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## ARTICULATING WOMEN'S OPPRESSION AND LIBERATION IN THE AWAKENING AND THE BELL JAR

Shoymardonova Gulandom Elbek kizi

Master Student of Asian University of Technologies;

Karshi, Kashkadarya;

Tel: +998996259066;

E-mail: [shoymardonovagulandom01@gmail.com](mailto:shoymardonovagulandom01@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This article examines how women's oppression and their search for liberation are depicted in two influential works of American literature: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. By comparing Edna Pontellier and Esther Greenwood, the study highlights how both authors reveal the psychological, social, and cultural constraints that shape women's identities. Using feminist literary criticism, the paper explores the protagonists' struggles for autonomy and the narrative strategies that express these conflicts. Despite being written over sixty years apart, both novels demonstrate the persistence of structural barriers to women's freedom and foreshadow later feminist discourse on gender, mental health, and self-realization.

Keywords: feminist criticism, female identity, women's oppression, liberation, *The Awakening*, *The Bell Jar*, American literature

### Introduction

The twentieth century brought dramatic changes in women's social status and rights, which literature often reflects and critiques. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) stand out as significant texts that expose the limits placed on women's selfhood in patriarchal societies (Walker, 2001; Showalter, 1985). The protagonists—Edna Pontellier and Esther Greenwood—struggle with cultural expectations, internal conflicts, and the contradictions of asserting individuality in a world determined to contain them



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(Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). This paper applies feminist perspectives to show how both works articulate the tension between women's oppression and their desire for emancipation.

Historical and Literary Context. Published at the end of the nineteenth century, *The Awakening* shocked its contemporary audience with its frank treatment of female desire and resistance to marital norms (Toth, 1999). Its scandalous reception led to decades of neglect until feminist critics like Nancy Walker (2001) and Emily Toth (1999) re-evaluated its importance as an early feminist narrative. In contrast, *The Bell Jar* was written in the mid-twentieth century, when domestic ideals were heavily promoted in postwar America (Friedan, 1963). Plath's novel, drawing on her own struggles, portrays a talented young woman's mental collapse under the weight of conflicting demands for professional achievement and feminine propriety (Showalter, 1985; Wagner-Martin, 1992). Critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) argue that both works anticipate later feminist debates about the medicalization of female deviance and the "problem that has no name" described by Betty Friedan.

Despite their different eras, both novels pose similar questions about how women can assert agency while confronting social expectations that define them as wives, mothers, and passive figures (Friedan, 1963).

Edna Pontellier's repression is embedded in her identity as a "mother-woman" in Creole society, an ideal she quietly rejects (Walker, 2001). Elizabeth LeBlanc (1996) highlights that Edna's refusal to subordinate her individuality to domestic roles marks a radical step, but also isolates her from her community and family. Chopin's subtle critique exposes how rigid expectations confine women not only through social norms but through internalized guilt when they attempt to assert autonomy.

Edna's interactions with other characters, such as Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, further illustrate the stark contrast between conventional womanhood and unconventional artistic independence. While Madame Ratignolle embodies perfect domesticity, Mademoiselle Reisz lives alone and free but at the cost of social ostracism (Toth, 1999). This binary forces Edna to confront an impossible choice between selfhood and societal acceptance.



Esther Greenwood's oppression is less explicit but equally powerful. Her mental crisis symbolizes the clash between her intellectual ambitions and the restrictive gender norms of 1950s America (Showalter, 1985). Elaine Showalter (1985) and Linda Wagner-Martin (1992) emphasize that Esther's breakdown reflects not only personal trauma but the internalized contradictions of a woman trying to be successful, sexually pure, and ultimately a compliant wife. Unlike Edna, whose struggle is externalized through defiance of domestic life, Esther's rebellion is internal, manifesting as depression and suicidal ideation.

Her distorted perception of reality under the "bell jar" signifies how deeply societal expectations infiltrate women's minds, suffocating any authentic sense of self (Plath, 1971). Moreover, the doctors and institutions in the novel symbolize male authority figures who diagnose, pathologize, and attempt to "fix" women who deviate from norms (Showalter, 1985). In both narratives, female characters are caught between the desire for self-definition and the crushing psychological burden of enforced conformity.

Both novels use intimate first-person narration and psychological depth to illustrate how social control becomes internalized, producing feelings of guilt, alienation, and despair (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). Through Edna's gradual emotional awakening and Esther's mental fragmentation, Chopin and Plath highlight how the mind itself becomes the battleground where oppression is perpetuated and, occasionally, resisted.

### **Articulating Liberation: Acts of Resistance and Their Limits**

Against this backdrop of constraint, both protagonists attempt to break free. Edna's "awakening" involves exploring her sexuality, pursuing art, and defying her husband's authority (Toth, 1999). However, as Nancy Walker (2001) argues, her society provides no acceptable alternative for a woman who refuses her prescribed domestic role. Edna's final act—her swim into the Gulf—has been variously interpreted as either a triumph of free will or a tragic surrender (LeBlanc, 1996).

Esther Greenwood's path is similarly ambiguous. Institutional psychiatry seeks to "cure" her deviation from the ideal of a cheerful, marriage-ready woman (Showalter, 1985). The "bell jar" metaphor captures the suffocating glass barrier



separating Esther from a healthy, liberated life. Linda Wagner-Martin (1992) notes that while Esther appears to recover, the novel's open ending leaves readers questioning whether true freedom is possible in a culture still hostile to independent women.

In both cases, the women's resistance disrupts their lives but fails to dismantle the structures that confine them. The novels thus highlight the paradox of seeking personal liberation in a society fundamentally opposed to female autonomy (Friedan, 1963).

### **Narrative Techniques and Symbolic Motifs**

Chopin and Plath deploy rich symbolism and innovative narrative forms to express the tension between constraint and freedom. In *The Awakening*, the sea functions as an emblem of both rebirth and oblivion, embodying Edna's longing for an existence beyond social conventions (Toth, 1999). Birds, too, symbolize the simultaneous desire for flight and the reality of entrapment—analyzed in depth by Gilbert and Gubar (1979).

In *The Bell Jar*, the glass jar distorts reality and amplifies Esther's sense of isolation (Showalter, 1985). Plath's shifts between sardonic humor and stark despair deepen the reader's understanding of Esther's mental state and critique the psychiatric system's role in policing female deviance (Wagner-Martin, 1992). These artistic choices not only render the protagonists' interior worlds but also critique the cultural systems that produce and maintain women's subordination (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).

### **Continuities and Contrasts**

Though written decades apart, both works reveal a continuity of feminist concerns: the policing of female sexuality, the stifling of creative ambition, and the pathologizing of women's dissatisfaction (Showalter, 1985; Friedan, 1963). At the same time, the differences in historical context highlight the slow progress of social change. Edna's society at the turn of the century offered virtually no alternatives for a woman seeking independence, whereas Esther's 1950s America ostensibly expanded women's options but still demanded conformity through marriage and motherhood (Friedan, 1963).



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As scholars like Elaine Showalter (1985) and Betty Friedan (1963) argue, both novels anticipate the feminist consciousness-raising that would gain momentum in the 1960s and 1970s.

## **Conclusion**

The *Awakening* and *The Bell Jar* endure as powerful explorations of the psychological and social forces that restrict women's freedom. Chopin and Plath expose the profound costs of female nonconformity while deliberately refusing to offer simple resolutions or neat moral lessons. Their open-ended conclusions compel readers to grapple with the harsh reality that individual acts of defiance often clash with deeply entrenched social structures, leaving true liberation tragically incomplete.

This comparative study underscores that feminist literary analysis remains indispensable for revealing how literature reflects, critiques, and even shapes cultural attitudes toward gender roles. By tracing the inner lives of Edna Pontellier and Esther Greenwood, these novels illuminate how societal expectations can penetrate the most private realms of consciousness, turning women's minds into contested spaces between rebellion and resignation.

Moreover, the novels invite readers to consider how far society has progressed—and how much further it must go—to dismantle systemic barriers to women's autonomy and psychological well-being. They remind us that mental health cannot be separated from social context: for many women, personal crises are often symptoms of broader cultural contradictions and inequalities.

By articulating the struggles and silences of women who dared to question their prescribed identities, Chopin and Plath contribute enduring insights that continue to resonate with contemporary discussions about female agency, reproductive rights, and the intersection of gender and mental health. Their works challenge modern readers to examine not only historical injustices but also the subtle ways that gendered constraints persist today.

In essence, *The Awakening* and *The Bell Jar* remain vital touchstones for understanding the complex dance between oppression and liberation—a dance that literature, society, and feminist scholarship must continue to interrogate until the promise of equality becomes a lived reality.



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