

Ideal of Womanhood: An Analysis of Gender in Plath's The Bell Jar and Shafak's Black Milk

Ms. Sumaira Yasmeen

Email: sumairayasmeen32@gmail.com

Research Scholar

Dr. Sadia Siddiq

Email: sadia-siddiq@comsats.edu.pk

Assistant Professor, COMSATS University, Islamabad

Ms. Saira Ali Hassnain

Email: sairaali@comsats.edu.pk

Lecturer, COMSATS University, Islamabad

Abstract

The idealized concepts of womanhood (gender roles for women), a significant issue in contemporary times as well as in fiction writings, is deeply rooted in socio-cultural practices. This idealized notion of a womanhood, particularly the inflexible division of labor in society, gives rise to a multitude of complex challenges and dilemmas for women, exerting a substantial impact on their autonomy, mental well-being, and overall quality of life. As it's an unexplored area on the selected texts, this study aims to do the gender-oriented exploration of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Elif Shafak's *Black Milk*, examining how the depiction of the ideal woman is portrayed in these literary works. Employing Eagly's (2011) Social Role Theory and Murphy's (1972) character analysis model, the study investigates the complex interplay between societal expectations and the protagonists'

experiences. The analysis reveals a distinct presentation of inflexible gender roles, evidenced by cognitive indecision, a sense of confinement arising from restricted roles, and a notable impact on gender identity. The research concludes that the enduring prevalence of these gender roles across the depicted periods underscores their lasting influence on women's lives, providing a complex narrative of the development and challenges of gender roles within the scrutinized literary works.

Keywords: Social Role Theory; Gender-oriented Exploration; Character Analysis; Gender Roles; Ideal womanhood

I. Introduction

Gender roles, deeply entrenched in human history, have traditionally imposed distinct societal expectations and behaviors based on individuals' perceived gender. Over the centuries, these roles typically assigned men to roles involving leadership and provision, along with the duty of protection, while women were tasked with roles centered on caregiving, homemaking, and nurturing. The societal norms imposed on women, especially the strict division of labor in society, give rise to a multitude of intricate challenges and dilemmas for women, significantly influencing their independence, psychological well-being, and overall quality of life.

Gender and sex are fundamental concepts that shape the understanding of human identity and societal roles. Although often used interchangeably, they represent distinct aspects of human existence, each characterized by its own complexities and implications. "Sex refers to the biological characteristics distinguishing male and female. This definition emphasizes male and female differences in chromosomes, anatomy, hormones, reproductive systems, and other physiological components. Gender refers to those social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts. Sex makes us male or female; gender makes us masculine or feminine. Sex is an ascribed status because a person is born with it, but gender is an achieved status because it must be learned" (Lindsey, 2016, p.4).

Gender roles can influence various aspects of life, such as career choices, family dynamics, relationships, and personal aspirations. Mostly, politics and business were proposed as manly traits to be part of the public domain. Women were expected to perform domestic duties, taking care of the private sphere. It's important to note that these roles are not inherent or fixed; they are constructed by society and can be challenged, questioned, and redefined as individuals and societies progress towards greater inclusivity and understanding of gender diversity.

Gender roles and stereotypes have a longstanding history, rooted in deep historical origins. The gender role and stereotypes prevalent in today's society can be linked back to the 19th century (Brannon, 2017, p.47). Brannon (2017) maintains that the Industrial Revolution changed the lives of a majority of people in Europe and North America by moving men outside the home to earn money and women remain at home to manage household duties and taking care of their children. This parting enforced men and women to adjust to different environments and roles. These changes produced two beliefs: the Doctrine of Two Spheres and the Cult of True Womanhood. The Doctrine of Two Spheres is the belief that due to separate domains of women and men—women and men have their distinct areas of influence. For women, the areas of influence are home and children, whereas men's sphere includes work and the outside world (p.47).

The Cult of True Womanhood emerged around 1820 to 1860. According to Welter the attributes of True Womanhood, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (as cited in Brannon, 2017, p.47). Piety was a virtue that society viewed as more natural to women than men i.e. Religious nature. Purity (that is, their virginity) means true women are sexually pure. Submissiveness means to be weak, dependent, and timid, whereas men were supposed to be strong, wise, and forceful. The last of the four virtues, domesticity, was connected to both passivity and to the Doctrine of the Two Spheres. True Women were wives whose concern was with domestic affairs—making a home and having children: These domestic duties included cooking and nursing the sick, especially a sick husband or child (Brannon, 2017, p.47).

I.1 Statement of Problem

Idealized notions of womanhood, encompassing conventional societal roles and expectations, impose a fixed benchmark for women's acceptance within their respective societies. The ongoing captivation with idealized femininity remains a significant theme in the world of literature, where writers take inspiration from society, and, reciprocally, the way female characters are portrayed influences societies. However, this concept of an ideal woman especially the strict division of labor in society gives rise to a multitude of intricate challenges and dilemmas for women, significantly influencing their independence, psychological well-being, and overall quality of life. The current research, in line with this social issue, examines the ideals of womanhood presented in *The Bell Jar* (1963) and *Black Milk* (2007) with the intention to investigate the intricate repercussions of idealized womanhood on the lives of female protagonists within the context of evolving social norms and the far-reaching consequences for the pursuit of gender identity. As both the texts have not been analyzed with a focus on gendered perspective, this research may provide insights into the complexities of gender roles that exists in every society.

I.2 Research Objectives

- To analyze the ideals of womanhood portrayed in *The Bell Jar* and *Black Milk*.
- To closely examine the affects ideals of womanhood on the lives of protagonists in the selected texts.
- To examine the progression of gender roles over the time period between the two texts.

I.3 Research Questions

1. What are the ideals of womanhood portrayed in *The Bell Jar* and *Black Milk*?
2. How do ideals of womanhood affect the lives of protagonists in the selected texts?
3. How do the gender roles progress over the time period between the two texts?

I.4 Significance of the Study

The findings of the study hold a vital significance in both academic and societal contexts. Firstly, the study has substantially contributed to the field of literary analysis and enriched the scholarly discourse by introducing a gender-focused perspective to these influential literary works. The study can serve as an educational resource, and can foster meaningful dialogues concerning the evolving dynamics of gender roles and the revealing impact of literature on the comprehension of women's experiences in society. The findings have underscored the gender-based division of labor, behavior and identity, thereby educating the readers on the intricate interplay among gender roles, societal pressures, and individual identity as depicted in these novels. This research has contributed to address the pertinent social issue of ideal womanhood through creating awareness about its negative impacts. This understanding will serve as a crucial foundation for advancing discussions related to gender equality and equity on different educational, social and decision-making power forums that can pave the way for moving towards a better policy making for the women rights protection.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender Roles

Social practices impact the characteristics attributed to masculinity and femininity. These gender anticipations are displayed through individuals adhering to the expected behaviors and traits linked to their respective genders. Living in society as a man or woman involves recognizing and adhering to these gender roles, which go beyond mere physical distinctions (Palahniuk, 2015). In Newman's (2018) account of gender roles, the concept encompasses behavior, demeanor, recreational and play preferences, and conversational subjects. To be categorized as either male or female necessitated adhering to unique behavioral expectations in both public and private spheres and shouldering specific duties.

2.2 Gender Stereotypes

The concept of 'gender roles' has been introduced to represent the shared societal beliefs that are collectively applied to individuals based on their socially recognized gender (Eagly, 2009). They are closely linked to gender stereotypes. Stereotypes can be considered as the descriptive components of gender roles, as they portray the traits that individuals associate with a particular group of people. (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). Stereotypes pertaining to both men and women frequently correspond to Bakan's (1966) distinction between two aspects, often labeled as agency, which denotes self-assertion, and communion, which signifies a connection with others (Eagly, 2009). Men are commonly seen as showcasing traits related to agency, including competency, assertiveness, independence, expertise, and a dedication to achievement, while women are often thought to exhibit these agentic characteristics to a lesser degree than men. Conversely, women are frequently associated with communal attributes like friendliness, warmth, selflessness, sociability, interdependence, emotional expressiveness, and a focus on relationships, while men are typically perceived as having lower levels of these communal qualities. (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). Gender roles consist of two primary elements: a descriptive aspect, often labeled as a stereotype, which establishes what is seen as customary for men and women in specific contexts and situations, and a prescriptive component, which delineates what is anticipated or regarded as favorable for them to conform to. Any deviation from these prescribed gender roles is attributed negatively (Eagly, 2009). Thus, W. Wood and Eagly (2010) suggest that the power of gender roles is rooted "both in others' expectations thereby acting as social norms and in individuals' internalized gender identities, thereby acting as personal dispositions" (p. 645).

2.3 Different Perspectives on Gender Roles

Gender roles not only divide roles for men and women, but also influence numerous aspects of human society. Blackstone (2003) states that different disciplines offer a range of perspectives on gender roles.

An ecological perspective on gender roles suggests that these roles develop from interactions among individuals, communities, and their environment. Thus, as individuals contribute in forming gender roles, they are also shaped by the surrounding environment. The ecological point of view about gender roles considers the environment and individuals as equal and important aspect in formation of gender roles.

A biological perspective, postulates that men and women naturally attract towards one's gender as females are attracted towards feminine gender roles and men have the natural instinct for masculine gender roles. However, this stance only inform about the gender roles of men and women and any status as superior or inferior isn't addressed.

A sociological perspective on gender roles states that biological characteristics of any individual don't play any role in forming specified .Sociologists attach diverse meanings and values associated with these roles in society as they consider gender roles

are learned from certain society. Based on this view, it can be said that learned roles can be unlearned to form new gender roles.

The feminist viewpoint emphasizes that gender roles are not about appropriate behavior of men and women according to one's gender but the power dynamics between males and females are related to it in society. As generally males are having higher status and females are at lower position, for instance, economic power with men often leads to greater societal power, while women may face economic challenges after a breakup in married life. According to the feminist perspective, this highlights a power imbalance supporting men in marriages, as they are less likely to experience a loss of power or social status in such situations (Blackstone, 2003).

2.4 Research Gap

The selected texts for this research i.e. *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath and *Black Milk* (2007) by Elif Shafak are classic semi-autobiographical feminist texts. Both the texts have been previously explored from perspectives of feminism, post modernism, metaphor, psychology, and autobiography etc. but these texts have not yet been analyzed from the gender perspective. Thereby, the current research fills this gap by analyzing these texts from gender perspective.

3. Research Methodology

The methodology of research functions as a guiding tool that assists scholars in navigating the complex realm of investigation. A well-constructed methodology not only augments the rigor and trustworthiness of a study but also brings transparency to the research process, permitting others to replicate, assess, and expand upon the discoveries. Eagly's (2011) Social Role Theory is used along with Murphy's (1972) Character analysis model for the analysis.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

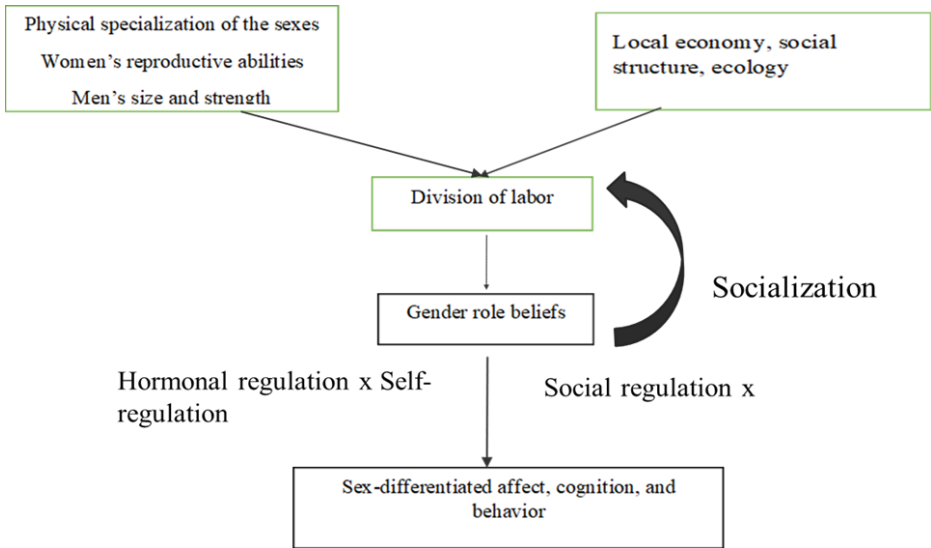
This research uses the Social Role Theory by Eagly and Wood (2011) as the theoretical framework to analyze the impact of social roles in shaping the behavior and identities of the protagonists in the selected texts i.e. *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *Black Milk* by Elif Shafak.

Eagly and Wood's (2011) work not only highlighted the division of labor in society but also maintained how specific gender roles influence the behavior and identities of individuals. Eagly and Wood (2011) also mentioned that "sex differences and similarities in behavior reflect gender role beliefs that in turn represent people's perceptions of men's and women's social roles in the society in which they live" (Eagly & Wood, 2011, p. 459).

The following figure sums up the different aspects of Social Role Theory as

1. The division of labor is the outcome of the interaction between the physical specialization of the sexes and local conditions.
2. The division of labor yields gender role beliefs, which then facilitate this division through socialization processes.
3. Gender role beliefs act on behavior through a trio of processes involving:

- Regulation by hormonal changes (biological mechanisms),
- Others' expectations (societal anticipations), and
- Self-standards (individual standards).



Gender roles guide sex differences and similarities

Figure 3.I Gender Roles Guide Sex differences and similarities

The diagram illustrates the core concepts of Social Role Theory, showing how a variety of factors collaborate to shape gender roles in society. It suggests that the division of tasks between genders is influenced not only by physical differences but also by external factors, indicating that societal roles are shaped by more than just biology. Additionally, the diagram highlights that these gender roles are not fixed but are continually reinforced through socialization, indicating the significant impact of societal norms and expectations on maintaining traditional gender roles.

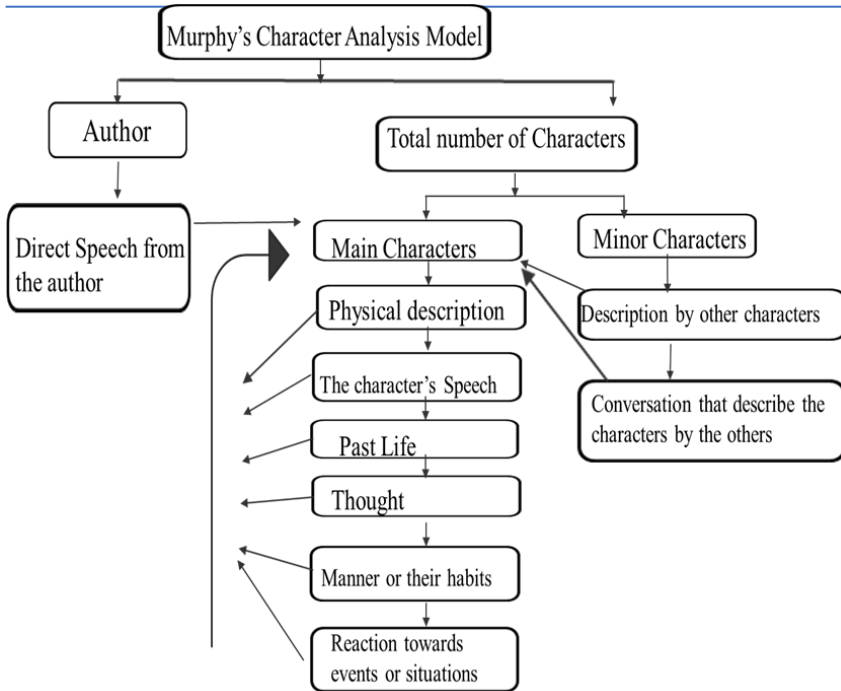
Furthermore, the diagram explains how gender role beliefs affect behavior through three main mechanisms. Firstly, it suggests that hormonal changes play a role in regulating behavior, implying a biological basis for some aspects of gender-specific behavior. Secondly, it emphasizes the influence of societal expectations, suggesting that individuals' actions are influenced by what others expect based on their gender. Lastly, it mentions self-standards, suggesting that individuals internalize societal expectations and develop their own behavioral standards based on gender roles.

Overall, the diagram presents Social Role Theory as a comprehensive framework that considers biological, societal, and individual factors in understanding the development and continuation of gender roles in society. It highlights the complex

interplay between biology, socialization, and personal standards in shaping both individual behavior and societal norms regarding gender roles.

3.3 Method of Analysis

This study takes a qualitative approach, employing character analysis as its selected method. It entails examining the specific traits of characters and their roles in the narrative, covering conflicts, experiences, and character development throughout the novel. "Characters in fiction can be major and minor, static, and dynamic characters. A major character is an actual figure at the center of the story. The major character (protagonist) is a figure whose conflict with an antagonist may spark the story's conflict. Supporting the protagonist is one or more secondary or minor characters whose function partly illuminates the major character(s). Minor characters are often static or unchanging, and they remain the same from the beginning of a work to the end. On the other hand, dynamic characters exhibit some kind of change—of attitude, purpose, behavior, as the story progresses" (Ferdinal, Seswita, & Sandika, 2020, p.67). The current investigation zooms in on character analysis, with a particular emphasis on exploring the role of the protagonist. Koesmobroto, (as cited in Handayani, 2017) points out the distinction between major and minor characters, wherein major characters, also labeled as protagonists, hold a crucial position in fiction, while minor characters, or antagonists, occupy less significant roles. The protagonists of *The Bell Jar* and *Black Milk* (Esther and Shafak, respectively) undergo analysis using Murphy's (1972) character analysis model.



This model considers various aspects, including personal description, perceptions by others, character's speech, past life, conversations involving others, reactions, thoughts, mannerisms, and the author's comments, to analyze characters in a literary text. First of all, there's personal description of the individual, where the author illustrates a character's physical attributes like skin color, hair, and clothing. Second, the standpoint of others is experienced, as the author unveils the character through the observations and opinions of fellow characters, aiding readers' comprehension. Third, character's speech, offering glimpses into a character's personality through his/her dialogue. Fourth, character's past is explored, shaping his current disposition. Fifth involves insights gleaned from conversations among others, bringing to light a character through discussions and remarks. Sixth is understanding a character through his/her reaction to diverse situations. Seventh is the author's direct commentary on a character. Eighth involves revealing a character's thoughts, granting readers exclusive access to their inner reflections. Lastly, mannerisms or habits can also provide insights into a character's nature (p.161-173).

In this study, the focus is on analyzing characters as perceived by others, character's speech, conversations involving others, past life, reactions, and thoughts under the Social Role Theory proposed by Eagly and Wood (2011). The analysis of texts is ordered in the following way.

1. The division of labor and societal expectations
2. Influence of gender roles
3. Gender roles and gender identities
4. **Data Analysis**

4.1 Context

Although both the texts are published at different places as *The Bell Jar* focusing on American society and *Black Milk* delving into Turkish society, but both deal with the same theme of gender. The main characters in both texts face similar challenges in defining gender roles for women. Esther in *The Bell Jar* grapples with shaping a diverse gender identity in American society, while Shafak in *Black Milk* undergoes a parallel struggle within Turkish culture. Consequently, this study underscores common social constraints in both societies that limit women to domestic responsibilities.

The Bell Jar and *Black Milk* vividly illustrate the profound impact of gender roles on the identities and experiences of their female protagonists, Esther Greenwood and Elif Shafak. Together, both the texts, constitute captivating literary explorations of the female experience. Eagly's (2011) Social Role Theory along with Murphy's (1972) character analysis model provide a valuable framework for understanding how societal pressures and gender norms influence their lives and decision-making processes.

Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, is a complex and troubled individual. She grapples with the challenges of self-discovery and societal expectations in the 1960s. Esther is characterized by her intelligence, ambition, and a strong desire to attain success as a writer. However, as the story unfolds, she wrestles with mental health issues, feeling profoundly confined, much like being trapped under a symbolic bell jar that isolates her from the world. Esther's character poignantly mirrors Sylvia Plath's own struggles with depression and the constraints placed on women in that era. Elif Shafak, the protagonist of *Black Milk* embarks on an introspective journey, delving into the interplay between motherhood and creativity, echoing themes of self-discovery and the constraints placed upon women. Shafak's character offers profound insights into the intricacies of womanhood, the burdens of societal expectations, and the innate desire for autonomy and self-expression in contemporary times.

4.2 Sections of Analysis

The analysis is carried out in the following way to unveil the complexities of gender roles which continue to influence the life choices and identities of women across history till contemporary times. The sections of analysis are taken from the chosen theoretical framework which is Eagly's (2011) Social Role Theory.

1. Division of labor and Societal Expectations
2. Influence of Gender Roles
3. Gender roles and Gender Identity

4.2.I. Division of labor and Societal Expectations

The division of labor pertains to the allocation of specific duties, roles, and responsibilities based on gender. It suggests that traditional societal norms and expectations have often dictated distinct roles and functions for men and women. The texts selected for this research, both reflect the portrayal of gender roles and division of labor.

Esther, a young and intelligent woman who takes the lead in *The Bell Jar*, dreams of becoming a writer while harboring a deep aversion to the societal pressures that confine women to traditional roles as wives and mothers in the sphere of domesticity in the last half of the 20th century. The text vividly conveys her discontent with these established feminine expectations.

He was always saying how his mother said, "What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security," and, "What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from," until it made me tired. (Plath, 1963, p.64)

These lines depict Esther's strong opposition to traditional gender roles, particularly as promoted by Mrs. Willard, the mother of Esther's boyfriend Buddy. Esther finds Mrs. Willard's views unappealing and restrictive, in line with Eagly's theory contrasting women's communal domestic roles with men's assertive employment roles (Eagly and Steffen, 1984 as cited in Eagly & Wood, 2011, p. 466). The quote suggests that Buddy often echoes his mother's beliefs, indicating his firm adherence to them. Although Mrs. Willard is a minor character, her beliefs reflect societal expectations and pressure Esther to conform. The societal idea that "a man wants a mate and a woman wants infinite security" emphasizes the limited and predefined roles for men and women, with women expected to serve as wives to provide security. Moreover, the quote implies that these roles are the only acceptable paths in society. Men are portrayed as arrows pointing towards the future, symbolizing progress and success tied to activities outside the home, while women are depicted as the starting point from which the arrow launches, signifying their role in offering support and stability within the household. The term "arrow" symbolizes the notion that a woman's fulfillment of her domestic duties directly impacts a man's career success. This reinforces the societal expectation of conformity, with deviation being unacceptable. Esther's weariness with these notions indicates her rejection of traditional gender roles and her desire to escape the constraints imposed on her as a woman. In conclusion, the quote reflects the societal perception of traditional gender roles in Western society, particularly America, during the late twentieth century. It is portrayed through the viewpoints of Mrs. Willard and Esther, emphasizing Esther's strong opposition to these roles and her aspiration to challenge societal norms.

Elif Shafak, the author and protagonist of *Black Milk* remains perplexed between her identity as writer and societal expectations to conform to traditional role of woman as wife and mother. The set standards in any field are hard to meet because it suggests all to acquire a certain level to be part of that group or community. The

ideals set for humans as male and female is one such kind which has pressurized them because it defines strict lines to be followed. The same aspect is mentioned by Shafak in *Black Milk* as she also feel pressure to conform to the ideals set for woman when was drawing comparisons between two distinct concepts of womanhood within her family – those embodied by her mother and grandmother.

Adjectives come in pairs. For every *beautiful*, somewhere there is an *ugly*... That's why we always think in terms of dualism. If there is an established definition of what constitutes "ideal womanhood," it is thanks to a similarly entrenched definition of "ideal manhood." Both definitions, and the expectations that ensue from them, can be equally harrowing for real women and real men. (Shafak, 2007, p.127)

The quote explores the notion of dualistic gender expectations, highlighting the idealized ideals of femininity and masculinity. These ideals indirectly refer to the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each gender, influencing the formation of gender roles and the allocation of responsibilities. As Eagly and Wood (2011) noted, behaviors that reflect differences and similarities between genders stem from societal beliefs about gender roles, which are shaped by perceptions of men's and women's societal roles. (p.466). The opening statement, "adjectives come in pairs. For every beautiful, somewhere there is an ugly," suggests that opposites exist in all aspects of the universe. This lays the foundation for understanding the quote's perspective on dualism, or the tendency to think in terms of opposites. This dualistic thinking is inherent in human existence, as evidenced by the dual nature of human society comprising men and women. The quote further asserts that the concept of "ideal womanhood" is defined in relation to an equally entrenched concept of "ideal manhood." This indicates that societal norms dictate the characteristics of a "real woman" or a "real man," presenting challenges for individuals who may struggle to conform to these ideals. Finally, the quote emphasizes the challenge of adhering to societal expectations regarding gender roles. It suggests that the definitions and expectations imposed by society can be difficult for both men and women, as these ideals may not align with their true desires and identities. The use of the term "harrowing" suggests that these expectations can be burdensome and emotionally draining. In summary, the quote underscores the significant impact of societal roles and expectations on individuals' lives, highlighting the difficulties associated with conforming to or deviating from these roles.

Another evidence taken from *The Bell Jar* reflect the rigid boundaries associated with gender roles have far-reaching repercussions throughout history. Esther's realization that her era of excellence as college student is about to end, puts her in a confused state of mind as she finds herself entangled with closed roads. Her expression sums it all.

The one thing I was good at was winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end. I felt like a racehorse in a world without racetracks or a

champion college footballer suddenly confronted by Wall Street and a business suit, his days of glory shrunk to a little gold cup on his mantel with a date engraved on it like the date on a tombstone. (Plath, 1963, p. 68)

This analysis explores Esther's internal struggle and her battle against societal norms. Despite her academic success, including winning scholarships and awards typically associated with intellectual prowess more valued in men, Esther feels that her accomplishments are losing significance as she nears the end of college. This illustrates the societal perspective that attributes like academic brilliance and intelligence are seen as more masculine traits, which do not align with the traditional feminine roles of wife and motherhood. Esther's likening of herself to a racehorse without a track or a college football player suddenly faced with Wall Street and a business suit reflects her sense of being adrift in a world that does not offer pathways for her talents and ambitions. This emphasizes the difficulty of adapting to evolving gender expectations and societal norms. In essence, this analysis depicts Esther's struggle to harmonize her skills and achievements with the confines of traditional gender roles. It highlights the challenges individuals encounter when excelling in fields not typically associated with their gender, illustrating the impact of gender stereotypes and societal pressures on personal identity and satisfaction.

A similar kind of evidence is taken from Elif Shafak's *Black Milk* where Elif is thinking about traditional gender roles allocated to women in the early part of 21st century. The division of labor indicates certain fixed attributes to both genders which becomes the societal beliefs with the passage of time and any modification is considered deviation from set standards. The association of intellectual ability to men is one such division which is hard to accept for women. The same is expressed by Shafak when she recalled the most male writers' belief about women writers.

For a woman, any woman, the right way to engender is through her uterus, not through her brain...They claimed fiction writing as their terrain, an inherently manly task. The novel was a most rational construct, a cerebral work that required engineering and plotting, and since women were, by definition, emotional beings, they wouldn't make good novelists. (Shafak, 2017, p. 19)

This analysis underscores the societal perception that writing fiction, particularly novels, is predominantly a male domain, depicting women as emotional and lacking in rationality. It reflects historical gender norms linking intellectual and creative tasks to masculinity, while assigning women roles centered on emotions and caregiving. Despite advancements towards gender equality, this bias against women's intellectual abilities persists. The notion that women would not excel as novelists due to their emotional nature reinforces this bias, suggesting they are incapable of logical and intellectual endeavors, thereby further restricting their access to fields traditionally dominated by men. Additionally, the analysis emphasizes how gender stereotypes shape perceptions of women's capabilities and societal roles, perpetuating unequal

expectations and opportunities based on gender. The belief that successful novel writing requires skills typically associated with men, like engineering and plotting, further marginalizes women in intellectual pursuits. Overall, the analysis underscores the importance of challenging these stereotypes to create a more inclusive and egalitarian society where individuals are not confined by gender-based assumptions.

4.2.2. Influence of Gender Roles

Gender roles exert a considerable influence on society, shaping societal expectations, behavior, and the opportunities, individuals have based on how their gender is perceived. These roles can differ across cultures and time periods, often involving stereotypes and prescribed norms that define how men and women should behave. These impacts can affect various aspects of life, including one's career, family dynamics, mental health, relationships, and personal sense of identity. The influence of gender roles is mentioned by Eagly as

Behavior consistent with gender role beliefs garners approval and continued interaction. In contrast, behavior inconsistent with gender roles is often negatively sanctioned and tends to disrupt social interaction. The sanctions for role-inconsistent behavior may be overt (e.g., losing a job) or subtle (e.g., being ignored, receiving disapproving looks). (Eagly & Wood, 2011, p. 468)

The first and foremost influence of prescribed gender roles is on decision making. It creates tension and indecisiveness among those who find traditional gender roles limited and imposed by others. The protagonists of both the texts face real struggle to find a way out of self-fulfillment. Esther's uncertainty and confused state of mind about her future is evident in the following example from *The Bell Jar*.

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch...One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor ... and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. 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. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide. (Plath, 1963, p.68-69)

Esther Greenwood uses a metaphor involving a fig tree to symbolize her struggle with the many life choices available to her, representing each option as a fig on a branch. These choices range from traditional roles like wife and mother to professional paths like poet, professor, or editor. However, she feels constrained by societal gender roles and fears the consequences of deviating from them, which Eagly's observation also supports that behavior inconsistent with gender roles is often negatively sanctioned and disrupts social interaction. (p. 468) In the quote, Esther compares her life to a fig tree branching out before her. Each branch represents a different life path, such as domestic life, a career as a poet or professor, or becoming an

editor. Despite considering various options, she feels indecisive and pressured to conform to traditional roles, which leaves her feeling confused and uncertain about her future. This inner conflict is symbolized by her image of sitting in the crotch of the fig tree, unable to decide which fig (or path) to choose. Esther's struggle highlights the societal expectations and pressures placed on women during that era, pushing them to make choices that often require trade-offs between personal and professional fulfillment. Her feeling of being overwhelmed, fear of making the wrong decision, and sense of being trapped reflect the experiences of many women of her time.

The enduring and prevalent nature of traditional gender roles continues to influence individuals throughout different eras. Esther's experiences in the late 20th century parallel to those of Shafak, the protagonist and narrator of *Black Milk*, who confronts with a similar dilemma in the early 21st century. Both face the challenge of choosing a path that leads to a secure future.

This is a historic moment," she bellows. "The time is ripe to make a choice once and for all." She points an accusing finger at Mama Rice Pudding. "Do you want to be like her? A forlorn housewife? Or would you rather live your life like a majestic arboreal brain... Finally, I muster the courage to answer. "If I have to make a choice, I'll certainly choose the Brain Tree. (Shafak, 2007, p.142-43)

In *Black Milk*, Shafak grapples with a significant decision concerning self-identity, personal freedom, and societal expectations. The quote reveals the impact of rigid gender roles, leading to indecision as Shafak contemplates her future. She faces the dilemma that choosing one role means forfeiting all others, with a fear of societal disapproval for deviating from these roles, as Eagly suggests, "behavior inconsistent with gender roles is often negatively sanctioned and tends to disrupt social interaction" (Eagly & Wood, 2011, p. 468). The passage begins with Milady Ambitious Chekhovian declaring a "historic moment," underscoring the gravity of the decision at hand. The phrase "the time is ripe to make a choice once and for all" implies a sense of urgency, pushing Shafak to decide her future. The accusatory tone towards Mama Rice Pudding, representing a traditional housewife, contrasts with the image of the "majestic arboreal brain," symbolizing a life of intellectual and creative pursuits. This sets up a clear dichotomy between the conventional path and a more intellectually fulfilling one, presenting Shafak with a stark choice. Ultimately, Shafak chooses the "Brain Tree," symbolizing her desire for a life enriched with intellectual growth and personal development over the traditional role of a housewife. This decision challenges societal expectations and encourages women to pursue paths that align with their aspirations, highlighting the struggle women face in navigating rigid gender roles and societal pressures to forge their identities.

4.2.3. Gender Roles and Gender Identity

"Gender roles influence people's self-concepts and thereby become gender identities – individuals' sense of themselves as female or male. These identities arise

because most people accept, or internalize, at least some aspects of cultural meanings associated with their sex” (Wood and Eagly, 2009, 2010). The rejection can be the outcome of prescribed gender roles as mentioned by Eagly as “people differ in the extent to which they incorporate gender roles into their self-concepts. Also, people differ in the aspects of gender roles that they adopt” (Eagly & Wood, 2011, p. 468).

Esther, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, deals with the pressure of conforming to traditional gender roles of wife and mother as her ambition of pursuing a successful career as a fiction writer presents a different perspective. The societal norms, illustrated by the actions of minor characters in the narrative, lead to internal conflict as she struggles to decide the best course for her life. Ultimately, her sense of gender identity is also shaped by the established gender roles she encounters. The instance taken from text also reflects the same notion. The following quote is one such example.

That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. 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, 1963, p. 74)

In these lines, the protagonist, Esther, expresses her strong aversion to the idea of marriage and the conventional role it imposes on women. Her refusal to marry signifies a rebellion against traditional gender roles and the societal expectations associated with women in marriage. This rejection of marriage aligns with Eagly's Social Role Theory, which suggests that individuals vary in the extent to which they internalize and adopt gender roles into their self-concepts (Eagly & Wood, 2011, p. 468). Esther's statement, “that's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married,” clearly articulates her rejection of marriage. She goes on to explain that she does not desire “infinite security” or to be a stable foundation from which others venture out, indicating her resistance to the traditional role of women in marriage. Women are often expected to provide stability and security within the household, while their own desires and identities are sidelined. Instead, Esther longs for “change and excitement” and to “shoot off in all directions” herself, emphasizing her desire for independence and a dynamic life. This desire clashes with societal expectations that often emphasize women's roles as nurturers and stabilizers. Esther's rejection of marriage reflects a broader theme of resistance to traditional gender roles and a quest for personal autonomy and self-expression.

Shafak's stance over marriage is also depicting as a deviant behavior from ideals presented by society. She asserts it in the following way.

If I must resort to marriage as a metaphor, I can claim that literature is my husband and books are my children. The only way for me to get married is either to divorce literature or to take a second husband. (Shafak, 2007, p.18)

In this excerpt from *Black Milk*, Shafak uses a metaphor to convey her profound connection with literature and creativity. She likens her relationship with literature to marriage, describing it as “literature is my husband and books are my children.” This

metaphor emphasizes the depth of her commitment to literature, suggesting that her life is deeply intertwined with her passion for writing. Shafak's use of this metaphor reflects her strong dedication to the world of literature, indicating that her creative endeavors are central to her sense of self and existence. The passage also explores Shafak's perspective on gender roles and her own identity. By likening literature to her husband and books to her children, she challenges traditional gender norms that often define women's primary roles as wives and mothers. This assertion resonates with Eagly's Social Role Theory, which posits that individuals vary in their incorporation and acceptance of gender roles into their self-concepts (Eagly & Wood, 2011, p. 468). Shafak's metaphorical marriage to literature signifies her rejection of societal expectations and her decision to prioritize her creative pursuits over conforming to conventional gender expectations. Moreover, the quote suggests that Shafak recognizes the potential sacrifices she may have to make to maintain her relationship with literature. She presents the dilemma of choosing between "divorcing literature" or "taking a second husband," indicating that nurturing her creative passion may require sacrifices in personal relationships or other creative pursuits. This underscores the significant impact that literature has on Shafak's life and the weighty decisions she faces in nurturing her bond with her craft.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it can be said that the deeply rooted ideals of womanhood portrayed in both the texts reflect the strict division of labor for women as these ideals are ingrained in societal expectations which restrict women to traditional roles. The ideal of womanhood in *The Bell Jar* depicts women as dependent, passive, and homemaker, whose duty is to serve men, similarly, the ideal of womanhood in *Black Milk* also portrays women as dependent, weak, irrational, and emotional beings whose primary duty is within reproductive roles. Furthermore, the ideals of womanhood adversely affect the lives of both the protagonists in *The Bell Jar* and *Black Milk*, as both of them experience indecision, loss of personal identity and dissatisfaction. Esther's internal conflict in *The Bell Jar* reflects societal pressure to conform, while neglecting personal growth and satisfaction so compelling her to limit herself to domestic and reproductive roles (leading her to suicidal attempt) and Shafak's inner voices in *Black Milk* reflect a society prioritizing motherhood over individual aspirations (impeding intellectual pursuits), illustrating the influence of ingrained social norms. Lastly, the progression of gender roles in both the texts reflects the unchanged nature of gender roles with the same societal expectations. Both the protagonists experience the societal pressure to conform to predefined gender roles, sacrificing their personal identities and fulfillment. Esther's internal struggle and uncertainty highlight the intricate relationship of gender roles and identity in *The Bell Jar*. Shafak's exploration of inner voices underscores the limitations imposed by societal gender roles as she seeks a balanced life in *Black Milk*.

Both the protagonists excelled academically, securing scholarships due to supportive legal rights that facilitated their education on ground. However, as they entered in domestic life, societal taboos overshadowed their legal rights confining them to traditional roles. The root cause of the problem is not the absence of legal/social rights but the missing implementation of those rights. Recommendations include initiating awareness campaigns on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter to foster an environment that promotes the practical implementation of the given rights thereby facilitating simultaneous pursuit of domestic roles and careers for women. Practically implementing egalitarian policies across legal, educational, economic, and welfare domains can promote the harmonious coexistence of domestic responsibilities and personal fulfillment for females.

References

- Bakan, D. (1966). *The Duality of Human Existence: Isolation and Communion in Western Man*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Blackstone, A. (2003). Gender Roles and Society. *Research Gate*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304125569_Gender_Roles_and_Society.p 335-338.
- Brannon, L. (2017). *Gender: Psychological Perspective*. (Seventh Edition). Routledge: New York.
- Eagly, A. H., & Mladinic, A. (1989). Gender stereotypes and attitudes toward women and men. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 15, p.543-558.
- Eagly, A. H. (2009). The his and hers of prosocial behavior: An examination of the social psychology of gender. *American Psychologist*, Vol. 64, p.644-658.
- Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2010). Gender. In S. T. Fiske, D. T. Gilbert, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology*. NY: Wiley: New York
- Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2011). *Handbook of Theories in Social Psychology, Edited by P. van Lange, A. Kruglanski, and E. T. Higgins*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ferdinal, Seswita, & Sandika, E. (2020). *Introduction to Literary Studies*. PJ Publishing: Padang
- Griffin, G. (2005). *Research Methods for English Studies* (second edition). Edinburgh University Press.
- Handayani, L., & Alwasilah, S. S. (2017). *An Analysis of Intrinsic Elements of Efendi's Refrain. Lucky Handayani 127010022* (Doctoral dissertation, Sastra Inggris).
- Lindsey, L. L. (2016). *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective* (Sixth Edition). Routledge: New York.
- Murphy, M. J. (1972). *Understanding Unseen: An Introduction to English Poetry and the English Novel for Overseas Student*. London: Gorge Allen & Unwin Ltd.

- Newman, T. (2018). "Sex and gender: What is the difference?" *Medical News Today*. Retrieved <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/232363.php>
- Palahniuk, M. (2015). Gender Issues: Challenges of the Present. *Humanities Bulletin of Zaporizhzhhe State Engineering Academy*. Issue 60, p73-83.
- Plath, S. (1963). *The Bell Jar*. Faber & Faber.
- Shafak, E. (2007). *Black Milk: On writing, Motherhood, and harem within*. Penguin Books.