with societal tradition and expectations, as well as the internal conflict that is related to their emotional and psychological breakdowns. Both literary works, Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), present the journey of their characters who were exposed to traumatic events. Plath's novel explains the journey of Esther and Joan towards mental illness. Esther appears at the beginning of the novel as a scholarship student who is unable to engage with her surroundings. As the novel develops, Esther feels more isolated and trapped under the constant pressures placed on her, which pushes her to commit suicide in various ways and end up getting hospitalized. Nevertheless, Esther survives at the end of the novel when she witnesses Joan's tragic death; Joan could not deal with society and its standards and thus decided to end her life to escape. As a result, both novels illustrate the profound impact of trauma on a character's identity and life choices. While some characters failed to recover from the impact of the traumatic events, as Joan and Septimus

did through their suicide, other characters, such as Esther and Clarissa, learned from their experiences and the suffering of others, which led them to view life from a different perspective.

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