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**The Portrayal of Mental Illness in Modern American Literature: A Comparative Analysis
of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar and Fredrick Exley's A Fan's Notes**

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Master Degree in Literature and
Civilization

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that the content of this academic paper entitled `` The Portrayal Mental Illness in Modern American Literature: A Comparative Analysis of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar and Fredrick Exley's A Fan's Notes`` is my own personal work, and I confirm that all academic sources that are mentioned in this work has been acknowledged and referenced.

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Date: 08/06/2025

Dedication

To the people whom without I would not be her, my dear, loving parents Abdelkader and
Yamina Chaib.

To my friend Benattou Nourhane, cousins and relatives thank you for the love, care, and support
you have shown me through the years.

Acknowledgment

This present work would not have been possible without the guidance, support, assistance, and supervision of Dr. Ouhiba Nawal. I would love to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to her for her time, insightful vision, wise advices and patient while correcting this work.

I would also love to extend my deepest thanks to the members of the jury, Dr. Amaria Mahdaoui the president, and Prof. Hana Berzoug the examiner, for taking the time to read and evaluate my thesis, and for their valuable feedback and observations.

Abstract

Mental illness has always been a central theme in literature mainly in modern American literature where writers like Sylvia Plath and Fredrick Exley were often aspire from their own, lived experiences with mental illness to offer raw literary works that reveals individuals' psychological struggles. Therefore, this research aims to analyze these authors' works and their portrayal of mental illness as well as their characters' psychological battles, using a psychoanalytical framework. This study examines how each author depict mental illness in a unique way focusing on the role of society roles, gendered ideals and identity formation, while Plath expose the oppressive demands of femininity in the modern American society, Exley reflects the societal masculine ideals placed on men revealing how these unrealistic demands strips people away from their own identity, ultimately leading to their mental as well as psychological breakdown. This thesis also argues that both works through unique narrative challenge these stigmatizing and marginalizing ideologies, promoting for creating supportive environment for mentally ill, and psychologically disturbed people.

Key Words: Gender ideologies, Identity Fragmentation, Mental Illness, Psychoanalysis Theory, Social expectations.

Table of Content

Declaration of Originality	II
Dedication	III
Acknowledgment	IV
Abstract	V
General Introduction	1
Chapter One: Modernism and Modern Literature	5
1.0 Introduction	5
1.1 Modernism as a Literary Movement	5
1.2 Historical Forces behind Literary Modernism	6
1.3 Main Traits of Modernist Literature	8
1.4 Modernism's Voice in American Literature	9
1.6 Voices of Disillusionment: Core Themes in American Modernist Literature	10
1.7 Shifting Foundations: How Modernism Reshaped American Culture and Identity	11
1.8 Reading Beneath the Surface: Psychoanalytic Perspectives in American Modernism	13
1.9 Anxieties of the Age: Mental Health and the Psychological Echoes of Modernism in American Literature	15
2.0 Conclusion:	16

Chapter Two: Exploring Mental Illness in Modern American Literature.....	19
1.0 Introduction.....	19
1.1 Understanding Mental Illness: A general overview.....	19
1.2 Representation of Mental Illness in Literature:.....	20
1.3 Mental Illness in Modern American Literature	22
1.4 Depicting Mental Illness in Modern American Literature	23
1.5 Mental Illness as a Reflection of Social Failure in Modern American Literature	24
1.6 The Struggle for Identity and Self-understanding in Modern American Literature	25
1.7 Social Expectations and Gender Norms in Modern American literature.....	27
1.8 Gender Conventions and the Formation of the Modern American Identity	28
1.9 Gender Roles, Identity Loss and Mental Illness in Modern American Literature	29
2.0 Conclusion	30
Chapter Three: Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles, Identity Loss, and Mental Illness in The Bell Jar and A Fan's Notes.....	33
1.0 Introduction.....	33
1.1 Gender Roles and Societal Expectations in The Bell Jar and A Fan's notes	33
1.2 Constrained Womanhood: Esther Greenwood's Rebellion in <i>The Bell Jar</i>	34

1.3 Fractured Masculinity: Exley's Struggle with Societal Ideals in <i>A Fan's Notes</i>	35
1.4 Mirrored Fractured: A Comparative Lens	36
1.5 Shattered Selves: The Crisis of Identity in <i>The Bell Jar</i> and <i>A Fan's Notes</i>	37
1.6 Esther's Identity Crisis in <i>The Bell Jar</i>	37
1.7 Exley's Loss of Selfhood in <i>The Fan's Notes</i>	38
1.8 The Fractured Psyches of Esther and Exley: A Comparative Analysis	39
1.9 Social Oppression and The Shattered Self: Mental Illness in <i>The Bell Jar</i> and <i>A Fan's Notes</i>	40
2.0 Exploring Esther's Psychological Turmoil in <i>The Bell Jar</i>	41
2.1 Exley's Psychological Journey in <i>A Fan's Notes</i>	42
2.2 Mirrors of Madness: A Comparative Study of Esther & Exley's Psychological Struggles.....	43
2.3 Conclusion	45

General Introduction

Literature is the mirror of the soul, it reveals individuals' feelings, unspoken fears and hidden desires, it reflects how their psyche, as well as their own view and understanding of life shift across time and place. As its genres and types differ from prose, to poetry, and drama literature core purpose is to transmit both entertainment and knowledge about our world, history, culture as well as ourselves and our relationships to one another. It offers people various lenses in which they can see and interpret the world around them, allowing them to question and understand their surroundings, emotions, internal thoughts, as well as their dreams and needs. Hence the late 19s and the early 20s literature mainly the Modern American literature offered a unique literary way of examining people's personal experiences with various social, historical, and cultural events emphasizing on how individuals internal, psychological states change and evolve through different, harsh periods and events.

Modern American literature is a powerful instrument that reflects the complex cultural, social, and historical development of the American nation as well as the true American dream, it symbolizes Americans' shift from the old, strict narrative to a bold and more experimental literary techniques, allowing modernists to embrace more complex, subjective and non-linear narrative which mirrors the fragmented reality of modern American world. these new narratives allowed writers to explore different themes such as the alienation, non-belonging, the WWI disillusionment, mental illness, identity crisis, as well as the rigid gendered, societal expectation. Modern American literature has mainly focused on shedding light on previously marginalized themes, as it also emphasized on the exploration of the modern American individuals and their loss of sense in a strict, limited society as well as their mental instability and psychological distress.

For this reason, the primary aim of this dissertation is to explore how individuals' inner psychological struggles is depicted in modern American literature emphasizing on themes of society restriction, identity crisis and mental health. Throughout a comparative analysis between *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *A Fan's Notes* by Fredrick Exley, this research seeks to examine how both authors draw from their own personal experiences in order to create emotionally raw and

vivid narratives to reflect the complexity of the human mind, reflecting the painful, and harsh realities men and women face for being mentally ill in a strict society.

In order to critically examine the Author's depiction of this theme in depicted in both novels, two major questions are being asked:

- How do the authors' personal experiences with mental illness influence their depiction of identity and the inner psychological struggles of their protagonists?
- How do the protagonists' experiences with mental illness in the novels contribute to their isolation, alienation, and loss of identity?

In response to these analytical questions, the following hypotheses were raised to guide this research:

1. The personal struggles of Sylvia Plath and Fredrick Exley with mental illness are deeply reflected through their protagonists' identities, as both authors use their own psychological experiences to shape characters who ache with internal conflicts, unstable self-understanding as well as a constant search of meaning.
2. The mental health challenges faced by the protagonists in both novels lead to a growing sense of isolation and alienation, pushing them to question the societal norms and gender dynamics as they embark on a personal journey to find meaning, and self-understanding beyond society's constraints and expectations.

To carry out this academic research, the researcher has utilized applicable scholarly online data and materials of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Fredrick Exley *A Fan's Notes*. These novels were chosen for a comparative study, with the use of psychoanalytical theory as an analytical approach. This research explores how mental illness is depicted in modern American literature, focusing on how the authors' personal sufferings affects their characters' portrayal, in addition to the societal restrictions and gender dynamics impact on the characters' psychological distress and identity reformulation.

In order to fulfil the finale objective this research is divided to three main chapters, the first chapter is a historical overview that offers a clear introduction of the literary movement modernism, highlighting the period in which it began as well as the socio-historical reasons that led to its emergence, this chapter also presents Freud's psychoanalysis as a central instrument to

this study. The second chapter is a theoretical chapter that defines mental illness as a concept and a central theme in modern American literature highlighting the reasons that lead to this mental disorder. moving to the third chapter, an analytical chapter that presents a comparative analysis between two different America modern literary works and their depiction of mental illness, social norms and identity crisis

Chapter One:

Modernism and Modern American Literature: Overview.

Chapter One: Modernism and Modern Literature**1.0 Introduction**

Modernism stands out as one of the most influential literary movements of the early 20th century, challenging the traditional beliefs and redefining the scope of art and literature. It emerged as a response to a significant social, cultural and historical changes, it set sights on the fragmented, complex and often the bewildering realities of the rapidly changing world. This chapter aims to examines modernism as a literary movement within the American context, exploring its historical origins, its rejection of traditional conventions and its focus on innovation. By delving into the historical background and highlighting the key characteristics, this chapter provides a deep insight into how modernism shaped American Literature and captured the complexities, hopes and tensions of its era.

1.1 Modernism as a Literary Movement

Modernism is one of the most revolutionary and significant literary movements of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, the movement appeared due to the rapid changes brought up by industrialization, urbanization and the catastrophic impact of the world war I. it sought to Reject the ideals of Victorianism which, in basic terms was a literary movement that celebrates emotions, the sublime view of nature, realism and societal morals and orders, in contrast Modernism refused the traditional forms of art, literature particularly poetry and fiction, as well as culture focusing on experimentation, innovation, and subjective experience. As notes in modernism by Peter Childs, Ezra Pound famously stated ``make it new`` (2017.p,3), which highlighted the movement's desire to break away from conventional tales, favoring more a fragmented, reflective method of storytelling.

Arthur Erickson described Modernism as a departure from the past, stating in his speech: “Modernism released us from the constraints of everything that had gone before with a euphoric sense of freedom” (2000), due to this shift in views, the trauma caused by the World War I, as well as the disillusionment with the traditional institutions and the growing sense of alienation, modernist writers were no longer interested in depicting reality as it is, such as Virginia Wolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and T.S Eliot’s *The Waste Land* which attempted to

uncover the human psyche, emotions, and perception deeply influenced by Sigmund Freud's ideas about the unconscious mind and the importance of dreams. In addition to Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of traditional morality¹ that impacted and encouraged other modernist writers like James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers*, Ezra Pound in *The Cantos*, and Thomas Mann *the Magic Land* that emphasis on exploring individuality, personal truth and the rejection of societal repression.

1.2 Historical Forces behind Literary Modernism

The Pre-Modern era was characterized by religious stability, cultural traditions and the belief in absolute truth. However, during that period, particularly in the mid-19th century many cultural, social, historical, intellectual and religious shifts and events occurred, creating a fertile ground for the modernist movement. One of the pivotal events that took place was The Industrial Revolution which Arnold Toynbee described as a transformation from medieval regulations to free markets, leading to a radical change in the way wealth was distributed, shedding lights on both economic and social systems (1884).

The Industrial Revolution, emerged during the 18th century but gained more prominence in the 19th century. It marked the transformation from the agrarian agricultural based economies to industrialized and technologically advanced ones, bringing forward mass production, mechanized manufacturing agriculture and urbanization. While this transformative shifts led to set of advantages and privileges contributing to the economic growth, technological development and social expansion, it also led to a deep negative impacts on several social groups primarily those from the working class or the poor ones. These groups were often forced to leave their rural areas to seek better opportunities in the urban, advanced cities. This displacement caused them to face numerous hardships such as, lack of labor rights, poor living conditions, loss of traditional livelihoods, and social inequalities (EBSCO, n.d).

These radical changes increased feelings of loss, alienation and non-belonging among the working class, a theme that was vividly explored in *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels who have notably declared: `` The history of all hitherto existing society is the

¹ **Critique of Traditional Morality:** Nietzsche believed that morality is a human invention to control and dominate others. Rather than inherent, universal truth.

history of class struggles``(2002,p.16), reflecting how the industrial revolution increased the tension between different social classes (the rich and the working class) leading to the rise of social oppression and alienation, which became central Themes in modernist literature. As the dehumanizing effect of the industrial revolution became central themes in modern literature many writers sought to explore how individuals felt oppressed and powerless in a developed, mechanized world. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), a significant literary piece that presents characters whose identities were shaped by the industrial pressures, as it illustrates how industrialization replaced individuals with mechanize making them think they are useless. despite the industrial revolution influence of modernist themes, there are other significant factors behind modernism's emergence.

Furthermore, one of the most influential factors of modernism's emergence were the philosophical and scientific shifts, brought up by the Enlightenment, a period best known as the ``Age of Reason``. A cultural, intellectual and a philosophical movement that coexisted with the Industrial Revolution and the Scientific Revolution during the 18th century. It emerged as a contradiction to traditions, religious believes as well as the authorities of the church and the monarchy. Immanuel Kant in his essay What is Enlightenment? he explained the motto of enlightenment as Sapere Aude! ``Have courage to use your own understanding! ``(n.d. p 02), as it also explains how this movement celebrates reason, science, individual freedom and human rights.

Thinker such as Rene Descartes, and John Locke Encourages individuals yjk.to use reason, and science to understand the world and solve social, political conflicts. So Modernism as an artistic movement that rejected the traditional ways of thinking, seeking for new means to present the complexities of modern life, was effected by the Enlightenment core ideas which motivated writers like James Joyce in *Ulysses*, and Virginia Wolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Lighthouse* to use techniques like Stream of Consciousness and the non-linear structure to show the personal experiences, struggles and the inner thoughts of the characters.

However, the hope that had once been introduced by the Enlightenment, began to fade away during the start of the World War I. A disastrous war from 1914 till 1918. It smashed down nearly all the believes of Enlightenment about science and reason. The War had a profound, devastating impact on individuals mainly soldiers, causing disillusionment, loss of life, mental and physical diseases as well as psychological trauma, as people started rejecting the believes and optimism of

previous movements. This disillusionment allowed writers to analyze themes such as alienation, trauma and the down fall of meaning in a chaotic world, writers like T.S. Eliot, who served in the war was highly influenced by sense of fragmentation and loss, his poem *The Waste Land* (1922) with its fragmented structure and multiple historical, cultural elements it serves as a significant example of how the war constructed modernist literature reflecting the disillusionment and disorientation of that time. In addition to different other writers as Ernest Hemingway *Farewell to Arms*, and Virginia Wolf which deals with trauma and the war's scars, and which were characterized by various modernist characteristics.

1.3 Main Traits of Modernist Literature

In an era marked by Industrialization, rapid social and cultural changes in addition to advanced social sciences. Writers particularly modernists adopted different methods as well as characteristics to examine the complex, dynamic nature of the modern world. One of the central, key characteristics of modernist writers used was experimentation of forms and language. Most modernists authors rejected linear and traditional narratives preferring fragmented structures in order to explore the disordered, uncertain modern life.

This uncertainty and fragmentation is apparent in Marcel Proust's *Search of Lost Times* (1927), in the Madeleine scene where Swann triggers memories that are disordered, traveling back and forth between the past and present capturing the subjective nature of memories and experiences, besides Virginia Wolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and its use of stream of consciousness² to engage the reader in the character's inner minds, this also led writers to emphasis on subjectivity and the inner experiences of the characters. This focus was largely influenced by Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious, as it inspired many authors to incorporate real experiences with disillusionment. Virginia Woolf captured this idea in her essay *Modern* (1925) as she examines how an ordinary human mind will jump from one thought to another.

Modernist literature, also tackled themes like alienation, loss of identity, meaning and mental illness. In former work of Virginia Wolf *Mrs. Dalloway* and Franz Kafka *The Metamorphosis*

² **Stream of Consciousness:** is a literary technique that represents the natural flow of the character's chaotic inner thoughts, feelings, and memories, offering the reader a direct access to the character's mind.

which reflects the protagonists sense of alienation from family and society as well as their psychological and emotional turmoil due to trauma from the war, and the oppressive societies, in order to make these themes and characteristics more evident writers relied on the use of symbolism and mythology. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* his use of myths such as the legend of King Fisher to represents the spiritual loss and the search of meaning. The use of symbolism allowed modernist writers to associate personal experiences with timeless narratives.

1.4 Modernism's Voice in American Literature

America during the mid-20th century was a nation of wealth, power and productivity however this sense of prosperity and confidence soon vanished as the two world wars, the great depression and the Jazz Age took place. These historical, and economic events deeply affected the American psyche causing trauma, and economic downfall, marking the beginning of a new age in the American Literature.

Modernism, an artistic and literary movement that first emerged in Europe, gradually spread across the globe and gained significant recognition in the United States during the 1910s and 1920s. Its rise was driven by the profound impact of World War I, which reshaped American society culturally and economically transforming a once confident and developed nation into a wounded one, marked by lasting scars on its people, particularly the soldiers who returned home physically injured, traumatized and mentally devastated, as well as the families who lost their loved ones such as wives and mothers who struggled to rebuild their lives.

This devastating legacy of the war found its way to literature, influencing writers to shift their focus to the exploration of the nature of the rapidly changing world, as well as the complex human mind and experiences, as many writers like Ernest Hemingway who served in the war as an ambulance driver and was badly wounded in a mortar fire during his service, this deadly experience influenced most of his writings as he delves into themes of psychological and mental trauma, alienation, as well as the search of purpose in a post war-world. His characters are often presented as lost and disillusioned who are mentally and physically crushed. As depicted in his novels *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* where the protagonists try to escape the chaos of war by finding love and peace. The war disillusionment wasn't restricted to Hemingway only. It was shared by many authors known as The Lost Generation. A group of writers like Hemingway

who quoted Stein's saying in *A Movable Feast* ``All of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation'' (1964, p.16). A long side with F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, and Ford Madox Ford whose works revolved around the lack of moral direction, traditions, the desire of traveling, and the struggles they face in unfixable post-war world.

Yet this sense of despair in literature, wasn't solely due to the war. The Great Depression, a severe economic downturn in America. It began due to the stock market crash on October 1929, it was seen as a downhill journey for Americans. As many companies were bankrupted and eventually closed, unemployment reached its highest rate in the American history making people pessimistic about their American dream. This era was the subject of most literary writings, as many authors examined how this era caused both financial and emotional trauma. One of the most famous novels written in it was *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) by John Steinbeck which explores the economic hardships, poverty and social injustice. Alongside to another significant novels *Mice and Men* (1937) of Steinbeck and *The Big Money* (1936) by John Dos Passos that emphasis on the American dream and the effect of Capitalism, however Americans sought to overcome the disillusionment of the war as well as the economic distress of the Great Depression through Jazz music giving them some sense of liberation and relief from the previous struggles paving the way for writers to explore other themes that defines American literature during that era.

1.6 Voices of Disillusionment: Core Themes in American Modernist Literature

The cultural and economic shifts that occurred during the 20th century set the stage for American writers to explore various themes such as the American dream, identity loss, multiculturalism, freedom, as well as psychological and mental instability. Writers have explored these themes in order to reflect the values, experiences, hopes, and struggles of American people as they cope with these transformations.

The American dream, was one of the prominent themes in the American literature James Truslow Adams in *The Epic America* defines it as ``The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement''(1931,p.404), This refers to the belief that anyone regardless their social rank can achieve wealth and success through hard work and determination, writers often used this theme to explore the Americans pursuit of happiness and the desire for a better

future. Works like *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925), *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller (1949) and *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison (1977) explored this idea and how it created various conflicts for American such as social division, materialism, moral decay, and personal happiness,

Other significant themes were explored within the American literature like the exploration of identity and multiculturalism. In a period where America was a melting pot of cultures and perspectives, various authors such as *Toni Morrison Beloved* (1987), *Ralph Ellison Invisible Man* (1952), and *Sandra Cisneros The House on Mango Street* (1984) used literature and their works to reflect the rich diversity as they delve into topics like race, gender, cultural hybridity and social class examining the challenges faced by foreign individuals like slavery and the quest of recognition.

Moreover, freedom and individualism are also considered as a fundamental themes in American literature, these principles are deeply grounded in the country's founding system, influencing its literary traditions. works like *Self Reliance* (1841) by Ralph Waldo Emerson as well as *Walden* (1854) by Henry David Thoreau authors sought to explore personal independence, nonconformity, and the search of authentic identity.

Building upon these themes, modernist writers continued exploring other recurring themes such as psychological distress and mental health. As writers began to delve into the complexities of the human psyche, and individual's unconscious minds, the sought to reflect the struggles people face with the social expectations like J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) which captures the inner chaotic mind of characters who are burdened with grief, adulthood, and social judgments. In addition to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1934), Fitzgerald uses Psychoanalysis technique in order to explore the psychological depth of his character's, reflecting their emotional struggles, mental instability, and the complexities of their inner minds.

Thus, modernist American literature, become a significant space for writers to explore the inner nature of the human mind, individual's struggles with personal and social pressures, fragmented identity, and instable mental health. By integrating different themes such as psychological turmoil, and trauma.

1.7 Shifting Foundations: How Modernism Reshaped American Culture and Identity

During the early 19th century, American society was a traditional and religious. With rigid gender roles, expectations, and cultural norms. Emphasizing on morality, hard work as well as a clear separation between men and women. As men were supposed to be more masculine and in-control while women were meant to be submissive and responsible for domestic duties in rural (Rayn,2019). However, with Modernism emergence during the 20th century, the American society's culture and values by refusing classical believes and embracing innovation, individualism in addition to new artistic and intellectual expressions. As the innovative and technological advancements influenced the society, the new modernist ideas have also changes art, literature and the way Americans defined themselves and the rest of the globe.

One of modernism significant aspects was its break from the traditional, harsh lifestyle American individuals used to embrace, encouraging migration from the rural, primitive areas to the newly, mechanized cities, triggering a profound change in the American gender roles. women sought to embrace their own financial, and intellectual independence. As Virginia Woolf once reflected `` A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction`` (1935, p,06). Alongside the transformation of gender roles and women's rights, Modernism also reshaped religious beliefs, individualism and self-expression, challenging the established religious doctrines by scientific advancements and enlightenment ideas. Many Americans questioned their established faith moving forward to a more existentialist, and a personal approach. As Fredrick Nietzsche noted ``God is dead`` (2001, p,13), which symbolizes the transformation of faith from an imposed belief to a personal choice, motivating people to search and define their own identities rather than confronting to the rigid social and religious expectations.

Modernism encouragement of self-discovery and expression, had a wide importance on multiple fields music, art, social behaviors as well as literature. Such as the Jazz Age, a cultural rebellion started by African Americans who aimed to broaden their own culture and talent despite the racial discrimination, it also promoted for personal freedom mainly for women who began challenging the traditional gender roles. As the Jazz Age broke from traditional cultural aspects, modernist literature challenged the traditional artistic forms. Many modernist writers welcomed the use of experimental techniques to explore the complexities of the modern world, they also enable women to define their own identities like Kate Chopin. Authors like Fitzgerald and John Steinbeck criticized the American Dream and its focus on material wealth, promoting it as a personal

fulfillment such as positive contributions to the community or having the freewill for self-discovery and expression, affecting people's identities and self-redefinition.

These social, cultural and literary changes deeply impacted the American identity and sense of self. As the pre-modern American identity was built upon the ideals of individualism, self-reliance, clear communication, equality, social bond and hard work, shaped a more alienated, uncertain and fragmented identity rather than a strong and stable one. Modernist sought to explore and reflect this identity fragmentation and instability throughout their literary work using different narratives. Such as, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) which uses symbols such as the car, seeds, the American Dream in order to reveal the destructive and crushing effects of self-made success, in addition to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and his use of the fragmented, unreliable narratives to highlight the mental chaos as well as the uncertainty of how Americans defined their own identity.

Furthermore, modernism offered a deep exploration of how the cultural, social, economic as well as religious are transforming the collaborative identity to a divided, isolating one. This modernist transformation of American identity had also influenced the American mindset and mental health, resulting in a profound change on how Americans perceive themselves and the world, as well as their purpose on the society.

1.8 Reading Beneath the Surface: Psychoanalytic Perspectives in American Modernism

Modernist American writers sought to uncover the complexities of the human nature, identity, and emotions, deeply influenced by various literary movements, as well as psychological theories, and philosophical shifts. One of the driving forces behind their focus on the inner psyche was the profound disillusionment and despair caused by the World War I, as well as the rise of existentialist beliefs like the rejection of the universal truth, the search of self-definition, and freedom. In addition to the emergence of the Freudian psychoanalytic theory. These shifting beliefs have profoundly influenced the modernist writers to shift their focus to the exploration of character's inner minds, their psychological struggles, and to their subconscious desires and fears.

Psychoanalysis, a psychological theory pioneered by Sigmund Freud an Austrian neurologist who studied how the unconscious mind, oppressed emotions, and childhood experiences impact

on the human behavior in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Oxford English Dictionary defines it as

A therapeutic method, originated by Sigmund Freud, for treating mental disorders by investigating the interaction of conscious and the unconscious elements in the patient's mind and bringing repressed fears and conflicts into the conscious mind, using techniques such as dream interpretation and free association. Also: a system of psychological theory associated with this method. (as cited in Wikipedia, 2015).

Freud also argued that dreams are representations of the unconscious, hidden desires in his innovative book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). he also introduced a groundbreaking concept such as the Id, Ego and Super Ego that represents the key components of psychoanalysis theory. The Id refers to the inherited instinctual drives and desires that seeks instant satisfaction, the superego represents the societal norm, and moral standards that guides the Ego to act according to the socially acceptable principles, meanwhile the Ego acts as a mediator between the Id's impulsive actions and the Superego's moral limitations, in orders to create a stable balance that is real and socially reasonable. Freud's ideas and interpretations were later on developed by other philosophers and theorists like Carl Jung, Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein influencing various domains such as philosophy, cultural studies and literature.

Literature has been a fertile ground and a complex source for the application of psychoanalytic theory, drawing on Freud's principles and ideas of the unconscious, dreams, and the structure of the human psyche.

In the early 20th century, Modernism with its focus on individualism and existentialism encouraged writers to shift their attention to more psychologically complexed narratives and themes, exploring the tension between the conscious and the unconscious, trauma, mental breakdowns, and inner conflicts. One of the prominent figures of psychoanalytical literature is

Saul Bellow and his valid novel *Herzog* (1964), throughout this book Bellow offers a rich exploration of psychological distress, depression and emotional breakdown, *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy (1985) is also a novel that embodies and examines Freud's concepts of the Id, Ego, and Superego through its characters, questioning the evil nature and its impact on the human psychological psyche, in addition to Philip Roth work *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), which is a series of therapy session the reveal the protagonists struggles with guilt, repressed sexual desires and parental influence. Modern literary writers tend to use psychology and psychoanalytic criticism in order to understand how personal and social constraint shape their behaviors, identity and mental health.

1.9 Anxieties of the Age: Mental Health and the Psychological Echoes of Modernism in American Literature

The American mental health, was highly misunderstood and stigmatized in the late 19th century. It was often acknowledged from a religious and a moral perspective rather than a scientific, medical point of view. Individuals who exhibited symptoms, were often put in madhouses, asylums or in religious institutions like convents, subjected to harsh, and merciless treatments such as, lobotomy and electric shock. They were also considered either insane, hysterical, possessed by an evil spirit or just acting-up for attention. However, with modernism taking place, medical science and psychological studies improved bringing a profound shift in the way Americans viewed, and treated mental illness.

Modernism rejected traditional beliefs, religious domination and the absolute truth, encouraging science, reason, and individualism. giving mental health a psychological as well as a biological explanation. Sigmund Freud theory of psychoanalysis and his ideas offered insightful interpretations, proposing that mental diseases are driven by the person's unconscious struggles rather than a divine punishment or an evil possession. Building upon Freud's interpretations other psychologists, as Carl Jung, and William James offered a new way on how mentally ill people were treated, instead of being punished and locked up, they were considered patients who needs medical assistant. This new understanding led to the developments of mental illness medical treatments. So instead of performing exorcism, and brain surgeries, patients were often treated with more compassionate methods like therapy where they freely shared their true feelings and thoughts or by taking anti-depressing pills. Inspired by these changes many modernist literary

figures were interested in using literature to legitimize mental illness both socially, and morally. Writers as* Ken Kesey *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) besides *The Group* (1963) by Mary McCarthy, often drawn from their own experiences try to examine the complexities of mental illness through their characters, portraying them as mentally unstable individuals who suffers from depression, PTSD, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia in order to reveal how these illnesses alienate and isolate individuals from their own communities as well as their rational minds, highlighting for readers the importance of understanding mental illnesses as well as giving voice to the marginalized individuals.

2.0 Conclusion:

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed Modernism as a literary movement tracing its origins mainly in America during the 19th century, and how it rejected the traditional ideas presenting a new innovative and challenging ideas, then we explored some of the main theories that were used in modern American literature, particularly psychoanalysis. We also shed lights on modernism's influence on the American society, and identity. As we move to the second chapter, we will take a deeper look at mental illness and its portrayal in literature as well as its connection society, identity, and gender representations.

Chapter Two:

Exploring Mental Illness in Modern American Literature.

Chapter Two: Exploring Mental Illness in Modern American Literature**1.0 Introduction**

Mental Illness has been both an intriguing and a compelling theme in literature. Practically the Modern American Literature, it serves as a means through which authors used to explore the human psyche, individual anxieties as well as societal pressures. This chapter examines mental illness as literary theme, focusing on its representation in Modern American literature, as well as its connection to gender, identity and social expectations. By delving into these key aspects, the chapter provides an insightful analysis of how literature influences and depicts mental illness both socially and culturally.

1.1 Understanding Mental Illness: A general overview

Mental Illness has been a subject of evolving perceptions and interpretations over time. In ancient medieval societies it was often viewed through a religious lens, believed it is either a work of an evil spirit, a demon or a divine punishment for the worldly sins. As a result, individuals with mental illness were subjected to harsh and painful treatments like, exorcisms, persecution or imprisonment. However, perceptions of mental illness began to shift radically during the 19th century particularly with the rise of the Enlightenment, the development of medical science, in addition to the emergence of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and his studies of the brain, Mental illness became recognized as a medical condition that requires moral and compassionate treatments. This period witnessed the establishments of asylums and institutions like Bethlem Royal Hospital in the United Kingdom and McLean Hospital in the United States in addition to the rise of new treatments like Hydrotherapy (water therapy), insulin coma therapy, electro-conclusive therapy, medications such as (Morphine, Bromides and Chloroform), and lobotomy which was a brain surgery (Stephen, n.d.; Walke, 2015).

Treatments continued to evolve, creating more revolutionized treatments such as antidepressants (Tricyclic 1950s) in addition to psychotherapy, which sought to change the institutionalized care to a more community based care. However, despite the medical evolution and the growing understanding of mental illness, public perception remained unchanged for decades, as those who were affected were often seen as a disgrace, weak and unfit.

During the 19th and the 20th centuries, negative stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards mentally disordered people were embedded in society, they were perceived as dangerous, incompetent and unworthy individuals who must be marginalized and kept away from the society. this societal stigma and discrimination affected patients' lives, and worsened their conditions. Many experienced social isolation, exclusion from various employments opportunities and social relationships, in addition to their growing sense of worthlessness, which declined their emotional well-being and self-esteem. Therefore, many mentally sick individuals turned to writing diaries, autobiographies and journals as a means of solace as well as self-expression. Over time these writings became significant works that challenged societal misconceptions, by encouraging normalization and legitimization of mental illness, spreading empathy and awareness (Hinshaw,2007).

1.2 Representation of Mental Illness in Literature:

Literature has played a dual role in exploring the human psyche and reshaping societal perceptions and fears towards mental illness, writers particularly those who have suffered from mental illness used literature, stories and narratives as instruments to vividly depict their hidden psychological and emotional struggles. Across different historical periods literature, has opened many doors for the exploration of mental illness challenging the societal misconceptions, promoting marginalized voices, and fostering a more compassionate society that respects mentally ill individuals and recognizes their role in society.

Throughout the middle ages mental illness was interpreted from a religious lens, usually seen as a result of a moral corruption, or an external spirit possession, these medieval ideologies directed how mental illness is presented in literature. Where characters tormented by madness were depicted as wild, cursed, and dangerous. They were portrayed with stones on their foreheads, wearing threadbare, ripped clothes, or even naked, as they speak in a nonsensical, incoherent manner, such as in *King Lear* by William Shakespeare Edgar dressing himself as ``poor Tom`` adopting the appearance of a haunted mad bagger, as he declares: `` The foul fiend haunts poor Tom in the voices of nightingale`` (*King Lear*, Act 3, Scene 6). Emphasizing the medieval believes that madness was caused by demonic possession. Alongside with Ophelia from *Hamlet* (1923) who used fragmented, and erratic speech to symbolize her insanity.

These literary depictions, reflected and reinforced the societal attitudes which resulted in isolating and marginalizing sick individuals, however, as literature evolved so did its representation of mental illness challenging the medieval representations and beliefs.

The Renaissance era, by the 14th and the 18th centuries marked an evident change in understanding mental illness, instead of purely religious explanations mental illness was perceived from a more naturalistic, and a humanistic approach highly influenced by the four humors theory.

The humoral theory, or humoralism it is a believe that physical and psychological health is linked to imbalances with bodily fluids (Lagay,2002), it was originated from ancient Greek medicine and was later revived by renaissance physicians such as Galen, Andreas Vesalius as well as William Harvey who defined mental illness as imbalance of the four bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. These imbalance was believed to cause melancholia a severe state of sadness, depression and even madness, these new interpretations influenced medical treatments, art as well as literature. As writers began exploring mental illness and melancholia not only as a diabolic possession and behavioral disorder, but also as a sign of intellectual creativity, as Plato reflects ``Madness (mania) from a god is finer than self-control of human origin`` (1995, P.18). Renaissance literary figures, influenced by the former believes often portrayed mentally unstable characters as possessed people who needs spiritual cleansing or a brain damaged individuals who requires psychological and medical treatment such as herbal remedies, bloodletting, as well as therapeutic music. One of the most evident literary works of that era was *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) by John Webster which portrayed mental illness through the protagonist Ferdinand who suffers from Lycanthropy and thinks he can turn into a werewolf, as he consider it a divine punishment for his sins, as well as *The Honest Whore* (1604) by Thomas Dekker a literary piece of work that depict mental illness as a condition caused by love and grief however it can still be cured through marriage, music, and natural treatments, in addition to *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) by Robert Burton as he famously stated ``all poets are mad`` (p,115). While the Renaissance period blended between the spiritual and the humanistic approaches in understanding mental illness, the Enlightenment era introduced a completely different approach relying reason and science.

The rise of reason and scientific observation during the early 19th century, brought new challenging interpretations and treatments of mental illness. Philosophers such us John Locke

(1690), William Tuke (1892) and others described mental illness as an intellectual disorder in the realm of ideas rather than a supernatural condition, these beliefs resulted in the emergence of new psychological and literary techniques about mental illness, introducing moral treatments such as institutional care.

These new psychological ideas and treatments greatly influenced literature. Authors began depicting mental illness as a medical condition that can be treated through medicine, as in *The Task* (1748) by William Cowper where he described depression and sadness as a curable disease suggesting that it can be treated by natural rest, and emotional isolation. As the 19th century brought a radical change in understanding mental illness, perception, treatments and literary representations continue to evolve until the late 19th and the early 20th century bringing modernist interpretations of mental disorder.

1.3 Mental Illness in Modern American Literature

The 19th and 20th centuries were marked by major events such as, industrialization, mechanization and the WWI that reshaped the American society, disturbing its stability and introducing a sense of fragmentation, loss as well as uncertainty among individuals. As a result, modernism emerged as a literary movement that sought to explore the disorienting nature of the modern world in addition to its effect on the human psyche applying new forms of narratives in order to reflect the psychological and societal upheavals.

As the American society faced rapid industrial and technological changes, modernists influenced by psychoanalysis theory and Freud's ideas of the unconscious, shifted their focus to the exploration of the human mind, delving into themes of mental instability, trauma, identity, in addition to the societal pressures.

American modernists, often depicted mental illness as a profound psychological, and emotional turmoil, employing various techniques such as stream of consciousness, fragmented narratives that offers deep and clear insights on the lived experiences of the psychologically ill characters, inviting readers to empathize and deeply understand the inner struggles as well as the complexities these characters' face. In *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964), Joanne Greenberg offer a powerful representation of mental illness through the lens of a 16-year-old protagonist. To cope with her trauma, the character creates her own imaginary world known as Yr, soon after her fantasy

blurs with reality, trapping her between the two. Greenberg implies stream of consciousness, fragmented narratives and dialogues in order to reflect the protagonists' inner chaos, reflecting her fear and confusion. Despite the painful journey the novel proclaims that recovery is possible through the protagonist recover and sense of reality. Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) is also a significant literary piece which tackle mental health and institutionalization, challenging the harsh societal stereotypes over mental illness. However most modern works tackled not only mental health and psychological instability, but also shed lights on various themes like isolation, identity, race and gender which offers a more in-depth representation of mental illness.

1.4 Depicting Mental Illness in Modern American Literature

Mental illness, is a critical and a prevalent theme in modern American literature, it influenced narratives that explored the complexities of the human nature, intersecting with other themes such as identity, race, gender dynamics, alienation in addition to societal expectations. Through these intersections writers sought to present not only the sick people and their experiences but also the stereotypes and the obstacles they faced. Revealing how mental illness is both a personal struggle and a social dilemma (Rani,2023).

One of the most prominent themes modernists explored in addition to mental illness, was identity, a central theme in the modern works. Identity was often understood by modernists writers as something fluid, fragmented and usually non-existing, this theme was often displayed in the characters' psychological struggle to find themselves, Nathanael West exemplified this in *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) through his protagonist who is known as Miss Lonelyhearts, a character who feels overwhelmed by reading the desperate, heartbreaking letters he gets from different people, as the protagonist reads these letters he begins to experience mental as well as emotional breakdown which eventually led to his detachment from both himself and his society.

Moreover, American modernists have also explored societal expectations and their effects on mental health as a major, significant theme in the modern American literature, offering writers to deeply explore how the oppressive society can undermine individuals' psychological and mental stability, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Paper* offers a critical examination of how social, and gender constraints can complicate mental illness through the narrator experience with the

oppressive society, judgments as well as misunderstanding of mental distress, as her it is seen throughout her husband's behavior by insisting she needs rest rather than acknowledging her illness which eventually will lead her to severe mental breakdown and madness, another powerful illustration of gender and mental illness is in Tennessee William's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) that explores a woman's journey towards disorientation and mental insanity due to the oppressive social norms and restrictions.

Modernists, have also alienation and isolation as key themes that align with mental health. As most the mentally sick characters were often seen as isolated and apart from the society and even from themselves, *The Sound and The Fury* (1929) by William Faulkner explore themes of isolation, mental distress and the search of meaning through Benjamin Compson character who grapple with psychological problems which will alienate him from his family leading to his tragic fate at the end. The exploration of themes like identity, gender roles, and societal pressures highlights how mental illness can be both an internal turmoil as well as a social and cultural struggle.

1.5 Mental Illness as a Reflection of Social Failure in Modern American Literature

Far too often, mental illness is perceived as a personal failure and weakness, rather than a result of a broader social system. This misconception reflects negative social attitudes towards individuals suffering from mental issues, when society prioritize modernity, productivity, and public image, the ones who are psychologically affected they are often stigmatized, marginalized and considered unworthy of a normal life, this harsh truth is reinforced by Theodore Kaczynski's statement in *Industrial Society and its Future*, about how mental illness is labeled in order for the society to maintain its own structure: ``The concept of "mental health" in our society is defined largely by the extent to which an individual behaves in accord with the needs of the system and does so without showing signs of stress`` (1995,p.14), By isolating and stigmatizing these individuals instead of sympathizing and supporting them society worsen their psychological turmoil. However, by the late 19th century individuals from different domains advocated for more awareness about mental illness, encouraging society to create a kinder, compassionate, and a supportive environment. Among these domains, literature has play a vital role in shaping the former societal perceptions over mental illness.

Writers, often portrayed character with dissociative disorders as complex, subjective, and as humans, not just broken vessels or mad and dangerous individuals who must be alienated from the society due to their struggle to meet the social expectations. Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), is a powerful critique of how mental disorder is a social failure, portraying it as a result of the rigid social expectations, ken's use of the psychiatric hospital as a symbol of the demanding society, where mentally unstable individuals are isolated, and oppressed rather than supported and treated by their own families, friends, and society. The novel also reflects the idea that not the patient's personal vulnerability that worsen their psychological health, but the social ideologies that rejects them and trap them away, aggravating their illness, defining it as a personal failure, were in fact it's the society failure.

The social stigma, isolation, and rejection mentally ill individuals faced, did not only exacerbated their health, but it also deprived them from their own identity, selfhood, alongside their sense of meaning in the merciless, cruel world.

1.6 The Struggle for Identity and Self-understanding in Modern American Literature

Identity in modern American context is a fundamental aspect of understanding one's own, it shapes individual's sense of who they are, and where they belong. As it is influenced by different personal traits, social roles and historical background, according to Mekala Chiranjeevi (2023) Identity in literature is

the complex construction of an individual's selfhood, encompassing various aspects such as personal experiences, cultural heritage, social roles, and internal perceptions. It involves the exploration of one's values, beliefs, desires, and the formation of unique identity in the context of larger societal structures. (p.02)

building on this American Modernists embraced the idea that identity can be a fluid, fragmented concept, constructed by various personal, social, cultural and historical factors. This shift in perspectives was mainly a response to the radical changes in society as well as the disillusionment and sense of loss brought by industrialization, world war 1 and the societies' break from traditional

believes, encouraging writers to focus and explore individuals' psychological complexities, in addition to their unstable identities and self-understanding in the fragmented, disjointed world.

One of the most modern influential pioneers who examines identity and self-discovery was the Irish novelist, James Joyce whose novel *Ulysses* (1922), delves into its characters' internal thoughts and struggles, discussing how the identity evolution and sense of self are shaped by social expectations, religious as well as personal factors. This idea is vividly portrayed in ``*Sirens*'' episode, where Bloom's identity undergoes a rapid series of transformations in the lines: `` Up the quay went Lionelleopold, naughty Henry with letter for Mady, with sweets of sin with frillies for Raoul with meet him pike hoses went Poldy on`` (p. 522). this episode mirrors the character's inner struggle, embodying roles bound with personal and social expectations, such as a husband, a lover and an outsider.

William Faulkner, on the other hand with his use of stream of consciousness technique, he reflected his characters' internal monologue, revealing their fragmented identity as well as the challenges of self-discovery. This idea is practically evident in Faulkner's work *The Sound and Fury* (1929), where he delves into the protagonist's minds, illustrating their non-linear desires, thoughts in addition to their sense of self, and search of meaning, as reflected in Quentin's passage

I couldn't tell if I was crying or not, and T.P. fell down on top of me, laughing, and it kept on making the sound and Quentin kicked T.P. and Caddy put her arms around me, and her shining veil, and I couldn't smell trees anymore and I began to cry (p.30).

Faulkner showcases his characters' fractured identity, and sense of self through their inability to distinguish their true feelings. On the other hand, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), explores the fragmentation and loss of identity in post-war world, driven by masculinity, and strength, Hemingway portrays the characters struggle as well as their inability to define themselves based on the societal norms, in addition to the masculine ideals and gender expectations.

The modern literature's explorations of identity and search of meaning as a fluid, ongoing process highlights how internal struggles are closely tied to the social constraints, shedding more lights on the powerful influence society and gender expectations have in shaping and restricting the definition of one's own identity and self, in addition to the burden they place on both men and women.

1.7 Social Expectations and Gender Norms in Modern American literature

Throughout, the 19th and 20th centuries America has witnessed immense development at various levels particularly with in the domestic and social contexts. However, alongside this improvement emerged deeply rooted ideologies of inequality, and oppressive gender roles. As the country became revolutionized and industrialized the traditional family structure changed, nevertheless the public assumptions remain the same or got worse.

During that era, the American society was a conservative, morally strict, and patriarchal, both men and women were confined to rigid social structure, and expectations. As men were meant to be strong, powerful, and financially successful, whereas women were meant for households, to be obedient, and sensitive. These strict social roles and high expectations harshly influenced individuals' emotional, psychological, as well as personal lives. Many found themselves socially excluded, restricted from expressing themselves as well as pursuing their dreams, and distinguishing between who they are and who they should be. As these internal struggles became more common and impossible to ignore they found their way to cultural expressions mainly in literature.

Therefore, literature has served as a powerful instrument in criticizing, and advocating change from the rigid, social restrictions, writers sought to challenge social oppression, inequality, injustice by incorporating literary themes like, gender inequality, racism, identity loss, in addition societal expectation, in order to expose the modern American social, and cultural issues.

Notable works such as *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, shed-lights on women freedom and their right to lead a financially dependent life without being judge by the society or strip away their voices, as she notably state: `` Only economic independence can free a woman to marry for love, not for status or financial support, or to leave a loveless, intolerable, humiliating marriage, or to eat, dress, rest, and move if she plans not to marry`` (1963, P.402), Friedan emphasis for financial and economic independence for women in order to be free from the gendered roles as well as societal judgments.

Furthermore, Richard Yates in *Revolutionary Road* (1961) has critically explored the societal expectation and gender roles in addition to their negative effects, through his protagonists Frank and April a suburban couples who tries to grapples to maintain the illusion of happiness, the novel

shed lights on the characters social alienation, sense of loss and their struggles to escape the strict gender roles and social demands.

Yates uses this masterpiece not only to expose how these social obligations and gender discrimination trap individuals and make them alienated and lost, it also gives voices to the ones who felt suffocated, unheard and underestimated by these social prejudice.

The modern American society, with its suffocating beliefs and its rigid, gender roles, often restricted individuals, dictating how they must behave, think, and live. As men were supposed to act strong, resilient while women must embody sensitivity, and emotional vulnerability. These harsh, and sever social structures has made individuals feel powerless, lost, alienated, and detached from their own sense of self.

1.8 Gender Conventions and the Formation of the Modern American Identity

Gender convention, during the modern era had a profound impact in shaping the society and individual's perceptions of how they must behave and live, setting a clear division between men and women. While men were meant for public dominance, leadership, and power women were assigned as caretakers, submissive and obedient. These strict, harsh roles have significantly influenced the way people perceived their own identities, as well as their place and role in the society. Alongside these interpretations men and women had other gender, and social expectations to achieve.

the society's expectations for both genders, to be successful, ambitious, and maintaining stable homes, was somehow a burden for men and women particularly during the war, industrialization period and other fast changing events. As men went to war and the economic base of the society changed from an agricultural base to a modern mechanized base, women had to work in order to provide for their families.

The deviation from the structural roles, resulted by the social and economic change, led to a widespread of isolation and loss of belonging. Men and women who strayed from their roles were no longer a good fit for the society, women who continued working and sought for independence faced harsh social criticism as they were labeled unfeminine and shameful. Men, on the other hand were seen as weak, and unfit.

The social criticism and rejection of this new change, created some sense of displacement as well as alienation among men and women, causing both internal and external conflicts. internally, individuals found it difficult to separate between who they want to be and what the society want them to be. While externally they faced cruel judgments and exclusion from a society that rejects any change, people found themselves torn between the pressure to meet the old gender norms, and to fit into the new, modernized society, creating a dual identity.

Men, who found it extremely hard to maintain the image of being successful, strong, and ambitious felt vulnerable, and incompetent. Meanwhile women who tried to challenge the society were vilified and attacked, this sense of failure and rejection left individual with broken, unstable and fragmented identity, one that is torn between the old societal, and gender roles, and the new evolving reality, leaving people to question their place in the world, their meaning and worth.

The growing sense of alienation, and loss of meaning, ruined the stability of the modern identity, disconnecting people from themselves and their surroundings, over time this fragmentation resulted in psychological distress and mental instability among individuals.

1.9 Gender Roles, Identity Loss and Mental Illness in Modern American Literature

Throughout modern American literature, identity loss, as well as mental illness were perceived as a consequence of the strict social, and cultural conventions, that set a clear definition of masculinity and femininity. Men were expected to reflect masculinity, financial success, and emotional detachment, while women were stuck with roles of submission, vulnerability and their worth was tied only to their responsibilities as wives, mothers, and caretakers. These discriminatory ideologies trapped individuals, strapping them from any personal freedom or emotional expression.

Hence, the once who failed to follow these rigid, gendered ideals were usually judged, criticized, and even excluded from their own societies, causing them a crisis of self-understanding and ultimately, leading to psychological as well as mental distress.

Building up on these roles and beliefs, modernists often used their works to explore how these gender norms disturbed individuals' self of sense, and fractured their mental, as well as emotional stability. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), is a seminal work that examines the damaging effect gender norms and social expectations have on women's identity and

mental health. By narrating a story of a woman who is confined to rest cure by her husband, forbade from expressing herself through intellectual, as well as creative activities, as her attention becomes fixated towards a yellow repellent wallpaper, which the author used to symbolize the ugliness of the protagonist's role as a woman and a wife.

throughout this story, Gilman has masterfully captured how the oppressive, and suffocating gender norms effects the women's selfhood, gradually stripping them from their sanity, she also challenges the belief that women's psychological distress is inherited by stating that it is a result of the masculine dominance alongside the high social expectations. Another significant modern American literary work is the American Psycho (1991) by Easton Ellis, the novel revolves around a successful investment banker during the 80s, who embodies the success as well as the masculine ideals of that era, the story shed-lights on the protagonist's obsession with social status, the materialistic image, and masculinity will eventually lead to his feeling of emptiness, Ellis uses powerful symbols as well as examples to illustrate how societal norms and gender roles affects the protagonists self-understanding and mental health, one of the key, central symbols was the protagonist's claim that he is wearing a mask, this idea was evident through the protagonist's monologue as he mentions:

there is the idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there. (Ellis, p.432)

This symbolizes how the protagonist was unable to connect his inner self and desires with his own friends and family, in order for him to maintain the masculine and high social status he has built in a judgmental and criticizing society.

Modern American literature, has revealed and criticized the suffocating, oppressive impact, the strict social and rigid gender norms have on individuals' inner self, leading to their identity fragmentation, as well as their psychological collapse.

2.0 Conclusion

Through time mental illness had been interpreted from various lenses, such as religious, spiritual, psychological and medical lenses. However, literature has offer fertile ground for American modernists to deeply explore how social and personal constraints fracture individuals' mental, as well as psychological state. This chapter has tackled modernists exploration of how oppressive social and gendered roles can harm individuals' self of sense or their understanding of how they are, harming their mental health, emotional state by using different literary techniques such as stream of consciousness, fragmented narratives as they sought to humanize the characters' internal battles and also criticize how the personal self-understanding and the societal constraints can harm and fractured individuals' mental health and sense of self.

Chapter Three:

**Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles, Identity Loss, and
Mental Illness in The Bell Jar and A Fan's Notes.**

**Chapter Three: Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles, Identity Loss, and Mental Illness
in The Bell Jar and A Fan's Notes****1.0 Introduction**

Modernism was explored as a literary movement which emerged in America between the 19th and 20th centuries, a period best known for its transformative events such as industrialization, modernization, as well as the two world wars. These changes have constructed a strict, fragmented, as well as a complex society, where individuals were pressured with rigid social and gender expectations. Resulting in social exclusion, identity loss, and psychological distress among people harming their mental stability and sense of self which became central themes in the Modern American literature. Building upon these explanations, this chapter will comparatively examine how gender norms, identity crisis and mental illness are depicted in *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath, and *A Fan's Notes* (1968). Throughout an analytical approach of the protagonists' experiences, this chapter will also explore both the similarities and differences of how the authors highlight the psychological and inner turmoil caused by the rigid, judgmental, and oppressive society.

1.1 Gender Roles and Societal Expectations in The Bell Jar and A Fan's notes

Drawing from their own personal experiences and struggles Sylvia Plath and Fredrick Exley crafted the semi-autobiographical novels, *The Bell Jar* (1962) and *A Fan's Notes* (1968). Blending fiction with lived personal realities, Plath and Exley explore, critique and expose the harsh as well as oppressive gender norms and social expectations in the modern American society.

Both authors, through their introspective views, psychological exploration they vividly depict these themes as a deeply innate believes that construct the social and cultural understanding of the modern American world, reflecting how they shape, confine and dominate the characters' environment, self-understanding as well as freedom.

The novels, has powerfully critique and expose how these pressures become deeply innate and fixed roles that define both gender. Women on one hand, being defined by their ability of obedience, and domesticity. While men on the other hand are symbols of ideal masculinity, independence and success, creating a clear division and disparity in opportunities and recognition.

Ultimately, both novels reflect, and explore the complexities of challenging the strict, social and cultural boundaries, as they criticize the hidden, sinister nature of societal control within the modern American society, encouraging readers to resist, question, and reconstruct the own social norms. Hence, understanding Plath and Exley depiction of these oppressive social, and cultural roles, set the ground for a deeper exploration of their protagonists' journey marked by social rejection, inner battles, and self-loss.

1.2 Constrained Womanhood: Esther Greenwood's Rebellion in *The Bell Jar*

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, offers a compelling and deeply critical examination of women's struggles with rigid social expectations, as well as the limitations placed upon their autonomy in the patriarchal society. In a world that traps women with domestic care, submissiveness, and motherhood, Plath presents a protagonist who rejects and resists these roles (Rathore, 2024. P.01). Esther Greenwood, a young, ambitious and intelligent girl who dreams of becoming a successful writer and leading a life of her own, nevertheless Esther finds herself unfit to the conventional path set for women of her era. As society encourages women to seek fulfillment solely through marriage, childbearing, and obedience, discouraging them to pursue their personal dreams. Esther becomes suffocated with the oppressive social roles allowed to her. Esther reflects her fear and uncertainty of choosing one path, as she says, `` I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story`` (Plath, 1966, P.51).

One of the major social expectations, Esther's grappled with was the pressure to marry and dedicate herself to a husband and domestic life. Throughout the novel, Plath presents marriage as a form of confinement rather than a sacred act of love and romance. Esther feels alienated from the idea of tying her identity to man and a home, as she aspires to professional success (Second, 2024. P.4). Her reflection on the rigid expectations imposed on women contrast sharply with her personal dreams and ambitions, as she states: `` The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all

directions myself`` (Plath, p.55), Esther reveals her rejection and rebellion against the traditional female role particularly marriage and the idea of being a main supporter to her husband's ambitions, as she yearns for freedom, and personal fulfillment.

The restrictive gender roles of the mid-twentieth century has worsen, and complicated Esther's struggle. As society favored men with social, sexual, as well as professional freedom, it demanded women to be chaste, loyal, and dedicated to domestic life. Esther perceives this inequality, along with the limited options available to women, with growing resentment and frustration, an attitude reflected in her statement: `` I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not``(Plath, p.54), the imposition of these oppressive ideas fills Esther with uncertainty and a sense of detachment, caught between her desire to pursue a life of freedom and the pressure to conform to society's limited vision for women. This internal conflict triggers a deep identity crisis, leaving her lost between two divergent paths.

1.3 Fractured Masculinity: Exley's Struggle with Societal Ideals in *A Fan's Notes*

In *A Fan's Notes*, Fredrick Exley presents a powerful and a straightforward portrayal of a man grappling with the ideals of masculinity during the late 50s and the early 60s America. During this era a man's success was perceive through stoicism, athleticism and professional achievement. (Novelzilla, 2024. 2:00). Exley, however finds himself unable to meet these high-standards, his awareness of this weakness and failure is apparent as he reflects: ``I fought because I understood, and could not bear to understand, that it was my destiny unlike that my father, whose fate t was to hear the roar of the crowd, to sit in the stands with most men and acclaim others`` (Exley, p.285).

Exley's inability to achieve the athletic strength, as well as financial success like his father, the professional football star Frank Gifford, led Exley to push himself further in order to emulate that success and what he believes is masculine strength. As a result, he becomes obsessed with sports, and his attempt to maintain the strong, confident masculine appearance even in his intoxicated state.

Despite Exley's continuous attempts, efforts and charismatic performances to fit the powerful and masculine society, he only reflects his hidden insecurities. Ultimately remaining him as a stranger watcher rather than a participant in a world that he idolizes (Novelzilla, 2024. 1:00). His

self-realization that no matter how hard he tries he cannot fit to the masculine ideals set by his own society. His self-realization intensifies his sense of failure as he admits: ``It was my fate, my destiny, my end, to be a fan`` (p.285), this admission highlights the acceptance of his failure, and his lack of physical, social, and emotional qualification that define a ``real man`` in the American society.

Exley's inability to measure up to the masculine ideals of his era damaged his sense of self, as he is unable to embody strength, power, and control he only turns to alcohol as an escape, which melted his identity into a realm of disappointment and guilt for what he could not achieve.

1.4 Mirrored Fractured: A Comparative Lens

Sylvia Plath and Fredrick Exley through their semi-autobiographical novels, *The Bell Jar* and *A Fan's Notes*, has offered a diverse yet equally strong depiction of how societal expectations and gender norms can shape, trap, and eventually harm individuals. Both protagonists live under the pressure of the mid-twentieth century American ideals that shape and dictate how both males and females must behave, while Esther Greenwood face a society that expect her to be chaste, submissive, and domestically devoted, Fredrick Exley on the other hand grapples to achieve an ideal masculinity which is defined by professional success, dominance, and fame.

Hence, Despite the divergent societal expectations and the protagonists separated paths with female chastity and male dominance they still share the same hostility towards these societal ideologies. While Esther is expected to fit in the ideals of motherhood, and domestic obedience, she examines these roles with discomfort and mockery as she mentions: `` What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb`` (Plath, p.148). Exley, likewise finds himself trapped in a masculine centered society, and his focus on his father's success convince him that he is unworthy and lacks athletic success, however unlike Esther who wish to break free from these norms, he runs after them comparing his self-worth with the ideal roles of his society.

While Esther evidently resist and try to escape the social norms pressed on her and Exley relentlessly tries to trail his own ideals, both characters are held under one umbrella of the crushing social pressures. Their rebellious as well as ambitious nature against these roles led to a deeper crisis which prevented them from forming a stable identity. Esther's rejection of these ideals left her unsure of what she really desires and how she is supposed to behave with in the society.

Chapter Three:

Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles, Identity Loss, and Mental Illness in *The Bell Jar* and *A Fan's Notes*

Similarly, Exley's fixed focus on living up to the society ideals and expectations exclude him from his authentic self. Upon these struggles both characters drift away from their true identities causing them to experience a growing sense of fragmentation, loss of meaning.

Ultimately, *The Bell Jar* and *A Fan's Notes* serves as evident portrayals of the hidden suffering, and battles faced by those who do not abide to the social standards. Throughout Esther and Exley writers had masterfully exposed the heavy price of not fitting in, in addition the characters' representation of individuals' loss, alienation.

Moreover, the rigid gender roles that Esther and Exley grapple with not only shape their social identities but also contribute to a deeper crisis of selfhood.

1.5 Shattered Selves: The Crisis of Identity in *The Bell Jar* and *A Fan's Notes*

Identity loss and the search of meaning has been one of the core themes in *The Bell Jar* and *A Fan's Notes*, throughout these personal yet reflective narratives Plath and Exley explores individual's struggles with self-hood and purpose in the modern American world (Rogers, 2004. P.1-4). both novels reflect how identity is not solid and fixed instead it is fragmented, unstable and constantly under the pressure of the social norms and expectations. Through a clever shift between tone, form, and point of views, authors reveal the hardships individuals with broken sense of self face when they fail to meet the high social standards.

Additionally, With Plath use of non-linear, narratives filled with vivid metaphors narratives she mirrors the confusion and uncertainty that comes with the loss of identity, while Exley's use of ironic tone and self-doubt he masterfully reflects the alienation and dissatisfaction individuals feel.

hence, these literary narratives have depicted identity loss and self-discovery as a painful, unfinished and a confusing process reinforced by individuals' inner conflicts, in addition to the societal pressures which often lead to their social alienation, and emotional turmoil. Importantly, this profound sense of loss, and disconnection is not only presented by the narrative tone and structure it is also ingrained with in the characters themselves, in order for the authors to set the ground for a deeper exploration of identity in a world that requires conformity and perfectionism.

1.6 Esther's Identity Crisis in *The Bell Jar*

Chapter Three:

Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles, Identity Loss, and Mental Illness in The Bell Jar and A Fan's Notes

Esther Greenwood's struggle for autonomy is the central point of *The Bell Jar*, as Plath offers a deep exploration of woman's shattered sense of self. trapped by the rigid expectations of the 1950s world, Esther reflects the alienation of woman who refuse to conform, from the beginning, Esther feels disconnected and unsure about her identity as she confesses: `` I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel`` (Plath, p.06), highlight sense of loss and uncertainty.

Throughout the story, Esther is depicted as smart, ambitious, and talented reflecting that her crisis caused not by lack of opportunity but due to her rejection of the society's strict expectations. her annoyance with these roles is captured through the metaphor: `` I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose``(p.52), reflecting her uncertainty to follow her desires or her society's rules (Rathore,2024. P.1).

As the novel progresses, Esther's resistance to oppressive norms intensifies her psychological disintegration. She becomes increasingly estranged, disconnected not only from society but also from her own emotions and sense of reality. Plath's use of the bell jar emerges as a potent metaphor for this alienation, encapsulating Esther's fragmented identity, emotional numbness, and entrapment within inescapable social expectations.

Ultimately, Esther's identity remains fluid, and unresolved emphasizing the unstable nature of identity particularly with in a strict society that refuses to accept freedom and personal choices, Plath initially leaves Esther's autonomy fragmented and in order to reflect how this disconnection and emotional instability can lead individuals to a deeper psychological and mental instability.

1.7 Exley's Loss of Selfhood in The Fan's Notes

Fredrick Exley presents his protagonist as man who has lost professionally, emotionally, and even within himself. As the narratives began Exley is obsessed with his fathers' athletic fame, and success, and he yearns for manhood, respect, and social admiration as he admits: `` Other men might inherit from their fathers a head for figures, a gold pocket watch all encrusted with the oxidized green of age, or an eternally astonished expression, for mine I acquired this need to have

my name whispered in reverential tones`` (Exley, p.30), this confrontation reflect his extreme longing for recognition and social approval.

Nevertheless, Exley fails to achieve both personal satisfaction as well as social adoration and praise, disappointed with his failure, he becomes a wandering ghost between failed jobs, psychiatric hospitals, football games, and bars. As he became trapped in an endless loop of uncertainty, despair, and alienation he eventually loses his identity and self-consciousness while trying to find his place in the society or abandoning it completely.

Thus, Exley's fractured identity compels him to seek refuge in alcohol. His drinking functions not as indulgence but as anesthesia, a desperate attempt to numb himself against a reality that denies him coherent selfhood. As he confesses: ``Unlike some men, I had never drunk for boldness or charm or wit, I had used alcohol for precisely what it was, a depressant to check the mental exhilaration produced by extended sobriety`` (p.24).

Exley's attempt to mask his pain and hide his inner torment with alcohol, worsen his fractured sense of self, blurring the reality of who his was and who he craved to be. His confusion alienated him from both society and his own identity. As shattered identity remained unresolved, his psychological distress deepened, leading to his mental breakdown.

1.8 The Fractured Psyches of Esther and Exley: A Comparative Analysis

Sylvia Plath and Fredrick Exley both offer a rich exploration of the weak, fragile identity through their protagonists, Esther Greenwood and Fredrick Exley whose identities are slowly shattering, and breaking down in response to the rigid social expectations. Although, both characters are facing different gender and social norms, they still experience the same identity fragmentation and loss.

As Esther suffers from the strict rules imposed on women by her society and due to her disapproval of this social treatments, she experiences multiple internal conflicts which eventually lead her to have a disoriented, and fragmented identity. Similarly, Exley feels like he lacks the masculine standards set by his society and his obsession and hard work to achieve them and be notice by his own people ultimately, cause him to loss his sense of self, and the ability to define who he truly is.

Chapter Three:

Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles, Identity Loss, and Mental Illness in *The Bell Jar* and *A Fan's Notes*

While both Esther and Exley experienced profound identity dissolution, they dealt with disconnection differently, while Esther was being overwhelmed and disoriented, she sought medical help build up her fragmented identity, and reconcile with her true self. deeply confused within herself and who she is. As she reflects: `` I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart, I am I am I am`` (Plath, p.162), Exley, on the other hand, instead of accepting and treating his failure, he keeps hiding it and detaching himself from reality. His excessive drinking, continued hospitalization and failed relationship prove his refusal to rebuild and search for himself, Exley unlike Esther tried to embrace his fragmented identity when he stated:

I had wanted nothing less than to impose myself deep into the mentality of my countrymen, and now quite suddenly it occurred to me that it was possible to live not only without fame but without self, to live and die without ever had one's fellows of the microscopic space one occupies upon this planet. (Exley, p.77)

Moreover, while both character sought their unique ways in treating and embracing their fragmented, and unstable identities, they have consciously or unconsciously impacted and harmed their psychological and mental state leading to its decline.

1.9 Social Oppression and The Shattered Self: Mental Illness in *The Bell Jar* and *A Fan's Notes*

Mental illness emerged as a central theme in *The Bell Jar* and *A Fan's Notes*, profoundly shaping the narratives as well as the characters' personal development. Within this context, mental illness is the essence of both novels as it offers a transparent reflection of the characters' experiences with the societal pressures and the inner conflicts the face.

Instead of examining mental illness as an isolated psychological or a medical condition, Plath and Exley have explored it as a gradual outcome of the rigid social norms as well as the self-dissolution, as the authors were drawn from their own lived experiences they had successfully mirrored the protagonists' struggles to navigate their own ways with in the controlling as well as the oppressive societies.

Hence, both novels offer narratives which emphasize how unrealistic, as well as suffocating social norms Strip individuals from their own freedom and rights leaving them no space for personal desires, individuality, and emotional autonomy. Furthermore, these literary works deeply reflect how individuals who willingly refused or failed to meet and fit to the social norms faced harsh criticism and judgments which eventually led them to be marginalized, and alienated from the society. As a result of this social rejection and exclusion, individuals' mental as well as psychological well-being has collapsed and broke-down.

While both novels, highlight the harming effect of the social expectation and the identity loss, each protagonist react in a different way, revealing how different gender, social roles, and personal identities shape the characters' psychological and mental health.

2.0 Exploring Esther's Psychological Turmoil in *The Bell Jar*

Sylvia Plath has offer a compelling and intimate portrayal of mental illness throughout her protagonist Esther Greenwood, reflecting her psychological breakdown against the oppressive societal norms and personal disillusionment. From the beginning of the story Esther's rejection of the roles imposed on her as well as her social exclusion are apparent particularly when she stated: ``The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn't thought about it`` (Plath, p.51), Acknowledging her deep sense of loss, and dissatisfaction.

Throughout the story, Esther Greenwood struggles to fulfill both the social roles imposed to her as well as her own dreams and desires. As she realizes her inability to reconcile her personal goals with her strict society, she finds herself trapped in a world where she is excluded and invisible. This sense of non-belonging and inadequacy only fuel her internal struggle, aggravating her psychological and mental distress (Tsank, n.d. p,166-168)

Esther's growing psychological and emotional turmoil has cast her into a deep, suffocating depression, disconnecting her from reality and trapping her within her own self. This depression and disconnection is not only a sudden and external it is also a slow, internal process holding Esther from finding meaning in her daily life, Plath has successfully reflected Esther's inner collapse through her confession: `` I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to`` (p. 78), Esther's admission reveals her hopelessness and loss of purpose in her life.

Chapter Three:

Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles, Identity Loss, and Mental Illness in The Bell Jar and A Fan's Notes

Furthermore, as Esther's depression deepens, her sense of social isolation and personal inadequacy intensifies, leaving her uncertain of what a sable, meaningful life is like. Tormented by uncertainty Esther saw death as her only escape as she declared: `` The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower`` (p.64), her calm death fantasy is a means to escape her oppressive society and shattered selfhood.

Moreover, this cold and calm desire for death it is not only driven by her internal collapse, but it is also shaped by the social stigmatization as well as misunderstanding of the women's mental health. Esther's psychological suffering, characterized by depression and suicide, was often mistaken as a morale weakness or a hormonal imbalance. For instance, when Esther try openly to confess her struggle with sleeping, eating, and writing, her mother optimistically says: `` I knew my baby wasn't like that. Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at the hospital`` (p.97), shutting her daughter down as she denies her sickness, encouraging the social marginalization over Esther which deepens her mental illness, offering her no help and no empathy.

Instead of treating Esther's case as a serious medical condition that requires proper, the society's mistreatment as well as ignorance had worsen her psychological state, this lack of understanding intensified her internal suffering. As a result, Esther was left to navigate her recovery alone, not being able to fully cure herself she learned to live with these overwhelming feelings.

2.1 Exley's Psychological Journey in A Fan's Notes

Fredrick Exley's *A Fan's Notes*, provide a raw and vivid portrayal of mental illness, through a man whose battling with feelings of failure, disillusionment, and social alienation. From the very beginning, Exley is introduced as a mentally instable person which he admits without any shame or self-pity by stating:

My lunacy had been recognized was chastening enough, but the judge's gratuitous “fatuous” carried with it intimations that I was in a blubbering, nose-picking state; and I had visions of arriving at my mother's door, garbed not in the “attractive,” melancholic dementia of the poet but in the drooling, masturbatory, moony-eyed condition of the mongoloid. (Exley, p.142)

Chapter Three:

Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles, Identity Loss, and Mental Illness in The Bell Jar and A Fan's Notes

This admission about his illness reveals his self-awareness of how the society label him as a lunatic and how he perceives himself through that same lens, highlighting the social judgment as well as his personal internalization.

Exley's psychological suffering and lunacy are deeply influenced by his inability to meet the societal expectation imposed on him as a man in the modern America. His constant comparison to men around him reminds him of his own failure, widening the gap between who he truly is and who he is expected to be by the society (Novelzilla, 2024. 1:31).

Eventually, Exley becomes socially excluded, self-disoriented and imprisoned in a cycle of alcoholism, depression, institutionalization, and emotional uncertainty. Additionally, Exley became psychologically numb, instable and hopeless.

Furthermore, these feelings of instability, numbness, and misunderstanding were encouraged by the society dismissal, and rejection to acknowledge Exley's mental illness marking it as a sign of weakness and vulnerability as Exley reflects:

I was insane. Still, I did not despise my oddness, my deviations, those things which made me. After all, me. I wanted to preserve those things. To do it, I had to get out of that place. Then as quickly as the rage had come over me I suddenly knew how to do it. I would be the kind of man I suspected the world wanted me to be. (p.70)

Exley, only revealed the was his mental illness was labeled as a shameful, as well as unacceptable thing which drove Exley to push himself further in order to be the man he was expected to be. However, this didn't last long until his mental state decline.

As the societal judgments continue and his alienation grow bigger he couldn't get fully cured on the contrary he was forced to accept his mental instability as part of him that cannot be separated.

2.2 Mirrors of Madness: A Comparative Study of Esther & Exley's Psychological Struggles

Sylvia Plath and Fredrick Exley had offer a well-crafted personal portrayal of mental illness, despite their different genders, narrative styles, and social context. both authors provided a

Chapter Three:

Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles, Identity Loss, and Mental Illness in The Bell Jar and A Fan's Notes

profound depiction of psychological distress and mental turmoil throughout their characters Esther Greenwood and Fredrick Exley.

Plath presents her protagonists mental illness as a slow, internal collapse caused by the societal expectation imposed on women. Meanwhile Exley's mental instability is presents as a messy conflict driven by his society's masculine ideals that he failed to meet. These differences revealed how mental illness is gendered in modern American literature.

Moreover, Esther's mental instability was inflicted due to her controlling environment which is clearly captured by Plath as she wrote: it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state`` (Plath, p.56). Esther's rejection of these patriarchal ideals led to her social disconnection and exclusion which eventually affected her sense of self, as she becomes uncertain of her own identity her mental state gradually aggravated and her society treatments only worsen her illness. For instance, her mother refused to acknowledge illness convincing her that she is good, while doctors had subjected her to electroshock therapy with no empathy or mercy. Plath's narratives mainly criticize how the society's failure to empathize and To verify Esther's illness only made it worse, ultimately leading to her psychological downfall.

Exley's illness although it is also fueled by the society's ideals expectations of masculinity as well as judgments of Exley's own failure to fit into the roles of fame, and success. However, Exley presents his character's personal disorientation and mental illness through irony and boldness and dark humor. He bitterly and explicitly recognizes his illness, and the way the society view it, with no sympathy and respect.

Exley shows his character's awareness and self-criticism through his narratives as well as his character's coping mechanism with alcohol, writing, and his football obsession. Unlike, Esther who struggles to understand what she is experiencing as she often describes her illness metaphorically as being trapped under a bell jar.

However, as the novels come to an end they both diverge in resolution. *The Bell Jar* offer uncertain end, concluding with Esther's release from the hospital with sense hope and the possibility of her recovery, her optimism is evident as she states: `` I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to circulating air`` (Plath, p.144). while, in *A Fan's Notes* Exley remains caught in a loop of drinking, and insecurities as he tries to

embrace his illness. While Plath and Exley offer a vivid, powerful, and personal portrayal of mental illness, their tone, narratives, style, and focus differ. Plath's narratives, and style is poetic, emphasizing the protagonists internal struggle with the gendered society and her understanding of her illness, Exley on the other had uses existentialist, and self-conscious narrative, exposing the heavy weight of the societal expectations on men. However, both authors tackled mental illness as a personal, and social conflict in the modern American literature.

2.3 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we explored the analytical part of our research, which includes *The Bell Jar* and *A Fan's Notes* two distinct novels with nuanced and valid portrayals of mental illness. Shaped by the protagonist's inner turmoil and societal pressures. While, Esther Greenwood's psychological experiences are shaped by the gendered society that limits her freedom. However, she managed to find a glimpse of hope about her recovery. Compared to Exley who constantly doubt himself as he can't live up to the mescaline ideals of success and power in modern America. Both stories offer different yet equal explorations of mental illness and how is it stigmatized and labeled by the society. Inviting readers to challenge these stereotypes and hoping for better understanding of the society's affect over mental instable individuals.

General Conclusion

Literature is considered a unique and a powerful tool for expressing the hidden wonders of the human mind, with its different narratives, raw literary techniques as well as its diverse Aesthetic movements it became a bridge where both the writer and reader feels connected as they could experience each other's thought, desires and emotions. This emotional and intellectual connection grew more evident during the late 19th and the early 20th century particularly with the rise of modernism within the American society, as the movement dealt and explored the human psyche, identity psychological state, modernists works reflected the tense, mentally damaging struggles often portraying characters as alienated, fragmented and mentally unstable.

Therefore, this research strives to explore the literary portrayal of mental illness, social dynamics, gender expectations and identity crisis within the modern American, mainly in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *A Fan's Notes* by Fredrick Exley, revealing the authors' ability to reflect on their experiences creating psychologically disturbed protagonists who vividly mirrors their own battles with mental illness. Throughout a psychoanalytic lens it became clear that the characters' mental and psychological distress is closely tied to the harsh social ideologies, gender roles as well as their inability to define themselves.

This research has also offered a significant comparative analysis of how both male and female writers depicts and understands mental illness differently. Furthermore, this research finding reveals how Sylvia Plath depicts mental illness as an internal conflict and gendered experience impacted by the societal rules, meanwhile Fredrick Exley portrays mental illness as a deep existentialist crisis shaped by the masculine ideals placed on men.

However, this research is no exception. The researcher noticed the lack of comparative studies that emphasis on the exploration of how both male and female authors draw from their personal experiences in order to shed lights on psychological battles modern Americans face. Moreover, future researchers could take the chance to expand this field by exploring other authors from different historical, cultural and social backgrounds throughout the use of multiple approaches like gender theory and social studies, as they could also examine how mental illness is presented in contemporary literature and how does it continue to evolve.

Chapter Three:**Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles, Identity Loss,
and Mental Illness in The Bell Jar and A Fan's Notes**

To sum up, this study exposed the societal pressures and personal struggles that worsen mental illness, as Plath and Exley did more than writing fiction of madness, they gave voices to mute, oppressed individuals by encouraging readers to sympathies and accept mentally ill individuals.

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