

Mental Illness Struggles in Some Contemporary

Selected Novels, A Critical Study

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Abstract :

This comparative analysis explores the representation of mental illness in contemporary literature, specifically focusing on the works of Sylvia Plath, and Janet Fitch. By critically examining some of their novels.

The analysis begins with Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, a semi-autobiographical novel that delves into the protagonist's descent into mental illness. Plath's raw and introspective writing offers a deeply personal portrayal of mental health struggles.

Janet Fitch's *White Oleander* presents a unique portrayal of mental illness through the experiences of Astrid Magnussen, a teenage girl navigating the foster care system after her mother's imprisonment. Fitch's novel explores the effects of abuse, loss, and abandonment on Astrid's mental health and distress.

Through this comparative analysis, readers gain insight into the diverse ways in which contemporary literature grapples with mental illness. By critically analyzing these works, this study contributes to the understanding of mental health representation in literature and its potential for fostering empathy and awareness in society.

Keywords: (mental illness, contemporary literature, Sylvia Plath, Janet Fitch, The Bell Jar, White Oleander).

صراعات الإعتلال الذهني في بعض الروايات المعاصرة المُختاره ، دراسه نقديه

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الملخص:

الدراسة التحليلية الحالية تهدف الى إستكشاف أساليب تصوير الإعتلال الذهني في الأدب المعاصر، وذلك من خلال التركيز بشكل خاص على أعمال سيلفيا بلاث وجانيت فيتش، من خلال فحص بعض رواياتهم بشكل نقدي حيثُ تبدأ الدراسة ب رواية سيلفيا، شبه سيره ذاتيه حيثُ إنها *The Bell Jar* تتعمق في إنزلاق بطله الروايه الى المرض العقلي، تقدم كتابات بلاث الأوليه والتصويريه صورة شخصية عميقة عن صراعات مريض العِلل الذهنيه.

أيضاً ، تقدم *White Oleander* لجانيت فيتش صورة فريدة للمرض العقلي من خلال خبرات أستريد ماجنوسن ، وهي فتاة مراهقة تنتقل في نظام الرعاية بالتبني بعد سجن والدتها، حيثُ تستكشف رواية فيتش آثار الإساءة والخسارة والتخلي عن أستريد على الصحة العقلية والاضطراب.

من خلال هذا التحليل المقارن، يكتسب القراء نظرة ثاقبة للطرق المتنوعة التي يتعامل بها الأدب المعاصر مع الأمراض العقلية. من خلال التحليل النقدي لهذه الأعمال ، تساهم هذه الدراسة في فهم أبعاد الإعتلال الذهني و الصحة العقلية في الأدب وإمكانية تعزيز التعاطف والوعي في المجتمع مع هذه الفئة من الأشخاص. الكلمات المفتاحية : (الإعتلال الذهني، الأدب المعاصر ، سيلفيا بلاث،جانيت فيتش).

Portrayal of Characters with Mental Illness:

First of all, Mental illness denotes a wide range of mental health disorders that affect any person's thinking, mood, and behaviour. Mental illness includes anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, schizophrenia, and addictive behaviours (Busfield, 2011, p.1).

The portrayal of characters with mental illness in contemporary novels is a crucial aspect to consider. Authors have the opportunity to offer authentic and empathetic depictions that reflect the complexities of mental health struggles. By delving into the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of these characters, authors can provide readers with a deeper understanding of the human experience of living with mental illness.

Authenticity and accuracy are paramount when portraying mental illness. Authors who draw from personal experiences, conduct thorough research, or consult with mental health professionals demonstrate a commitment to creating realistic representations.

Moreover, the context in which mental illness is depicted should be examined critically. Some novels may explore mental health issues within the larger social, cultural, or historical context, shedding light on the influence of external factors on mental well-being. These novels can offer valuable social commentary and encourage discussions about the systemic issues that contribute to mental health struggles. However, it is important to avoid reducing mental illness to a mere reflection of external circumstances, as it is a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and environmental factors.

Novels like *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, known for its semi-autobiographical nature, and *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch are good

examples of the depiction of the impact of mental illness. Both exemplify the depth that can be achieved through personal understanding and research. Avoiding stereotypes and clichés is also crucial in the depiction of mental illness.

These novels offer a critical examination of mental illness and its representation in contemporary literature. They shed light on the complex interplay between personal experiences, societal pressures, and the internal struggles faced by individuals grappling with mental health issues. By providing nuanced and thought-provoking portrayals of mental illness, these authors contribute to a broader understanding of the human condition and challenge societal stigmas surrounding mental health.

Novels should strive to present multidimensional characters who are not solely defined by their mental health conditions. By avoiding one-dimensional representations, authors can challenge misconceptions and promote a more nuanced understanding of mental health struggles (Andreasen, 1974).

Additionally, it is essential to recognize the diversity of mental health experiences. Mental illness includes an extensive range of conditions, each with its unique manifestations and challenges. Contemporary novels should reflect this diversity by depicting characters with a variety of mental health

conditions. By doing so, authors can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of mental health struggles.

Also, by depicting characters with different mental health conditions, authors can foster a more inclusive understanding of mental health struggles and contribute to a broader representation of diverse experiences (Stuart, 2016).

Critical Evaluation of Representations:

A critical evaluation of the representations of mental illness in contemporary novels is essential to understand their strengths and limitations. By critically examining these portrayals, we can assess the impact they have on readers' perceptions and understanding of mental health struggles.

One aspect to evaluate is the research and understanding demonstrated by authors. Novels that reflect extensive research, personal experiences, or consultations with mental health professionals tend to provide more accurate and authentic representations. Such novels contribute to a deeper understanding of mental health struggles and can challenge societal misconceptions.

The representation of mental illness in contemporary novels is a complex and multifaceted subject, with authors employing various approaches and perspectives to depict these struggles. While some novels

provide sensitive and nuanced portrayals, others may perpetuate stereotypes or present a simplistic view of mental health issues. It is important to critically analyze these representations to understand their strengths and limitations.

Additionally, the role of language and narrative techniques in representing mental illness should be considered. Contemporary novels employ various literary devices to convey the subjective experiences of mental health struggles. Stream-of-consciousness, fragmented narratives, or metaphorical language can capture the chaotic nature of mental illness, allowing readers to engage with the characters' internal worlds.

The balance between artistic expression and responsible representation is another crucial consideration. While creative narrative techniques can effectively convey the subjective experiences of mental illness, authors must be cautious not to romanticize or sensationalize these struggles. Responsible representation requires an understanding of the potential impact on readers and a commitment to avoid continuing harmful stereotypes or indifferent mental health issues. So, authors must strike a delicate balance between artistic expression and responsible representation when depicting mental illness.

The impact of these representations on readers' perceptions and attitudes towards mental illness is also significant. Novels that present

empathetic portrayals can foster empathy, increase understanding. On the other hand, harmful representations can reinforce stereotypes, perpetuate misconceptions, and contribute to the marginalization of individuals with mental health conditions (Corrigan, & Watson, 2002, p.p. 16–20).

Critical Views

The Bell Jar written by the American writer Sylvia Plath (born 27th October 1932/ died 11th February 1963 in London), and *White Oleander* by the American author Janet Fitch (born 9 November 1955), both novels are notable works that concentrate on the representation of mental illness in contemporary literature. Each novel presents a unique perspective on mental health struggles, offering insights into the lived experiences of the characters and exploring the societal and personal factors that contribute to their conditions.

The Bell Jar falls squarely in the category of coming-of-age fiction, it is written in the way that partly autobiography and partially fiction, as if it is being a fictionalized explanation of the writer's life (Dictionary, 2002, p.2).

The Bell Jar traces the path of Esther Greenwood, the main character and narrator, as she undergoes a critical period in her life where she transitions from a naïve adolescent to an experienced young woman.

The novel (which published under the name of Victoria Lucas as a pseudonym in 1963 in England while in America in 1971), follows the story

of Esther Greenwood, a young woman grappling with depression and existential anguish. Plath's portrayal of mental illness is raw and introspective, delving into the depths of Esther's mind as she experiences a breakdown and undergoes treatment. Plath's writing captures the isolating and suffocating nature of depression, highlighting the humiliation surrounding mental health during the time the novel is set (Summer 1953; at New York City) (Plath, 1972).

An example of Greenwood's inner anguish described by her own words, as she said that:

"The sickness rolled through me in great waves. After each wave it would fade away, leave me limp as a wet leaf, then I would feel it rising up in me again, the glittering white torture chamber tiles under my feet and over my head, all four sides closed in, squeezed me to pieces" (Plath, 2008, p.36).

Here, Greenwood words encapsulates Sylvia Plath's vivid and evocative portrayal of the protagonist's mental illness. Through this description, Plath conveys the overwhelming and cyclical nature of Esther's suffering, creating a deeply immersive experience for the reader.

The use of metaphorical language, such as "the sickness rolled through me in great waves," emphasizes the intensity and uncontrollable nature of Esther's mental anguish. The waves suggest a relentless and overpowering force that engulfs her, leaving her feeling powerless and

depleted. This imagery effectively conveys the physical and emotional toll of her mental illness, as well as the unpredictability of its onset and subsiding (KUMLU, E. (2010).

The mention of feeling "limp as a wet leaf " further enhances the reader's understanding of Esther's vulnerability and fragility in the face of her mental struggles. Plath's choice of simile vividly communicates Esther's sense of weakness and lack of agency, likening her to a delicate and easily manipulated object. This imagery evokes sympathy and compassion in the reader, as they witness Esther's suffering and empathize with her plight.

The description of the "glittering white torture chamber tiles" and the sense of confinement conveys the claustrophobic and suffocating nature of Esther's mental state. Plath's use of descriptive language creates a vivid and oppressive atmosphere, capturing the feeling of being trapped and overwhelmed. This imagery reflects the supposed bell jar, symbolizing the isolating and imprisoning effects of society and the protagonist's own psychological struggles.

By employing such rich language, Plath effectively transports the reader into Esther's internal world, enabling them to experience her torment firsthand. The passage engages the reader's senses and emotions, evoking a visceral response that deepens their understanding of Esther's mental illness (Smith,2012, p.p.355-366).

From a critical perspective, this passage highlights Plath's mastery of language and her ability to articulate the complex and intense experience of mental illness. Through her poetic and evocative prose, Plath avoids romanticizing or trivializing mental suffering. Instead, she confronts the reader with the raw and uncomfortable reality of Esther's condition, challenging societal taboos and shedding light on the often misunderstood and stigmatized realm of mental health (De Villiers, 2019, p.p. 1-11).

However, it is important to note that Plath's portrayal of mental illness is specific to Esther's experiences and should not be generalized to all individuals with similar conditions. While the passage effectively captures the essence of Esther's suffering, it is essential to recognize the diversity of mental health experiences and avoid essentializing or universalizing them based on a single narrative.

The Bell Jar is a powerful critique of societal expectations and the pressures faced by women, while also examining the complex interplay between identity, creativity, and mental well-being. Plath's work sheds light on the pressures faced by women in a patriarchal society and delves into the profound effects of these pressures on the protagonist's mental health.

One of the central themes in *The Bell Jar* is the oppressive nature of societal expectations, particularly for women. Plath presents a vivid portrayal

of 1950s society, which imposes rigid gender roles and stifling expectations on women.

Through the character of Esther Greenwood, Plath exposes the inherent contradiction between the aspirations and ambitions of young women and the limited opportunities available to them. Esther, a talented and ambitious young woman, struggles to find her place in a world that restricts her choices and diminishes her worth based on societal norms (ibid, p.10).

The novel also explores the complex relationship between identity, creativity, and mental well-being. Esther's descent into mental illness is closely intertwined with her struggle to establish her own identity and reconcile her desires for personal and creative fulfillment.

Plath draws a parallel between Esther's emotional confusion and her creative aspirations, emphasizing the inherent link between the two. The pressure to conform and the suppression of her creative spirit contribute to Esther's failing mental state, highlighting the devastating consequences of stifled self-expression.

Plath's masterful use of language and imagery adds depth to her critique of societal expectations. *The Bell Jar*, a recurring symbol throughout the novel, represents the disgusting confinement and isolation experienced by Esther. It encapsulates the societal forces that hinder her growth and

reinforce her feelings of alienation. Plath's vivid descriptions of mental anguish and the portrayal of Esther's distorted perception of reality provide an intense commentary on the damaging effects of societal pressures on mental well-being (Fejer, & Talif, 2014).

Furthermore, *The Bell Jar* challenges the notion of mental illness as a personal failing or weakness. Plath's portrayal of Esther's mental health struggles rejects the prevailing humiliation surrounding mental illness and emphasizes its universality. Through Esther's experiences, Plath humanizes mental illness, presenting it as a consequence of systemic pressures and societal neglect rather than an individual flaw. This subversion of societal norms serves as a critique of the inadequate support and understanding provided to individuals grappling with mental health issues (Miyatsu,2018, p.p.51-69).

Finally, *The Bell Jar* continues to resonate with readers due to its timeless relevance. Plath's exploration of the complexities of identity, creativity, and mental well-being remains appropriate in contemporary society, where societal expectations and pressures persist, even though in different forms.

As for *White Oleander*, the novel written by the American writer Janet Fitch (born in November 9th. 1955) it centers around Astrid Magnussen, a young girl who is placed in foster care after her mother is imprisoned. Fitch

portrays Astrid's journey through various foster homes, each presenting its own challenges and emotional confusion. Astrid's experiences reflect themes of abandonment, loss, and the search for identity, all of which contribute to her mental health struggles. Fitch's novel sensitively explores the impact of hurtful experiences on an individual's psyche and the long-lasting effects they can have on mental well-being.

Astrid Magnussen, the daughter of a narcissistic artist, lands herself in jail as a result of killing her boyfriend; in the absence of her mother, Astrid ,whose odyssey through a series of Los Angeles foster homes, each its own universe, with its own laws, its own dangers, its own hard lessons to be learned, becomes a redeeming and surprising journey which through she discovers new parts of her away from her mother's shadow (Vogt, 2014).

It is a story of anger, loss and suffering for Astrid because of her selfish mom (Comer, 2004, p. 40).

Here are some words that reflect her feelings of hatred, she said that: "Isn't it funny. I'm enjoying my hatred so much more than ever enjoyed love. Love is temperamental. Tiring. Love uses you, changes its mind. But hatred, that's something you can use. Sculpt. Wield. It's hard, or soft, however you need it. Love humiliates you, but Hatred cradles you"(Fitch, 2013, p.34).

The above quoted words which belong to Astrid reflect her experience of hatred. This exploration of emotions raises several thought-provoking

themes, such as the complexities of love, the attraction of hatred, and their implications for mental well-being. Fitch's novel critically examines these themes and presents a description of their impact on Astrid's journey and her struggles with mental illness.

One of the central themes in *White Oleander* is the exploration of love and its temperamental nature. Astrid's reflection highlights the demanding and changing nature of love, describing it as tiring and something that uses and manipulates individuals. Fitch presents a critical perspective on the traditional romanticized notions of love, challenging the idea that love alone can bring fulfillment and happiness.

By emphasizing the flaws and vulnerabilities inherent in love, Fitch questions its ability to provide stability and emotional well-being, particularly in the face of difficult circumstances (Gale, 2018).

The contrasting emotion explored in the quote is hatred. Astrid expresses a newfound enjoyment and power in her hatred, describing it as something she can use and sculpt to her advantage. Fitch presents a fascinating perspective on hatred, highlighting its potential for intervention and control. The quote suggests that hatred can serve as a protective mechanism for Astrid, allowing her to regain a sense of power and self-worth in the face of her experiences of loss, abandonment, and the search for identity.

This exploration of hatred in the novel raises psychological questions regarding its potential as a coping mechanism for individuals facing adversity. Fitch presents a complex portrayal of this emotion, neither wholly condemning nor glorifying it (Hall, 1999, p.p. 213–214).

Instead, she invites readers to critically examine the ways in which emotions like hatred can shape one's identity and influence mental well-being. By acknowledging the presence and impact of darker emotions, Fitch challenges the binary view of emotions as strictly positive or negative, emphasizing the importance of understanding their complexities (Gale, 2018).

The theme of abandonment permeates throughout the novel, contributing significantly to Astrid's mental health struggles. Astrid's mother's imprisonment acts as the catalyst for her journey through foster care, leaving her feeling abandoned and unmoored. This sense of abandonment shapes Astrid's perception of herself and her relationships, as she grapples with feelings of unworthiness and a constant search for stability and belonging. Fitch sensitively portrays the long-lasting effects of abandonment on Astrid's mental well-being, shedding light on the profound impact of early life experiences on one's sense of self and emotional resilience (Vaknin, 2009).

Loss is another significant theme in *White Oleander*. Astrid encounters various instances of grief and separation throughout the novel, which further

contribute to her mental health struggles. Fitch explores the complexities of loss and its repercussions on Astrid's psyche, highlighting the pain of separation and the struggle to process these losses. By examining Astrid's experiences of loss, Fitch emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and processing grief as a crucial aspect of maintaining mental well-being.

The search for identity is a recurring motif in Astrid's journey, as she attempts to establish a sense of self amidst the challenges and uncertainties she faces. Fitch explores the connection between identity formation and mental well-being, suggesting that a lack of stable identity can contribute to emotional turmoil and vulnerability.

Astrid's experiences of loss, abandonment, and the upheaval of foster care complicate her search for identity, adding layers of complexity to her struggles with mental health. Fitch skillfully portrays the impact of these factors on Astrid's journey, inviting readers to reflect on the significance of identity in shaping one's mental well-being (Callanan, 2008, p.p.495-518).

In analyzing the quote provided, it is crucial to note that Astrid's perspective may not represent a universal or healthy approach to emotions such as love and hatred. Fitch presents Astrid's reflections as a product of her specific circumstances and experiences. Astrid's embrace of hatred as a source of empowerment can be seen as a coping mechanism in response to her upsetting past. However, it is important to approach this perspective

critically, recognizing that sustained engagement with hatred can have detrimental effects on mental health and interpersonal relationships (Gale, 2018).

In general, Janet Fitch's *White Oleander* critically examines themes of love, hatred, abandonment, loss, and the search for identity, and their impact on mental well-being. Fitch presents a portrayal of these themes, challenging conventional notions and highlighting the complexities and contradictions inherent in human emotions.

The exploration of these themes through Astrid's perspective invites readers to critically reflect on the influences of societal expectations, personal experiences, and coping mechanisms on mental health. By delving into the details of these emotions, Fitch offers a thought-provoking examination of the human psyche and the challenges individuals face in their pursuit of emotional well-being.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the depiction of mental illness in contemporary novels is a subject that requires critical examination. Authors approach this topic in

various ways, and it is important to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their professionals, or conducted thorough research can add depth and authenticity to their portrayals.

On the other hand, a critical examination of the depiction of mental illness in contemporary novels is necessary. It involves evaluating the research and understanding demonstrated by authors, assessing the diversity of representations, analyzing narrative techniques, considering the social and cultural context, and assessing the ethical implications. By engaging in critical analysis, readers can navigate a literary landscape that contributes to a more informed and empathetic understanding of mental health struggles.

So, the critical analysis of *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath further deepens our understanding of the issues readers are interested in.

Both *White Oleander* and *The Bell Jar* offer emotional and thought-provoking representations of mental illness. Through the journeys of their respective protagonists, Astrid Magnussen and Esther Greenwood, these novels explore the complexities of mental health struggles and shed light on the profound impact of societal expectations, upsetting experiences, and the search for identity.

In *White Oleander*, Fitch sensitively portrays Astrid's experiences within the foster care system, highlighting the lasting effects of abandonment, loss, and the search for identity on her mental well-being. Fitch emphasizes the importance of recognizing the impact of hurtful experiences on an individual's psyche, challenging the humiliation surrounding mental illness.

Through Astrid's narrative, Fitch invites readers to reflect on the systemic failures within the foster care system and advocates for a more compassionate and supportive approach to those who have experienced suffering.

On the other hand, in *The Bell Jar*, Plath offers a deeply reflective and raw depiction of Esther's descent into mental illness. The novel critiques societal expectations, particularly those imposed on women, and explores the interplay between identity, creativity, and mental well-being. Plath challenges the romanticized notions of love and confronts the reader with the harsh realities of mental anguish. By humanizing mental illness and exposing the limitations of societal norms, Plath encourages a more empathetic and inclusive understanding of mental health struggles.

Both novels emphasize the multifaceted nature of mental illness and reject simplistic and branding narratives. They explore the complexity of emotions and the impact of personal experiences, societal pressures, and

suffering on mental well-being. Through Astrid and Esther's stories, Fitch and Plath highlight the individuality of mental health struggles and underscore the importance of understanding the broader contexts in which they arise.

Additionally, both authors navigate the delicate balance between artistic expression and responsible representation of mental illness. Fitch and Plath employ rich language, vivid imagery, and powerful metaphors to convey the depths of their protagonists' emotional confusion. However, they also avoid romanticizing or sensationalizing these struggles, grounding their narratives in the realities of the characters' lives and the societal pressures they face.

These novels remind us of the diverse experiences of individuals grappling with mental illness. They call attention to the importance of understanding the complex interplay between personal circumstances, societal pressures, and the search for identity in shaping one's mental well-being. By delving into the depths of human emotion and experience, *White Oleander* and *The Bell Jar* challenge readers to critically examine their own perceptions, biases, and the systemic factors that contribute to mental health struggles.

Ultimately, these novels serve as emotional reminders that mental illness is not a personal failing but a multifaceted human experience that

warrants empathy, understanding, and support. Through Astrid and Esther's narratives, Janet Fitch and Sylvia Plath make valuable contributions to the representation of mental illness in literature, fostering a more inclusive understanding and encouraging conversations surrounding mental health in society.

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