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ABSTRACT

Socially constructed ideas about what it means to be female affect women today, as they always have. Throughout history, these ideas have manifested themselves through expectations and demands that women should conform to in order to be considered feminine. This thesis seeks to investigate the manners in which these expectations affect women's sense of self. Because one's sense of self-worth and identity is in many ways connected to the feeling of acceptance, identification and belonging in one's contemporary society, it will be investigated how social conventions and demands affect women's construction of a stable sense of self, and particularly the challenges that arise for those who may not wish, or are unable to conform to accordingly. This is an important topic, because we are not only dealing with a historical phenomenon, but a universal problem that still exists today, namely the idea that women should fit into a certain mold in order to be considered women.

I will conduct a comparative analysis of three novels and investigate how the main female character in each of these struggles to construct her identity as a woman either in concord or conflict with her contemporary society, and to what degree this affects her development of selfhood. Furthermore, this thesis will deal with the beauty ideal, because the identity of a woman warrants that the female human being conforms to certain standards of beauty. The characters and novels that will be investigated are Esther Greenwood in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1966), Olanna Ozobia in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2014a), and finally, Irie Ambrosia Jones in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). These female characters are connected in that they are all attempting to find out who they are as women in their contemporary societies. Either directly or indirectly, they are asking themselves the question "who am I?" and attempt to find their place in this world.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

OED – *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary for Students* (2006)

TBJ – *The Bell Jar* (1966)

HYS – *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2014a)

WT – *White Teeth* (2000)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| 1. Chapter 1: Introduction..... | 4 |
| 2. Chapter 2: Theoretical orientation..... | 8 |
| 2.1. The history of female writers..... | 8 |
| 2.2. Feminism..... | 11 |
| 2.3. Narration and narrative..... | 13 |
| 2.4. What is a woman?..... | 18 |
| 2.4.1 Sex and gender..... | 18 |
| 2.4.2 Ridding ourselves of the metaphysical baggage..... | 20 |
| 2.5. Beauty..... | 22 |
| 3. Chapter 3: <i>The Bell Jar</i> | 26 |
| 3.1. About <i>The Bell Jar</i> | 26 |
| 3.2. Esther Greenwood and her contemporary society..... | 28 |
| 3.3. Esther and the “oppositional” practice against “expectancy of conformity”..... | 30 |
| 3.3.1. Physical appearance | 30 |
| 3.3.2. Esther’s class..... | 31 |
| 3.3.3. Self-image..... | 32 |
| 3.4. Sexuality, marriage and “oppositional” practice..... | 36 |
| 3.5. Is there an alternative to marriage?..... | 46 |
| 3.6. Career, education and ambitions..... | 50 |
| 3.7. Confined to the “belle” jar..... | 52 |
| 4. Chapter 4: <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i> | 55 |
| 4.1. Olanna Ozobia and her contemporary society..... | 56 |
| 4.2. Class, education and independence..... | 58 |
| 4.3. Beautiful <i>and</i> independent?..... | 62 |
| 4.4. Independence and identity..... | 65 |
| 4.5. Olanna’s independence in terms of marriage, sexuality and affirmation..... | 69 |
| 4.6. Reclaiming her independence and becoming herself..... | 73 |
| 5. Chapter 5: <i>White Teeth</i> | 75 |
| 5.1. The importance of belonging..... | 76 |
| 5.1.1. Englishness, Britishness and immigration..... | 77 |
| 5.2. The roots of Irie’s rootlessness..... | 79 |
| 5.3. Irie’s quest for roots..... | 82 |
| 5.3.1. Irie’s quest for home..... | 82 |
| 5.3.2. Irie’s fascination with the Chalfens..... | 86 |
| 5.4. “ <i>English Rose</i> ”..... | 88 |
| 5.4.1. The lack of a reflection..... | 89 |
| 5.4.2. Love and sexuality..... | 95 |
| 5.5. The perfect blankness of the past..... | 97 |
| 6. Chapter 6: Conclusion..... | 100 |
| 7. References..... | 105 |

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women have been subjected to expectations and demands based on their sex, and socially constructed ideas concerning what it means to be female is a topic that is applicable to our present time as well. These ideas are manifested through certain expectations that ought to be met in order to be considered feminine, which is generally expected of women. It is challenging for women to find their place and sense of self in societies that submerge women in socially constructed expectations due to their sex, especially when these expectations do not coincide with their own desires. This thesis will investigate how these demands prescribed to women affect their construction of a stable sense of self, and particularly the challenges that arise for those who may not wish, or are unable to conform to society's demands. The importance of this topic lies in the need of acknowledgement of the prolonged stigmas and assumptions that have been placed upon women throughout the times. More importantly, is the realization of equality between the sexes. It is an indisputable fact that men have also been subjected to certain expectations towards masculinity, and this indicates that social conventions prescribing gender is not restricted to women alone. However, my focus in this thesis will be on the demands of femininity on women, because I am investigating three novels which deals with women in particular.

Three novels will be employed in order to investigate how the female characters deal with the expectations they are subjected to in their contemporary societies. The respective novels and main female characters that will be investigated in this thesis are Esther Greenwood in Sylvia Plath's *TBJ* (1966), Olanna Ozobia in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *HYS* (2014a), and finally, Irie Ambrosia Jones in Zadie Smith's *WT* (2000). The female characters in these novels are connected in that they are all attempting to find out who they are as women in their contemporary societies, and either directly or indirectly, they are asking themselves the question "who am I?" in an attempt to find their place in this world, and make a room for themselves both on the inside and on the outside. In these novels, we follow women who go through a process, and novels of this kind are frequently referred to as *bildungsroman*'s, describing the characters' transition from adolescence into adulthood. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the term *bildungsroman* as "a novel that deals with the formative years of the main character – in particular, his or her psychological development and moral education". This thesis will investigate how the female characters construct and

present their identity as women, both in concord and conflict with their contemporary societies.

The novels that will be investigated have been chosen with consideration to the fact that they have been written by female writers, and explore what it means to become a woman. As we will see in the next chapter, female authors have had a challenging process in finding their place in the literary history. In his book *What is Feminism - An Introduction to Feminist Theory*, Chris Beasley (1999, p. 3-4) confirms this, and explains that literature has traditionally been dominated by male writers, and that there have been few references to women theorists, feminist analysis or to women's position in social and political life. Because of this, it is interesting to note that the topic of women's femininity and the demands entailed is something that female authors have been particularly concerned with in their literature. Because they are experienced on the matters themselves, they are able to provide realistic experiences in their narratives in a way that male authors may not be capable of portraying in the same way. Because these novels are written by female authors who attempt to say something about women's thoughts, feelings and experiences, one may claim that they are performing an oppositional practice by doing so.

When thinking about the authors' standpoints and conveyance of feminist ideas in the respective novels, it is interesting to note that *TBJ* was written in 1963, during the period of second-wave feminism. Plath's ideas corresponds with feminism, and this is represented through her writing and through Esther Greenwood's worldview. Although Plath committed suicide before the second wave hit with full force, it is likely to assume that she would have supported the movement, based on her writing and descriptions in *TBJ*. Posthumously, Plath received the status of a feminist icon and pioneer female poet. Linda Wagner-Martin claims that Plath is one of the most important female writers in the US (Wagner-Martin 1995, cited in Karen Ford & Cary Nelson n.d. n.p). Regarding Plath's status in the women's movement, Wagner-Martin compares the importance of *TBJ* to that of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (2010), and claims that in *TBJ*, Plath foreshadows the feminist writing that appeared in the later 1960s and 1970s, and calls it a harbinger and an early voice of the women's movement (ibid.). Anne Stevenson considers Plath a heroine and martyr for the feminist movement after her suicide (Stevenson 1994, cited in Ford & Nelson n.d, n.p.). Lynda K. Bundtzen understands *TBJ* as an allegory about femininity, specifically "the woman's place in society; her special creative powers; and finally, her psychological experience of femininity" (Bundtzen 1983, cited in Badia 2006, p. 131). Based on this, it is evident that Plath raises important topics in her novel regarding women and femininity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the author of *HYS* considers herself a feminist. In addition to her novels, she has published a book called *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014b), in which she discusses the importance of feminism. She was born and brought up in patriarchal Nigeria, and is therefore able to provide us with valuable insight regarding the strains of patriarchy and women's inferiority that she has experienced firsthand throughout her life. The main female character in *HYS*, Olanna Ozobia, is portrayed as a smart, strong and independent young woman who crosses many boundaries in her contemporary society which is characterized by this patriarchy. Adichie's narrative is particularly important in relation to the enlightenment that is conveyed through e.g. the transformation of Olanna, as she is able to oppose patriarchy due to the awareness of her capabilities and her social class.

In Z. Smith *WT*, Irie Ambrosia Jones struggles to construct her identity as a woman and to find her place as a mixed-race teenager in England, since she lives in a white-dominated culture. In contrast to the struggles of Esther and Olanna, it is clear that Irie's challenges are not mainly connected to patriarchy, but more so to the ideal of beauty she is subjected to in her contemporary society. It becomes particularly interesting to think about the different challenges these women experience in relation to the decades and geographical locations in which they find themselves. Although it is clear that they are facing various struggles and challenges, there are several similarities to be noted that may represent efforts that women across the world may be able to relate to. This is what makes these authors particularly important for the conveyance of feminist ideas, namely that they in their novels raise topics that can shed light to the struggles women experience from the social conventions that are imposed on them simply because they are women.

The novels will be investigated from a feminist perspective, and it will be attempted to critique and explore not just the stereotypical representations of gender and gender roles, but also the struggle against patriarchy and sexism (Moi 1989, p. 118). When discussing feminism and feminist literature, the topic of feminist criticism is also an important part in reading and making sense of literature. In her article "Feminist, Female, Feminine" in *The Feminist Reader*, Toril Moi (1989, p. 118) argues that the methods in which feminist criticism and theory are used, must show relevance to "the study of the social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes". The novels that will be investigated in this thesis deals with stereotypical representations of both men and women, and although my primary focus in this thesis will be on those of women, I find it worth noting that these novels also represent the male characters in stereotypical ways (e.g. Odenigbo and Ugwu in *HYS*, and the men that Esther dates in *TBJ* for instance).

I will conduct close readings of the novels, and then compare my findings in the hopes of finding examples of how social conventions affect the female characters' sense of self. A comparative analysis of the three novels will investigate and provide insight into how the main female character in each novel struggles to construct her identity as a woman either in concord or conflict with her contemporary society, and to what degree this affects her.

The motivation behind this thesis is to investigate how the social demands that are placed on women affect their sense of self. This is important, because investigating these characters will shed light to the challenges that arise when women are subjected to social conventions and demands as to how they should be, look and behave, and will represent the experiences and struggles of women throughout various periods of time and geographical locations. One of the most problematic demands in our own time is the beauty ideal that is imposed on women. Women have been affected by this globally throughout time, and the beauty myth shapes their feeling of worth and beauty. Moreover, this is something that women struggle with still to this day, particularly the demands of meeting certain standards of beauty.

Starting with theoretical orientation, the first part of this thesis will be characterized by explanation and discussion of important terms and concepts to guide the reader. First, we will explore the history of female writers, and further, the concepts of *feminism*, *narration*, *identity*, *woman* and *beauty* will be discussed. The second part of this thesis consists of three analysis chapters that will provide a thorough examination of how the narratives convey the female characters' struggle in constructing and presenting their identity as women. Finally, a conclusion will be given, in which I will attempt to draw lines between the struggles the female characters in the novels experiences, and connect it to our present time and age.

As will be discussed, one might claim that the demands and expectations that Esther Greenwood, Olanna Ozobia and Irie Ambrosia Jones are subjected to in their contemporary societies, all have their basis in their sex alone. Because they are women, they are subjected to expectations that are grounded in general presumptions that has been internalized by their contemporaries regarding how they should look, what life they should live and what their mission in life should be, because they are women. Their conscious rejection, or their incapability of conforming accordingly will affect their sense of self, and we will see that they all ultimately long for the opportunity to be themselves and live the life they want, regardless of social conventions attempting to tell them otherwise.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Regarding the theory that will be employed in this thesis, I will use Elaine Showalter's theory to explore the history of female writers. I have chosen to focus on Paul Cobley (2014), Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (2016) in relation to their theory on *narrative*, and when discussing *identity*, the theory of Seth J. Schwartz, Luychx Koen, and Vivian L. Vignoles (2011), along with Daphna Oyserman, Kristen Elmore and George Smith (2012) will be employed. The concepts of *woman* and *feminism* will be explored with attention to the theory Toril Moi (1999), Chris Beasley (1999), Betty Friedan (2010), Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) and June Hannam (2007) provides, in order to create a solid and intertwined understanding of the concepts. Beauty will mainly be discussed in terms of the theory that Naomi Wolf (1991) and Meeta Rani Jha (2016) provides.

2.1 THE HISTORY OF FEMALE WRITERS

In *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (2016, p. 54, 59) argue that stories are everywhere, and that they are the medium in which power is exercised. Ross Chambers argues that that storytelling is often used as an "oppositional" practice (Chambers 1984, cited in Bennet and Royle 2016, p. 59). By this, he means that storytelling can be used as an act of resistance by the weak against the strong, seeking to exploit the narrative situation and change the reader of the story through the maintenance of authority (ibid.). Telling stories can be seen as a political choice, a gesture in which the author is able to address certain social and cultural expectations or perceptions, and shed light to inequities or prejudices (ibid.). In the novels that will be investigated in this thesis, the female authors are telling a story through their female characters, and one may claim that by doing so, they attempt to take control and (re)gain authority over the representation of women. An oppositional practice is carried out throughout the narratives of these novels, but additionally, one can claim that the oppositional practice transcends the narratives. This is because the topics raised in these novels are not limited to the narratives alone, but represents struggles and challenges women both *have* experienced, and *are* experiencing in their personal lives as well. This thesis will show how the female characters in many ways break with the traditional representations of gender in their contemporary

societies, and by writing stories like these, one may suggest that the authors perform an oppositional practice by doing so.

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter (2009, p. 30) states that this “oppositional practice” has not come easily to women, and that they have always had to struggle against the cultural and historical forces that relegated their experience to the second rank. Its effect on the literary history of female writing is a mere reflection of the subordinate position women have been given in society throughout the years. To their contemporaries, female writers in the nineteenth century were not first judged as artists, but as women, a phenomenon Showalter (2009, p. 61) names the double critical standard. John Stuart Mill argued that women would have a struggle to overcome the influence of male literary tradition, and to create an original, primary and independent art (Mill, 1869, cited in Showalter 2009, pp. 3-4). Further, he claimed that as long as women live among men, they will not be in a position where they can have a literature of their own (ibid.) He also claimed that because men have already created such a highly advanced literature, their influence would infiltrate the attempts of female writers to create literature, resulting in them merely copying the male literature, and not creating their own (ibid.). As we can see here, Mill argues that women do not have their own voice in literature because of the internalization of patriarchy. It is important for women to have a literature of their own, because female writers can provide female readers with experiences that are recognizable and relatable. Annis Pratt argues that “even the most conservative women authors create narratives manifesting an acute tension between what any normal human being might desire and what a woman must become” (Pratt 1981, cited in Wagner-Martin 1986, p. 67). In this, Pratt understands women's fiction to reflect an experience that is radically different from men's experience, because women's drive towards growth is thwarted by society's prescriptions concerning gender (ibid.). This explains their importance, namely their ability to provide an oppositional practice by writing about their own experiences as women, and raise topics that they may find challenging themselves. Male writers may struggle to write in such a recognizable and relatable way, at least for female readers, because their experiences are very different from those of women. Further, George Eliot appears to glimpse a hope of female writers' success, and argues that women could write some of the best novels if they poured in the right elements: “genuine observation, humor, and passion”, whereas Virginia Woolf saw economic and social freedom as key in female writing (Eliot 1963, Woolf 1945, cited in Showalter 2009, p. 261). Showalter (2009, p. 261) argues that if contact with a female tradition and a female culture is a center, then the art of female writers should succeed.

Showalter (2009, p. 11) explains that female writing has gone through three phases. First, the feminine phase (1840-1880), in which an imitation of the prevailing models of the dominant tradition takes place. Internalization is a keyword, as standards of art and social roles. Second, the feminist phase occurs (1889-1920), in which female writers protest against these standards and values, and the support of minority rights and values is prevailing, along with a rising demand for autonomy. Third, there is the female phase (1920-today), characterized by self-discovery, independence and a search for identity. In addition to these three phases, Showalter includes the 1960s as an additional phase for self-discovery, wherein female writers entered a new stage of self-awareness. Showalter (2009, pp. 244, 215) understands contemporary women novelists in a continuing phase of female self-discovery and self-scrutiny in forms and vocabularies very different from those employed by previous female writers. Since the novels that will be investigated in this thesis were written after 1960, they can be seen as products within the category of the female phase. Since Esther, Olanna and Irie all attempt to explore who they are, reclaim their independence, and construct their identity as women in the respective novels, Showalter's contentions about contemporary women novelists entering a new stage of awareness seems legitimate. This is further confirmed by the fact that Plath, Adichie and Z. Smith all raise topics that are connected to self-discovery and self-scrutiny. In this, they perform an oppositional practice, in that they are political in addressing social and cultural expectations that women are subjected to.

In the ongoing struggle for personal and artistic autonomy, Showalter (2009, p. 247) argues that contemporary female writers have attempted to escape the continuity with previous female writers, in an act of liberation from the kind of literature they produced. Another criticized characteristic of contemporary female writing is the conflict between personal relationships and artistic integrity (2009, p. 248). Showalter exemplifies this by referring to Sylvia Plath, and how she in *TBJ* shows ingratitude through her writing. Showalter (ibid.) consider this as an example of "how difficult it has been for women to transcend social and familial pressures to write only what is pleasant, complimentary and agreeable".

The Women's Liberation Movement that started in the 1960s in America affected Europe as well, and Showalter (2009, p. 257) considers this movement to possess the potential of giving voice to silent women, giving them courage to write – hoping that they might be part of the next literary generation. Once again, the importance of female writers is highlighted, as they are able to write women's stories. Simultaneously, Showalter (2009, p. 259) describes a relaxation in contemporary female literature when it comes to the open

discussion of taboo topics, such as female sexual experience. Taboo topics are represented in all three novels that will be investigated in this thesis, and proves that female writers possess the ability to write stories that particularly women can relate to. This is represented in Plath's *TBJ* where we read about Esther's sexual experiences and her declining mental state which is negatively affected by the massive pressure she experiences because she is a woman. In Adichie's *HYS*, we learn about Olanna's sexuality and infertility, and in Z. Smith's *WT*, we see Irie struggling with her body-image and her sexuality. This shows that all three female authors are interested in describing these topics, and confirms Showalter's claim (2009, p. 259).

The respective novels that will be investigated in this thesis serve as an enlightening counteraction to the misconceptions and injustices women have been (and still are) subjected to, and can help women realize discrimination and help them decolonize their minds by becoming aware of the strains and suppression entailed in the stereotypical representation of gender. This is important in order to avoid the internalization of these perceptions, and women must become aware of their value and rights, and reclaim and regain their equal outlets. In this way, we can see that the authors of these novels provide an oppositional practice against the prevailing gender stereotypes and expectations that women are subjected to, and break with many of these by allowing their female characters to surpass and step away from the prevailing expectancy of conformity they are subjected to in their contemporary societies. As the times have changed since the female-phase, Showalter (2009, p. 261) now considers it possible for women to compete on an equal basis with men. Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* was originally published in 1977, and now, years later, it remains to be seen whether women have succeeded in developing a literature that describes different experiences than those of men.

2.2 FEMINISM

Throughout the times, women have been held in a subordinate position to men both socially and politically, and still to this day, women are struggling in many aspects of life to possess the same opportunities and rights as men. Beasley (1999, p. 7) argues that men are perceived as the norm, or the standard, and women as flawed replica. Bernadette Mosala confirms this by stating that "when men are oppressed, it's tragedy. When women are oppressed, it's tradition" (Mosala 1992, cited in Beasley 1999, p. 6).

Feminism originated in the late nineteenth century as an oppositional practice against these social constructs in which women were perceived as inferior. We have seen that storytelling serves as an oppositional practice against male dominance in the literary field, and feminism can in many ways be juxtaposed as an oppositional practice in the same way. As an oppositional practice, feminism seeks to deconstruct the socially constructed concept of what a woman is. *Feminism* is in the OED (2006) defined as “a movement or theory supporting women’s rights on the grounds of equality of the sexes”. In her book *Feminism*, June Hannam (2007, p. 4) explains that the word *féminisme* means women’s emancipation, and that at the heart of feminism, is the belief that women’s voices should be heard - that they should represent themselves, put forward their own view of the world and achieve autonomy in their lives. Further, Hannam (2007, p. 4) defines feminism as a set of ideas that recognize in an explicit way that women are subordinate to men and seek to address imbalances of power between the sexes. Beasley (1999, p. x) argues that when feminism is represented, it is concerned with the term equality. Feminism can be understood both as a social movement striving for equal opportunities for men and women, as well as an organized movement.

When the importance of feminism is in question, Hannam quotes Millicent Fawcett as she held a speech in 1913:

Other movements towards freedom have aimed at raising the status of a comparatively small group of class. But the women’s movement aims at nothing less than raising the status of an entire sex – half the human race – to lift it up to the freedom and valor of womanhood. It affects more people than any former reform movement, for it spreads over the whole world. It is more deep-sated, for it enters the home and modifies the personal character

(Fawcett 1913, cited in Hannam 2007, p. 1)

This quote sums up why feminism is important, and how it has implications for women across the world. Hannam argues that feminism is important as it can stir preconceptions and improve the lives of women, and since it is both cultural and political, it is so powerful that it has the ability transform the lives of both men and women. According to Hannam (2007, p. 2) it has the potential of turning the world upside down, but one may ask oneself if it would be more appropriate to say that feminism can turn the world downside up. If so, this would signify in a literal sense that things can put right again, at how they were supposed to be before men climbed atop the pedestal, claiming themselves to be superior. Then, women could finally be placed in the position they deserved all along, alongside men, and the oppositional practice of feminism would not be necessary.

Although the concept of feminism has been discussed, it is important to note that the practices and importance of feminism has varied depending on the decade, society and culture in question. For this thesis, the decades in which the narration takes place are in the 50s (*TBJ*), 60s (*HYS*), and 90s (*WT*), and it is evident that the female characters experience the strains of patriarchy and need for feminism in various degrees. For Esther Greenwood (*TBJ*) and Olanna Ozobia (*HYS*) patriarchy appears to challenge their construction of an identity in particular, because they find themselves in societies in which they are considered inferior to men. For Irie Ambrosia Jones (*WT*), it appears that patriarchy is not her biggest challenge, but rather the beauty ideal she is subjected to in her contemporary society, as a young woman with a mixed-race background. Regardless of the origin of their struggles of constructing their identities, they are all in need of reinforcement that can help them surpass and exceed the expectations they are subjected to as women in their contemporary societies. This proves the broadness of feminism, and shows its importance across time, culture and societies, as the discrimination of women and belief of women's inferiority saturates several aspects of women's everyday life in various times and places. Feminism can be viewed as a response, a compensation, an oppositional practice against this imbalanced power system.

2.3 NARRATION AND NARRATIVE

In this thesis, it will be explored how Esther, Olanna and Irie struggle to construct their identity as women in their contemporary societies. The point of departure in investigating this will be in the narrative of each novel, and therefore, narrative is an important term to discuss and clarify.

In his book *Narrative*, Paul Cobley (2014, pp. 251-252) defines narrative as “a movement from a start point to an endpoint with digressions, which involves the showing or the telling of story events”, and considers narrative as a *re*-presentation of events. Similarly, Bennett and Royle (2016, pp. 54-55) define narrative as a series of events in a specific order with a beginning, a middle and an end, and state that it is characterized by its foregrounding of a series of events or actions which are connected in time. Additionally, *anachronisms* are characteristic for narratives, which are flashbacks, prolepses, the slowing down and speeding up of events and other distortions of the linear time-sequence (Genette, Gerard 1986, cited in Bennett & Royle 2016, pp. 55-56). Bennett and Royle (2016, p. 59) find it important to

distinguish between the narratorial point of view and that of the so-called implied author. This is also important for this thesis, as it will be the narrator's point of view that will be in focus, since it is s/he who is giving the reader information about the female characters.

Further, Bennett and Royle (2016, p. 371) define *narrator* as the person or persona (as distinguished from the author) who is telling a story. They clarify that narrators are just linguistic fabrications, textual creatures, and argue that the understanding of a text is pervaded by the reader's sense of the character, and the trustworthiness and objectivity of the figure who is narrating (Bennet & Royle 2016, pp. 319, 58-59). Along with this, they argue that characters are the life of literature, and object of the reader's curiosity and fascination, affection and dislike, admiration and condemnation (Bennet & Royle 2016, p. 63). They are lifelike, and for a character to be lifelike, they claim that three important requirements must be fulfilled. First of all, they should have a plausible name, and speak and act in a way that is convincingly similar to how one speak and act in so-called "real life". Second, the character should have a certain complexity, it may be that of conflicting or contradictory traits and to some extent be unpredictable. Third, the contradictions or multiplicities should cohere in a single identity (Bennett & Royle 2016, p. 65). These requirements are all fulfilled in the female characters of the novels that will be investigated in this thesis, and because of this, we are provided with lifelike and realistic characters.

Even though the narration in these three novels differs between first person (*TBJ*), third person limited omniscient (*HYS*) and third person omniscience (*WT*), they all have in common that they focus on the process of transformation that the female character undergoes. *Omniscience* is in the OED (2006) defined as "knowing everything". In accordance with this, Copley (2014, p. 91) argues that omniscient narration consists of both the narrator's godlike ability to go everywhere, and to possess the power and control that derives from unlimited knowledge. Omniscient narrators are according to Bennett and Royle (2016, p. 319) strange figures by their very nature, and they argue that omniscience itself is a fiction, "a strange invention of literary critics drawing on the obviously problematic identification between an author or narrator and the Christian God". They see the narrator as secretive in regard to the gradual revelation of the story, as well as in relation to the knowledge that may not be revealed about this narrator (Bennett & Royle 2016, p. 319). The omniscient narrator is all-knowing – s/he possesses the power of foresight into the future (Bennett & Royle 2016, p. 318)

Since the respective novels are told by different types of narrators, it is interesting to note in which ways they differ. In Plath's *TBJ*, Esther Greenwood is both the main character

and the narrator of the story, so the story is told through first-person narration. Because of this, the narration is clearly subjective, and as readers, we are provided with insight into both her thoughts, feelings and actions, and get to see the world from Esther's perspective.

Although this is useful in order to understand Esther and her struggles, we are as readers somewhat restricted in that we are not able to see Esther in the way the world perceives her. In Adichie's *HYS*, the story is told by three main characters, acting each their turn as a first-person narrator: Ugwu, Richard Churchill and Olanna Ozobia, which is referred to as third person omniscient limited narration. In my analysis of the novel, however, it is Olanna's narration that will be investigated, since she is the main female character. This kind of narration provides us with a narrative technique in which the story is told by one of the characters, and as readers, we gain insight into his/her thoughts and feelings while presented with the other characters objectively. With this kind of narration, we are able to gain more insight as to both the internal and external sides of Olanna, since she both narrates some chapters, and is narrated in others. Z. Smith's *WT* is narrated by a third-person omniscient point of view, but my focus will be limited to the character of Irie Ambrosia Jones. With this kind of narration, the narrator possesses the ability to go everywhere, and he/she knows everything.

Bennett and Royle (2016, p. 58) claim that one of the most fundamental distinctions within narrative theory is that between "story" and "discourse", and since this thesis is not just dealing with the story itself but also the way in which it is told, it seems appropriate to clarify the difference between the two terms. Jonathan Culler suggests that a fundamental premise of narratology is that narrative has a double structure: the level of the told (story) and the level of telling (discourse) (Culler 1981, cited in Bennet & Royle 2016, p. 57). *Discourse* is in the OED (2006) defined as "written or spoken communication or debate, or a formal written or verbal discussion of a topic". In *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary History*, John Anthony Cuddon (1999, p. 228) describes discourse as a learned discussion, spoken or written, on a philosophical, political, literary or religious topic. Further, he considers discourse as language understood as utterance, involving subjects who speak and write – presupposing listeners and readers who are "objects" (ibid.). This is of importance for this thesis, namely to use not just the story (what happens chronologically) of these novels, but also the level of telling, i.e. discourse (how it is told), in investigating how female identity is constructed and presented by the female characters.

The relationship between narratives and identity is of great importance since this thesis seeks to investigate the narratives in order to gain insight into the construction of the female

characters' identity. The communicative space in which the construction of identity is conveyed is through the narratives, and as these novels are either narrated from a first-person perspective, or by an omniscient narrator, this space is easily accessible as both internal reflections and external actions are readily available. Identity is a recurring theme throughout the respective novels that will be dealt with in this thesis. What connects these authors and texts, is that they are all focusing on the answer to the question “who am I?”, attempting to address identity. *Identity* is in the OED (2006) defined as “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is, and the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is and distinguishing them from others”. Copley (2014, p. 258) defines identity as:

The perception and feeling of belonging to a particular group of commonalities of experience, status and physical existence. Such commonalities can revolve around social class, gender, sexuality, age, occupation, ethnicity and nationality, and so on

Additionally, Copley (2014, p. 248) adds examples of more local phenomena such as individual or familial circumstances that can influence the construction of identity. In accordance with Copley's claim, Daphna Oyserman, Kristen Elmore and George Smith share his understanding of identity in their article "Self, Self-concept and Identity" (2012). They claim that identity is a mental construct that influence actions, and understand it as a combination of many components, adding that identities can be focused on the past, the present, or the future (2012, p. 75).

In *Handbook of Identity, Theory and Research*, Seth J. Schwartz, Luychx Koen and Vivian L. Vignoles (2011, p. 2) argue that it is people's answer to the question “who am I?” that tells us what identity is. The construction of identity is about finding meaning and understanding why one is who one is. They point out that “I” in this context can be both singular and plural. Following this train of thought, identity can be found either introspectively or to a certain group (could be in regard to nationality, roles, parents, teachers), or biological similarities (sex, race) to mention a few. Further, they see identity not only as a question of “who you think you are”, but also “who you act as being” in interpersonal or intergroup interaction (Schwartz, Luychx & Vignoles 2011, p. 2). Identity can be perceived as dynamic, as one can identify and make meaning in one setting that might be conflicting in another. This is explained due to the fact that identities are not fixed markers, but dynamically constructed in the moment (cf. Oyserman, Elmore & Smith 2012, p. 70). Identity then, is linked to the concept of existing, because it is based on something a person relates to, something a person is or does. It is a lifelong process, and is object to change, since

finding one's identity is linked both to the past, present and future (ibid.). The definition of one's identity is dependent on the subject in question, because traits, characteristics, roles, social group memberships are crucial in this process (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith 2012, p. 69). As we can see here, identity is individually constructed.

Although individually constructed, identity is also intrinsically connected to culture and society (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith 2012, p. 76). Grounded in social contexts, there are many levels that affect the construction of identity. On a macro level, historical epoch, society and culture influence the construction of identity, but other levels are also of importance, e.g. neighborhood, family, and school (ibid.). On a micro level, Oyserman, Elmore and Smith (2012, p. 76) argue that situations that arise moment-to-moment also affect the construction of identity. In relation to the construction of identity in social contexts, they argue that it is likely to be formed in relation to people's contemporary environment, and in relation to what matters to others. Identity can therefore be seen as a response to the social expectations that are present as one identifies oneself with a certain group, e.g. in relation to religion, race or gender, or in relation to family roles or looks. Identity is a social product, object to change since people are likely to conform to a behavior that is congruent with the stereotypical understanding of their own identity, in order to be valued in one's culture and place within the social hierarchy (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith 2012, p. 76). There are certain social expectations and aims that one is expected to reach in relation to one's identity. Identity is in other words not constructed in isolation but in contexts. Based on this, one can say that identity indeed is individually constructed, but is also constructed *for* one, depending on one's own perception of oneself. Following this train of thought, identity can be seen as an oppositional practice, as it is constructed in relation to one's present society and culture.

In this thesis, it will be investigated how the female characters in the respective novels relate to themselves as women, to their contemporary environment (e.g. society/culture), and how their identity is affected when it is in some ways constructed for them. These novels have in common that the main focus of the narration is the process of transformation that each female character undergoes, and throughout this process, both Esther (*TBJ*), Olanna (*HYS*) and Irie (*WT*) forges an identity for herself.

2.4 WHAT IS A WOMAN?

Since this thesis aims to investigate how the female characters in the respective novels struggle to construct and present their identity as women, it is both appropriate and necessary to define the term. According to the OED (2006), a *woman* is “an adult, human female”, but this short and concrete definition does not justify the complexity of the term. Throughout history, one has attempted to properly define what a woman is, and generally speaking, one can say that society’s expectations of women have changed as the ideologies and the definitions has changed. Socially constructed ideas concerning what it means to be female affect women today, as they always have. This is manifested through certain expectations that ought to be met in order to be considered feminine, which is generally expected of women. To be *feminine*, is in the OED (2006) defined as “having qualities traditionally associated with women, especially delicacy and prettiness”. Since external pressure pushes women to conform to certain ideals, they may find themselves facing a dilemma. On the one hand, there are social expectations as to how they should act, speak and look because they are women, but on the other hand, their own understanding of themselves may not coincide with these. This can in turn lead to an identity conflict. Ideologies throughout the times have made frameworks and expectations for what it means to be a woman, but in essence - is *woman* a term that can properly and carefully be defined?

2.4.1 SEX AND GENDER

In her book *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*, Moi (1999, p. 5) challenges the traditional ideas about gender, and points out that there is only one word for sex in Norwegian (*kjønn*). She explains that since the 1960s, however, English-speaking feminists have used the distinction between sex and gender (ibid.). According to Moi (1999, p. 3), the distinction clarifies the relationship between sex and gender: *sex* as a biological and *gender* as a social or cultural category. In her article “What is the Difference between Sex and Gender”, Ann-Marie Nobelius (2004, n.p.) attempts to clarify the two terms, and explains that *sex* refers to biological differences, that is chromosomes, hormonal profiles, internal and external sex organs, while *gender* describes the characteristics that a society or culture delineates as masculine or feminine. The World Health Organization (n.d, n.p) defines gender as the

following:

the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed. While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviors – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and work places

According to World Health Organization, one's sex is dependent on being born either a physical male or female. This is decided by biology, and is not dependent on society or culture. Gender, on the other hand, is described as the norms and behaviors that a society or culture construct as masculine or feminine (ibid.). This then, is subject to differences across societies and cultures. Man and woman are given different expectations and requirements regarding appropriate norms and behaviors, and these requirements are added to that of the sex in the first place. So, in order to be a "real woman", one must biologically be defined as a woman, and in addition conform to the set culture's or society's requirements regarding the appropriate characteristics and behaviors in order to be considered feminine. On one hand, women are defined due to their female physique, but on the other hand, socially constructed ideas define them.

Although widely respected in society at large, Moi (1999, p. 4) is skeptical to the importance of the distinction between sex and gender, considering them irrelevant in producing a concrete, historical understanding of what it means to be a woman. She argues that since women's bodies are human as well as female, defining women based on their sexual differences would never adequately cover their interests, capacities and ambitions. Any definition of femininity will be transcended by any woman, according to Moi (1999, p. 8). She clearly states that it is both unsatisfactory, as well as sexist to reduce women to either their sexual difference or their femininity (ibid.). De Beauvoir contends that people with female bodies do not have to fulfill any specific requirements to be considered women (De Beauvoir 1949, cited in Moi 1999, p. 77). Explaining gender as a social construct, De Beauvoir famously claimed that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (ibid.). De Beauvoir argues that one is taught to act in stereotypical ways through socialization (ibid.). In her article "What is a Woman", Amia Srinivasan (2017, n.p.) agrees, and argues that because the concept of woman is a social construct, it is open to change. This means that women can be liberated from the socially constructed expectations related to gender, and obtain their own sense of subjectivity.

If attempting to make a clear-cut line, or to impose that a woman is defined by either sex or gender alone, it seems that one is failing to see the larger picture. Sex is biological and gender is socially constructed. In accordance with Moi's theory on what a woman is, we can claim that one is born a sex, but can choose one's gender. Moi (1999, p. 114) argues that we can never get rid of the biological differences (sex), but hopes that gender will not be limited to only male or female. She claims that this is the logical consequence of denying that biology justifies social norms (ibid.). Instead of distinguishing between sex and gender, Moi (ibid) suggests distinguishing between bodies and subjectivities instead. She argues that De Beauvoir shows that the relationship between body and subjectivity is contingent, and argues that:

[t]o say that my subjectivity stands in a contingent relationship to my body is to acknowledge that my body will significantly influence both what society – others – make of me, and the kind of choices I will make in response to the Other's image of me, but it is also to acknowledge that no specific form of subjectivity is ever a necessary consequence of having a particular body

(Moi, 1999, p. 114)

Here, Moi clarifies that the female physique is indeed necessary in defining a woman, but as a woman is more than her body, this alone will not justify her as a complex human being. She states that the body will influence both what society (the other) makes of her, and it will also influence the kind of choices she will make in response to society's image of a woman. Moi (1999, p. 117) contends that the individual's encounter with social norms will affect how one's body and the kind of subjectivity (i.e. characteristic of an individual) is experienced.

2.4.2 RIDDING OURSELVES OF THE METAPHYSICAL BAGGAGE

Moi (1999, p. 10) considers it necessary to dismiss the idea that the word "woman" always carries metaphysical baggage. By the demolition of this, contradictions and objectivity would not make the effort of defining woman such a complex task. When De Beauvoir says, "I am a woman", she is making the verb signify existence, which again is always a process of becoming, and existence, she claims, exceeds essence (De Beauvoir 1949, cited in Moi 1999, p. 117). De Beauvoir discards the notion of stereotyping in understanding what a woman is, claiming that freedom is a universal value that does every human being good (Moi 1999, p. 118). The freedom from a theoretical picture telling us how things must be, is what Moi

(ibid.) yearns for in relation to the sex/gender distinction. The hope is that one is not blinded from alternative ways of thinking (ibid.). Citing Ludwig Wittgenstein, Moi leads us towards an epiphany:

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably. We are released from the linguistic shackles that hold us captive

(Wittgenstein 1968, cited in Moi 1999, p. 119)

Moi (1999, p. 120) hopes that “feminist theory” could come to mean a thought that seeks to scatter the confusions in relation to bodies, sex, sexuality, sexual difference, and power relations between and among women and men. Such theory, she claims would set us free from the metaphysical pictures that hold us captive. Wittgenstein considers the intellectual liberation as a release from the linguistic shackles that holds us captive, and Moi (1999, p. 120) understands this liberation to enable us to raise questions about things that matter. Concluding her chapter in *What is a Woman?*, Moi (1999, p. 120) steps back from the meaningless critique and arguments that have characterized the attempts to define woman, and away from the metaphysical baggage the word seems to carry. A woman is an adult, human female, based on her biology. As discussed in relation to sex and gender, it has been proved to be of common understanding that when it comes to being female, biology is the determining factor, deciding the sex: either male or female. Gender, on the contrary, is a social construct.

Although gender is a social construct, it is clear that expectations as to how women should look, behave and what kind of life they should lead in order to be perceived feminine have saturated societies throughout the times. Concerning the topic of femininity, there are many socially constructed expectations targeting women, anticipating certain behaviors, traits and appearances. In 1963, Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she puts words to the problem that has no name. Friedan explains the problem that has no name as a sense of dissatisfaction American women experienced in the pursuit of the feminine ideal of domestic womanhood. Friedan (2010, p. 28) explains that the feminine mystique implies that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity, and shattered the image of the happy American housewives in the middle of the twentieth century. By the end of the 1950s, Friedan (2010, p. 6) saw a decline in women attending college in comparison to men, an increase in young marriages, a battle to meet the

physical ideals at the expense of health, and a baby-boom. The suburban housewife became the ideal of femininity, the dream image of women all over the world. They served their husband and children, cooked, baked, sewed, did the laundry, and beamed in their role as women, and as housewives (ibid.)

Women learned that truly feminine women did not care for the independence and opportunities that feminists had fought for, truly feminine women were solely concerned with her husband, children and home: they were housewives and mothers (Friedan 2010, p. 5). Friedan (2010, p. 7) contends that women were taught that it was in this true feminine fulfillment was to be found. The problem that has no name was shared by countless women in America, according to Friedan (2010, p. 20), all having lived their whole lives in the pursuit of feminine fulfillment. In her book, Friedan meets the cry within women that longed for something more than a husband, children and a home. Friedan (2010, p. 59) argues that in terms of both old conventions and the new feminine mystique, women are not expected to grow up to find their identity, and asks if the identity of women is determined by their biology, as theorists of femininity claims. Aided by her book, women became aware of their identity crisis, and Friedan (2010, p. 309) urges them to make a new image of themselves and their lives. This, she suggests, is the process that leads women from what is called femininity to becoming fully human. Friedan's elaboration on the problem that has no name will be important in relation to investigating how Esther Greenwood struggle to present and construct her identity as a woman in *TBJ*, as the contemporary society in which the novel was written in is representationally conveyed in *The Feminine Mystique* (2010).

2.5 BEAUTY

When dealing with femininity and the expectations entailed, the concept of *beauty* needs further elaboration. *Beauty* is in the OED (2006) defined as “a combination of qualities that is very pleasing to the senses or to the mind”. Beauty creates standards in which women's femininity or power are defined or sought measured by. Women can be misled into believing that their identity is dependent on their external appearance, and that their value and power is dependent on their physique alone. Although beauty is indeed external, it is at the same time internal. This dialectic relationship can create an inner conflict, as the woman may not live up to the socially constructed ideas of beauty that are expected in a given society. When a woman feels pressured to look a certain way, but simultaneously wants to reflect her own

perception of herself, she may experience an inner crisis. Beauty can be perceived to dominate women, but at the same time it is used to construct their identity as women, and this explains why the ideas of beauty can be problematic. The concept of beauty is a theme that is raised in all the three novels that will be investigated in this thesis, and its connection to the construction of the female characters' identity will be further investigated.

In her book *The Global Beauty Industry*, Meeta Rani Jha uses beauty to explore topics such as gender, race and class. She explains that it is important to analyze beauty because it can lead to social, economic and symbolic power “that devalue[s] and denigrate[s] some physical features while idealizing and privileging others” (Jha 2016, p. 3). Further, she contends that since femininity is often linked to whiteness, Eurocentric beauty ideals “exercise social control over female bodies generating fantasies, inspiration, injury and equality”, and that women can only attain these if they are able to mold, sculpt, manipulate and reshape their body according to the culturally validated norms (Jha 2016, p. 1). Jha (2016, p. 3) understands beauty as hierarchic and an arena of competition, and that physical appearance and attractiveness is a form of privilege.

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf (1991, p. 10) considers the beauty ideals to be a consequence of the female liberation, leading to a violent backlash against feminism as images of female beauty becomes a political weapon against women's advancement. Wolf (ibid.) calls this phenomenon the beauty myth. Further, Wolf (1991, p. 16) considers the vertical hierarchy that has been established by men in assigning women value “an impression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves”. Having saturated societies after the first and second wave of feminism, the beauty myth has been seen as a weapon in the hands of men, continuing to inferiorize women, as their identity is in many ways dependent on what is considered beautiful in their contemporary society. The beauty myth is a way for men to execute power over women, Wolf (1991, p. 18) holds, by setting standards as to how they should look and behave, putting themselves on top of the social hierarchy.

In this manner, we can see how beauty creates structural and individual privileges, and contributes to discrimination and inequality (Jha 2016, p. 3). The political and cultural aspects of the pressure women experience as they are expected to possess certain traits or a certain body shape or skin color reveals that a woman's body is not only an individual asset. Susan Bordo confirms this, and adds that the cultural norms of a society “inscribe meanings in order to socialize and discipline female bodies” which are regulated by patriarchy, capitalism and feminist resistance (Bordo 2003, cited in Jha 2016, p. 3). Jha (2016, p. 2) explains that this

leads to commodification of women's bodies, and claims that beauty and sexuality has become constructed as essential and natural attributes of femininity and female identity.

In her book *Femininity and Domination – Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, Sandra Lee Bartky (1990, p. 39) operates with the term fashion-beauty complex, considering it a “major articulation of capitalist patriarchy”. She explains the growth of the fashion-beauty complex in relation to the declining influence of family and church in the regulation of “femininity” (ibid.). Bartky (ibid.) considers feminine narcissism as a major part of what is ordinarily regarded as femininity. *Narcissism* is in the OED (2006) defined as “excessive self-love or vanity: self-admiration, self-centeredness”. Overtly, she recognizes the fashion-beauty complex seeking to worship the female body and what she calls “narcissistic indulgence”. She argues that what is more important, is its covert aim, namely to depreciate women's bodies and attack her narcissism (Bartky 1990, p. 39). Today, one is surrounded of images of the perfect female. Beautiful bodies, features, and style are communicated through commercials and magazines. Bartky explains that “[a]ll the projections of the fashion-beauty complex have this in common: they are images of *what I am not*” (Bartky's emphasis, 1990, p. 40). The expectations attached to the visual presentation of women creates a certain pressure, forcing them to attempt to fit in by possessing certain feminine traits. The fashion-beauty complex makes women feel deficient, not good enough, or beautiful enough, resulting in them feeling insecure and inferior due to their physical appearance. Bartky (1990, p. 40) claims that this produces estrangement from a women's bodily being, and that on the one hand, she is her bodily being, hardly allowed to be anything else. On the other hand, she must constantly remain distanced from her physical self in a permanent position of criticism and objection.

Jha's contentions of beauty ideals being a “gold standard” is in accordance with Wolf's claims. Furthermore, Wolf (1991, p. 12) argues that beauty is a currency system, determined by politics, and claims this to be the last, best belief that helps keep male dominance intact. Jha (2016, p. 3) agrees, and argues that “physical attractiveness, whiteness and youthfulness have accrued capital just as darker skin color, hair texture, disability and aging have devalued feminine currency”. Although Western women today appears attractive and powerful, Wolf (1991, p. 12) claims that there is a secret “underlife”, which is characterized by “self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging and dread of lost control”. The beauty myth of the present is more insidious than any mystique of femininity yet, and Wolf (1991, p. 19) is aware of the danger in this and claims that this backlash is destroying

women physically and depleting them psychologically. Wolf (1991) considers the beauty myth to be indeed a myth, and that beauty is not universal and changeless.

As we have seen, the link between beauty and femininity is controversial. As Wolf claims, the beauty myth is presented as an objective measure of beauty, and has increased with women's power in society. When women gained their freedom from what Wolf (1991, p. 15) calls "the feminine mystique of domesticity", she considers the beauty myth taking control over the lost ground, replacing it to carry on its work of social control. The liberation of women during the first and second wave of feminism, is now replaced to checkmate the inheritance of feminism on every level in the lives of Western women, according to Wolf (1991, p. 13). The real problem in the beauty myth is, according to Wolf (1991, p. 272), women's lack of choice. She stresses the importance of women realizing that it is how they feel that matters most, namely that they feel beautiful (*ibid.*). Her solution to this problem is a new way to see, breaking our thoughts and changing the rules (1991, pp. 19, 290). Keywords describing this enlightenment is freedom, toleration and individual choice. Wolf (1991, p. 513) argues that the idea of beauty is distorted, and that beauty is about behavior, and not appearance.

Beauty is a recurring theme in the three novels that will be investigated in this thesis, and Esther (*TBJ*), Olanna (*HYS*) and Irie (*WT*) are all faced with beauty ideals in their contemporary societies. In one way or another, these ideals are out of reach for them all, and in the following chapters we will see how this affects their sense of self, their confidence and their choices. After having explored, clarified and connected important concepts such as *identity*, *woman*, *femininity* and *beauty* in this chapter, one may wonder if these are perceived in the same manner by the main female characters of these novels. If not, what are the implications of this for their individual sense of self and construction of an identity? Keeping this in mind, we will now move on to the analyses of the respective novels.

CHAPTER 3: *THE BELL JAR*

In this chapter, *TBJ* will be analyzed with focus on the main character Esther Greenwood. My focus will be on the topics of feminine etiquette, marriage, and sexuality as part of an attempt to understand how she relates to her surroundings and the “expectancy of conformity”. In many ways, Esther Greenwood performs a variety of “oppositional” practices against the expectations she is subjected to as a woman in 1950s America, and this will be further explored. I will focus on how she relates to her role models, and how the apparent lack of role models enhances her indecisiveness and struggle. Further, I will investigate how her education has attributed to her formation of an identity, and how her ambitions of making a career affects her, and her formation of a stable sense of self. Finally, I will attempt to answer the question of how she constructs her identity as a woman while confined to the “belle” jar.

3.1 ABOUT *THE BELL JAR*

Sylvia Plath, author of *TBJ*, was born on October 27, 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts. Plath struggled with mental illness throughout her life, and only two weeks after the publication of her only novel, *TBJ*, she committed suicide on Feb. 11th 1963 (Wagner-Martin, 2006, p. 52). As mentioned in my first chapter, Plath was posthumously famous for her writing, receiving status of a feminist icon and pioneer female poet.

TBJ is largely based on Plath’s own life, and this is evident as Plath and Esther share several similarities. In her article “Analyzing Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* through a Feminist Lens”, Kristen D’Elia (2003, n.p.) confirms that Plath shared many commonalities with Esther Greenwood. However, it is important not to restrict the novel to Plath’s life alone. In her article “Plath’s *The Bell Jar* as Female 'Bildungsroman'” in *Women’s Studies*, Linda Wagner-Martin (1986, p. 67) claims that although there are similarities between the lives of Plath and Esther, *TBJ* moves far beyond the framework of Sylvia Plath's autobiography. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that they both struggled to overcome the culturally and socially constructed views of what was regarded as "female traits", and to make a career of their writing, a notion perceived as “irrational” in their contemporary society. Integrating personal values and life accounts into the novel, Plath’s depiction of the societal inequality, stereotyping of women and prevailing gender roles can be understood as an attempt to urge

women to reject society's constructed roles and fight for their own independence (D'Elia, 2003, n.p.). D'Elia (ibid.) considers *TBJ* as an urge to women of the era to reject society's constructed roles, and to become more independent. Additionally, she understands Plath to want to make it abundantly clear that if society continued to control women's lives through the set structure of patriarchy, many would eventually go insane from repressing their dreams and desires. Wagner-Martin (1986, p. 67) complies, and contends that *TBJ* must be read as the story of that inevitable clash, a repetition of lives all too familiar to contemporary readers, and as a testimony to the repressive cultural mold that trapped many mid-century women, and forced them outside what should have been their rightful, productive lives. In *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, Deborah Nelson (2006, p. 24) agrees with this perspective, and argues that:

Plath wanted her own experiences growing up in the 1950s to provide the template for a "generational" story. In her journal she wrote of the novel's narrator, Esther Greenwood, "Make her a statement of the generation. Which is you"

Nelson contends that Plath wanted to write a "generational" story, in which Esther represents the generation of young women who were transitioning into adulthood. By illuminating the struggles women faced, she makes an important statement against the prevailing societal expectations women were subjected to in the 1950s. By opposing and challenging traditional gender roles and assumptions as to how women's lives should look, Plath appears attempt to change them and pave the way for young women who did not want to conform to the existing expectations.

The story reflects the societal conditions in America in the 1950s, and since it challenges and opposes these conventions and norms as to how women should look and behave, we can tie this to the term "oppositional" practice. We have discussed this term which is introduced by Chambers, and seen how storytelling can be used as an oppositional practice (Chambers 1984, cited in Bennet & Royle 2016, p. 59). He understands that storytelling can be used as an act of resistance by the weak against the strong, as a political choice, a gesture in which the author is able to address certain societal expectations or perceptions, or shed light to inequities or prejudices (ibid.). Just as storytelling can be used to challenge and oppose societal and political aspects, this term will be adopted and employed in relation to women's rejection of the societal expectations they are subjected to as women in their contemporary societies. To perform an oppositional practice refers to something that is active, and not passive. In order to oppose something, action is required to challenge the standard

practices.

Another term that will be employed deliberately in this chapter is “expectancy of conformity”. Plath once described that “[t]he great fault of America” is its “expectancy of conformity” (Plath n.d., cited in Badia 2006, p. 133). This term explains how women were expected to accommodate themselves and their lives according to the prevailing assumptions concerning what it means to be a woman. Since women in mid-century America found themselves in a society that implied that women’s highest value and only commitment was found in the fulfillment of their own femininity, women were expected to adapt to this lifestyle (Friedan 2010, p. 28). Women’s identity was found in subordination and homemaking, in what Friedan refers to in *The Feminine Mystique* (2010). Another aspect of what makes the novel particularly compelling is the concept of the mental strains the expectancy of conformity may cause for women who object to social expectations. We know the social aspects of the novel to be true from historical facts and other novels, and since Plath herself struggled with mental challenges deriving from the pressure and expectations that she experienced as a woman in her contemporary society, its origin in the life of the author is an interesting note in relation to the ability it has of reflecting realistic characteristics of this environment.

Due to Plath’s statement in Nelson’s quote, it is likely that the novel was written as what one might term an oppositional practice against the prevailing expectancy of conformity in Plath’s contemporary society. Referring to the novel as an oppositional practice is not just to refer to a story, but to a bigger movement. Just as feminism can be perceived as a movement of oppositional practice against male dominance and patriarchy, this novel may be regarded in the same terms. This is what makes the story bigger than itself.

3.2 ESTHER GREENWOOD AND HER CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Wagner-Martin (1986, p. 56-57) writes that the novel has two primary themes: Esther Greenwood’s developing identity, or the lack of it, and her battle against patriarchy, especially in relation to the authority of older people and the authority of men. She opposes patriarchy, subordination, and the reduced range of opportunities women possess compared to men. By opposing these, Esther can be considered a feminist, as she strives to obtain the same opportunities and freedom of choice to those of men. Breaking with the general perception that women in the 1950s had to choose between profession and domesticity, Esther opposes

the prevailing expectancy of conformity, as she rejects finding her identity exclusively in the domestic lifestyle or in the profession of a secretary. Her rejection of the expectancy of conformity can be argued to comprise Esther's sense of identity, since she does not construct her identity as a woman in the same manners as most of the other women in her society, namely in the utmost definition of femininity, found in subordination and service to her husband and children. She appears to be stuck between the disgust of the role society expects her to play, and the comfort it gives, which in her opinion are two mutually incompatibles.

The notion of women as inferior to, and dependent on men, was the prevailing assumption in America throughout this decade. A woman who surpassed the identity other than being sweetheart, girlfriend or wife was rare, and it was perceived a major achievement, according to Wagner-Martin (1986, p. 57). Women were expected to behave and appear feminine, and this was mainly acquired by adapting to the set life of a housewife. As mentioned in my first chapter, Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (2010) is of great importance when it comes to understanding the contemporary society of Esther Greenwood. In this context, it is interesting to note that Friedan and Plath were connected through Smith College, which they both attended, graduating only 13 years apart. Smith College is a women's college committed to "enable [women] to develop their intellects and talents and to participate effectively and fully in society" (Smith College n.d.). It is therefore likely that they were influenced by attitudes regarding their participation and their role as women in their contemporary society, and were urged to break with the traditional perception of women as passive and subordinate. Due to this, one can also anticipate that they shared similar experiences and had corresponding perceptions of their contemporary society. This is an interesting note, since both books speak to young women who struggle against the expectations they are subjected to, and clearly addresses the prevailing social conventions in their contemporary society. Along with Plath, Friedan also criticized the social expectations that were pressing upon women. Created by the media and various experts, e.g. on marriage and family, the image of a good woman shape female lives and mirror their dreams, according to Friedan (2010, p. 21).

3.3 ESTHER AND THE “OPPOSITIONAL” PRACTICE AGAINST “EXPECTANCY OF CONFORMITY”

Throughout the narrative, it appears that Esther suffers conflicts between her own desires and the expectancy of conformity the society subjects her to as a woman. Wagner-Martin (1986, p. 67) claims that Esther struggles to become whole throughout the novel, and is not displayed as a woman who has reached a sense of stable selfhood. Although Esther is aware of her privilege of getting the opportunity to live in New York City, she feels passive and distracted. In many ways, Esther can be considered rebellious against the expectations, as she breaks with the etiquette that she is expected to implement as a woman. *Etiquette* is in the OED (2006) defined as “the customary rules of polite or correct behavior in a society or among members of a profession”. Feminine etiquette is the customary rules of polite or correct behavior for women. Providing guidelines as to how one should behave in a society, the topic of feminine etiquette is of interest in relation to Esther, as she appears to perform an “oppositional” practice in neglecting and refusing the feminine etiquette that is expected of her as a woman in social settings.

3.3.1 PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Esther appears to have a desire to appear sophisticated, although she realizes that this is merely a facade. Her purchase of the expensive clothes prior to her stay in New York City supports her desire to appear sophisticated, and dress appropriately to the physical appearance that was expected of her as a woman. Physical appearance is connected to femininity, and Friedan points out that women in the post war era of the 1950s were obsessed with their physical appearance, wanting to dye their hair blond and shrink their sizes (Friedan 2010, pp. 6-7). In order to shrink their size, many would eat a chalk called Metrecal instead of food (ibid.). While she has bought new clothes, Esther Greenwood, is not concerned either with putting on weight, or losing it. This is illustrated when Esther states that she loves dishes full of butter, cheese and sour cream (Plath 1966, p. 25). During the Ladies' Day banquet, she is starving, and carefully plans how she can eat as much as possible, without being out of line or perceived as rude. Instead of listening to the welcome speech, she comes up with a strategy of how to get her hands on as much caviar as possible, growing confident that she will not have to compete with the rest for the girls to get most of it for herself. She seems to have a distorted picture of food, as she does not seem to enjoy it. Instead, she appears to devour it,

obsessing over how much she can get her hands on. She makes a habit of ordering several of the most expensive dishes on the menu, since she is not paying for it. To avoid keeping her friends from waiting for her to finish eating, she eats fast, also breaking with the feminine etiquette which is to eat slowly and discreetly (Plath 1966, p. 26).

This is an aspect of the text which is interesting to read in the context of Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, where it is argued that, for women, eating is a public issue (1991, p. 331). Food is problematic for women, and women's obsession with dieting and thinness started as women gained more power, e.g. when they received the vote around 1920 (Wolf 1991, p. 184). Female etiquette dictates that women should not eat big portions of food, but Esther does not seem to care. Although Wolf does not specify which decades these perceptions were strongest in, it is likely that these ideas characterized the American society in the 50s as well. In her obsession of food, one can wonder if Esther uses it as an outlet for her suppressed emotions and frustrations, as she appears to be in lack of other outlets in her life. In devouring the food instead of enjoying it, and making a point of eating as much as possible, Esther breaks the norms attached to women and food. Esther's actions reject these beliefs, and can be understood as an oppositional practice, since eats whatever she wants, whenever she wants, without taking the beauty myth into account. She seems unconcerned with the general norms attached to women's eating, and appears to oppose the beauty myth in which images of female beauty is used as a political weapon to hold women back, and fight against women's advancement (ibid.).

3.3.2 ESTHER'S CLASS

During their tour of the building in which the Ladies' Day lunch is held, Esther feels dizzy seeing all the food stacked in the kitchens. Further she explains that she was not starving at home, but meals were served with consideration to the price, and that her grandmother had a habit of reminding Esther of the cost of the food as she ate it (Plath 1966, p. 27). The caviar reminds her of her grandfather, and the standing joke she had with him. At her wedding, he would make sure she had all the caviar she could eat. "It was a joke because I never intended to get married, and even if I did, my grandfather couldn't have afforded enough caviar unless he robbed the country club kitchen and carried it off in a suitcase" (Plath 1966, pp. 27-28). Esther also explains that while growing up, she could not afford a magazine (Plath 1966, p. 2). These examples make it clear that Esther's family did not have a lot of money throughout

her childhood, and since she claims that she was poorly brought up, one can propose that her insecurities in social settings may be grounded in her lower-middle-class background. Women belonging to the lower-middle-class or working class were subjected to even bigger challenges when it came to living up to the social expectations. Thinking about feminism then, we can say that these women were subjected to a double issue, in that they were women, but also that they belonged to a lower social class. Feminism is not only concerned with gender *per se*, but also with class issues. Beasley (1999, p. 62) agrees, and explains that sex and class are two “systems” of social organization, e. g. patriarchy and capitalism, and he understands sexual power to be presented alongside class power. For Esther’s part, this becomes evident as she is a “social climber”, surpassing her own class and attempts to fit in with the upper-middle class in New York City. This aspect is also evident as Esther’s mother tries to help her to overcome her own class, by wanting her to marry. Marriage was a means of which social class could be altered, if women married someone higher on “the social ladder”.

During their lunch at the Ladies' Day banquet, Esther does not mind what spoons to use for which course, since she believes that acting assertive would prevent people from thinking she was poorly brought up (Plath 1966, p. 28). She thinks that doing things with a certain arrogance will only make people see her as original (ibid.). As she transfers this trait to other situations, it is evident that Esther has made a habit out of acting as if she knows anything. Her opposition against the expected performance of feminine etiquette may not only be explained in relation to Esther’s upbringing in an environment that did not reflect these customary rules, but can also be explained as a rejection of the expectancy of conformity she is subjected to as a woman in her contemporary society.

3.3.3 SELF-IMAGE

The cultural ideal of women’s beauty is of importance when it comes to the construction of women’s identity. As discussed in my first chapter, beauty attempts to create standards in which women’s femininity or power are defined or sought to be measured by. In constructing one’s identity as a woman, beauty or the sense of external appearance can be perceived to dominate women. The expectations attached to the visual presentation of women creates a certain pressure, forcing them try to attempt to fit in by possessing certain feminine traits. Esther does not describe her own physical appearance in detail, and her physical appearance

is therefore primarily unknown for the readers, with the exception of her description of herself as “skinny as a boy and barely rippled”, in which she insinuates that she does not possess the physicality that is generally idealized in women (Plath 1966, p. 8). Her self-consciousness is also evident as she thinks that Constantin would sleep with her if she only had a keen, shapely bone structure to her face (Plath 1966, p. 86).

On the second page of the story, Esther claims that she should be having the time of her life, and the envy of thousands of college girls just like her across America. Their envy would derive from her apparel and her sophisticated way of life that she experienced in New York City, where is drinking martinis, and is surrounded by handsome, potential mates (Plath 1966, p. 2). Although realizing her privileges, Esther does not feel like she has it all figured out. Reflecting over her past, and her upbringing in a remote town with a lower-middle-class background, she thinks about how people must see her as she is “steering New York like her own private car” (ibid.). Esther on the other hand, claims that she is not steering anything, not even her own life (ibid.). Feeling empty and passive, she perceives herself as “bumping” from events to her hotel, to work and then back again. Realizing she has her first, big chance, Esther feels sick by the fact that she’s just letting it run through her fingers like water (Plath 1966, p. 4). Staying in New York City seems to give her perspective on her place in the world, and she regrets buying “all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in [her] closet” (Plath 1966, p. 2). Regretting the purchases of the uncomfortable, expensive clothes may signal a realization that clothes are superficial, but at the same time they are important to make a good impression and seem sophisticated and wealthy. Esther appears to realize that the great achievements she attained in college shrinks down to nothingness when faced with this big city, and her perception of herself and her own success is demolished when surrounded by seemingly successful, bright and important people. The identity that she had constructed for herself trembles as she starts to compare herself to the women around her, realizing that her own achievement fades in comparison with theirs.

Esther’s self-image appears to be twisted and distorted. Just as food is connected to beauty and body image, mirrors are also connected in that they reflect one’s external appearance. This is a topic of interest in relation to investigating how Esther constructs her identity as a woman, as a mirror reflects the external appearance, that simultaneously affects the internal construction of identity. As previously discussed, the relationship between external appearance and internal perception of oneself can create an inner conflict, especially if they do not coincide with each other. In *TBJ*, there are several examples of situations in which Esther appears to be in conflict with her own reflection. Many times, Esther fails to see

her own reflection for what it is. Instead, her reflection is odd and uncanny, her inner self distanced from her physical appearance. One example is when she walks into an elevator, and notices “a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into [her] face. It was only [her] of course. [She] was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up [she] looked” (Plath 1966, p. 19). Humorously, Esther fails to see her own reflection, suggesting it is someone else’s reflection. In this, it seems that Esther struggles to unite her external and internal sense of identity.

After waking up from the coma after overdosing on sleeping pills, Esther asks for a mirror (Plath 1966, p. 184). Reluctantly, the nurse hands it over to her, and Esther thinks that she is seeing a picture:

You couldn’t tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person’s face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person’s mouth was pale brown, with a rose-colored sore at each corner

(Plath 1966, p. 185)

Faced with her own reflection, Esther perceives it to be a picture of a man or a woman in a bad condition. She describes the face she sees in a neutral manner, since she fails to realize that it is indeed her own reflection (ibid.). Esther smiles, and the mouth in the mirror “cracked into a grin”, leaving the mirror on the floor, scattered (ibid.). Although she seems to realize that the reflection is her own at last, she appears passive and expressionless. In her article “Funny and Tender and Not a Desperate Woman: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and Therapeutic Laughter” in *Plath Profiles*, Andrea Krafft (2013, p. 296) argues that Esther’s grin before the cracking of the mirror signifies bitterness against the smiling woman. Krafft talks about the smiling woman, and this may point to the social expectation that women should smile. A smile is a sign of happiness, but regardless of how they feel, it seems that women are expected to smile. In her article “It’s Important For Men to Understand That They Need To Stop Telling Women to Smile”, Erica Hardison (2016, n.p.) explains that smiling “makes women feel that [they] are only meant to be happy and pretty and it’s a passive way to engage into an unwanted conversation”. This is illustrated in the pictures taken of Sylvia Plath. Although we know that she was depressed and that her mental health was declining throughout the last years of her life, she can be seen

smiling in her photographs. In *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, Paul Keegan (2003, p. 1045) cites Ted Hughes' poem, *Fulbright Scholars*, where he comments on Plath's smile:

And your grin.
Your exaggerated American
Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners

Since *Fulbright Scholars* is part of Hughes' poem collection *Birthday Letters* in which he revisits the life and work of Plath, it is likely that he refers to Sylvia Plath (Gill 2006, p. xiv). This enhances how women were expected to smile for the sake of others, regardless of how they feel: “[g]rin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners” (Keegan 2003, p. 1045). This is also reminiscent of *The Feminine Mystique*, where Friedan (2010, p. 15) observed that “a bitter laugh was beginning to be heard from American women” in response to their lack of fulfillment. Krafft (2013, p. 299) understands Esther Greenwood's laugh to be part of reclaiming authority and anger, particularly in response to women's expected adaption of the feminine mystique.

Wagner-Martin (1986, p. 58) suggests that we should realize the weight Esther carries while attempting to maintain a number of conflicting identities, “the obliging daughter, and the ungrateful woman, the successful writer and the immature student, the virginal girlfriend and the worldly lover”. Taking this into consideration, it is not surprising that Esther fails to see her own reflection properly. While presented with these various expectations, Esther decides to go against the norm, and her battle of protesting these becomes ridiculous, in that it seems like an unconscious act of rebellion. Although seemingly unaware of her oppositional practice, it seems that at its heart is Esther's desire of wanting to “have it all”. The same can be argued in relation to her concern and unconcern with her physical appearance. In some ways she wants to fit in by buying expensive clothes, but simultaneously she dreads conforming to society's expectations. She is caught in a double bind in that she both longs for the acceptance and safety provided in conforming to society's demands, but simultaneously, she dreads the life it entails. One can say that Esther simultaneously despises and desires the American Dream. By attempting to both fight and adapt to conformity at the same time, a kind of crisis is created in Esther, and it seems that this crisis is manifested in her oppositional practice. Since there is no clear solution to her problems, her oppositional practice does not really have a purpose, but leaves her feeling even more lost. Additionally, she is obliged to “be it all”, in terms of what society expects of her as a woman, which is yet an example of the impossibility entailed in the expectations she is subjected to. This in turn, leaves her feeling

flustered and indecisive, and her inability to make decisions is a red thread throughout the narrative of *TBJ*. She appears to feel self-alienated since she is both unable and unwilling to fulfill both her own expectations as well as those of her contemporary society, and there is no clear solution to her problems. The distorted image she is faced with when she sees her own face in the mirror may represent these conflicting identities, and prove that they are neither interwoven, nor compatible.

3.4 SEXUALITY, MARRIAGE AND “OPPOSITIONAL PRACTICE”

According to Germaine Greer, women would be free when they had a positive definition of female sexuality (Greer 1985, cited in Wolf 1991, p. 154). Wolf (1991, pp. 154-156) claims that in our time, female sexuality is not only negatively defined, but also negatively constructed. Claiming that women's vulnerability has its base in the absorption of the beauty myth's intervention, and that women's sexual education is set up to ensure vulnerability, Wolf (ibid.) understands women's sexuality as distorted from birth. She claims that this outside-in eroticism is cultivated in women by three unnatural pressures on female sexuality: the lack of intimate care from their fathers, the strong cultural influence that teaches them to see women as sexual objects, and finally the prevalence of sexual violence. These three factors affect women's understanding of their sexuality, and they learn to see their sexuality through the reflections in the eyes of men, thus constructing it negatively, according to Wolf (1991, p. 155). Both Friedan and Wolf agree that patriarchy and the expectance of conformity affect women's sexuality.

Friedan (2010, p. 28) contends that the feminine mystique resulted in boredom and lack of fulfillment for many women, and she found that American women's sexual hunger had increased, along with their conflicts with the expected femininity as a reaction. From 1950 to 1960, women's interest in intercourse had surpassed the interest of men, who historically had shown most interest in this activity (Friedan 2010, p. 214). Throughout these years, it is evident that women's relationship to sex had changed. The Kinsey reports in 1948 and 1953 found the increase of women's interest in sex as symptoms of the increasing depersonalization, immaturity, joylessness and “spurious senselessness of our sexual overpreoccupation” (Friedan 2010, p. 214). Friedan (2010, p. 221) asks if sex had become something that was always out of reach and had become an unreal fantasy, since it had

become something that people needed to feel “alive” and to find their own identity. Further, she asks if women used sex or sexual fantasy to fill needs that were not sexual, and if the feeling of personal identity and fulfillment that they sought in sex was not something that sex alone could give (ibid.). Women’s sense of boredom and confinement constructed in the feminine mystique may be seen to cause an increase in women’s sexual needs, as an attempt to construct their identity with something practical and yet fulfilling.

The subject of sexuality appears to be of importance to Esther, and since Friedan (ibid.) argues that sexuality became something out of reach, or an unreal fantasy to women, one may begin to understand why she is so obsessed with it. Her interest in the topic of sexuality is colored by her impression of it as passive and mundane when confined to wedlock, but at the same time, she appears to be curious and excited about it whenever it is presented without any attachments such as marriage, romance or intimacy. The fact that Esther thinks about her sexuality in a different manner than her contemporaries who understand sexuality in a traditional sense, supports the claim that she is performing an oppositional practice when she breaks with the prevailing and accepted views of sexuality. Although most people in her contemporary society mainly understands sex to belong within the frames of marriage, Esther is simultaneously part of a youth culture that supports sexual experimentation. Considered delicate in terms of womanhood, sex appears to be callous for Esther, as she breaks with the general perception of women as the sexual object, and she wants to have sex for the physical enjoyment alone. She explains how she at the age of nineteen considered pureness to be the greatest issue, and saw the “world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another” (Plath 1966, p. 85). “[She] thought a spectacular change would come over [her] the day [she] crossed the boundary line” (ibid.). Weighing like a millstone around her neck, Esther is intent to lose her virginity (Plath, 1966, p. 240).

In relation to the idea of maternity and having children, Esther once again appears to perform an oppositional practice against the societal view of sexuality. In her contemporary society, women’s sexuality was integrated with motherhood and reproduction within the frames of marriage. The quest for motherhood was won through women’s sexuality. Although Esther is eager to experiment with sex, she appears to have an ambivalent attitude to the consequences that may follow, namely her chances of becoming pregnant. Claiming that children make her sick, it is likely to believe that her fear of becoming pregnant holds her back from practicing sex in the way she aspires (Plath 1966, p. 123). It is not until the day she

has her diaphragm fitted that Esther has sex, and this illustrates the freedom she acquires through her contraception, since she is no longer concerned with the risk of becoming pregnant (Plath 1966, p. 235). Esther's sexuality as an oppositional practice is portrayed in her obsessiveness with sex, not grounded in the contemporary perception of sex as a means of love and reproduction, but merely grounded in her lust and physical enjoyment. As previously argued in relation to Esther's obsession with food, one can wonder if her obsession of losing her virginity may have its origin in the same place. Could her obsession of food and sex both serve as outlets for her suppressed emotions and frustrations? As she lacks other outlets in her life, one may see this presumption reasonable.

When Buddy takes her to see the cadavers and bottled fetuses, Esther feels proud that she handles it so well by remaining calm although the sights are very disturbing (Plath 1966, p. 65). Considering a woman who is giving birth to be on top of "some awful torture table", Esther observes the delivery with great distress (1966 p. 67). In an attempt to calm Esther, Buddy tells her that the woman is on drugs that would make her forget the pain, and in Esther's opinion, this drug would have to be the invention of a man. Forgetting the pain would only lead her to go home and make another baby, Esther reasoned (Plath 1966, p. 68). This reinforces the assumption that Esther perceives men as oppressing and taking advantage of women whenever they could, and in her reflection over the drugging of the woman giving birth, her defiance of masculinity is once again displayed. When Buddy asks Esther how she experienced the childbirth, Esther answers that it was wonderful, and that she could see something like that every day (Plath 1966, p. 69). Further, Esther reveals her own expectations of her potential childbirth, imagining it as an awful ordeal, but smiling afterwards, radiating as she reaches out for her "first little squirmy child and saying its name, whatever it was" (Plath 1966, pp. 69-70). Although children seemingly make her sick, it is also represented as one of the figs on the fig-tree that she wants, and despite the fact that Esther provocatively rejects all notions of having children throughout the narrative, she apparently possesses certain hopes to one day become a mother (1966 pp. 123, 80). It seems that it is not the idea of having children that is Esther's biggest concern, but more so the position it gives women in her contemporary society, and the stereotypical life that women were expected to lead after having children, appropriating the role of the domestic housewife, namely and conforming to society's expectancy of conformity.

When Esther considers having sex with Eric, she reflects over her chances of becoming pregnant, and thinks about an article her mother had cut out from *Reader's Digest*, called "In Defense of Chastity". According to Esther, its main point is that:

a man's world is different from a woman's world and a man's emotions are different from a woman's emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds and the two different sets of emotions together properly

(Plath 1966, p. 84)

Since the article was published in *Reader's Digest*, one can assume that the attitudes described reflect the prevailing understanding of sexuality. Apparently, it defends chastity, but it becomes clear that the real difference between men and women is not only that they are very different, but that women are expected to stay pure, but men are not (ibid.). Since the article was written by a married woman, Esther's mother tells her that this is something girls don't not know until it is too late, and that she should therefore consider the advice of the experts (ibid.). Through this, it is clear that Esther's mother warns her against experimenting with sex, fearing that a viable husband might reject her if she is sexually experienced. Further, the article said that "the best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they were not pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex" (ibid.). This passage confirms Esther's assumption of the social expectancy of women's chastity. Men are accepted despite living double lives, and not saving themselves for marriage, but women are not. Whether they virgins or not themselves, men want virginal wives, and when Esther realizes the injustice entailed in these expectations, she figures she might as well forget to stay pure herself, and marry someone who has also ridden themselves of their virginity out of pure rebelliousness (Plath 1966, p. 85). In her urge of ridding herself of her virginity, she appears to perform an oppositional practice to rebel against these set expectations. In her article "*The Bell Jar* and other prose", Janet Badia (2006, p. 134) agrees, and considers Esther subjected to the societal double standards allowing men to construct their own sexual identity while women could not. The article from *Reader's Digest* can additionally be understood to intensify Esther's prevailing assumption of sex as something purely physical, since there is no mention of love, romance or attraction in the article.

Her reflections around sexuality and intercourse appears to be distorted, since romance and intimacy does not appear to be connected to sex for Esther. The only boy she ever considered going to bed with was Eric, who is described as a "bitter, hawk-nosed Southerner from Yale", and who is dumped by his girlfriend who happened to live in the same house as Esther (Plath 1966, p. 82). She sees him fit to go to bed with since he is experienced and does not seem silly or dirty-minded when they talk about sex. Things change, however, when Eric

announces his feelings for her, something that results in her lying to him and disregarding him (Plath 1966, p. 83). She seems to lack the ability to deal with her own emotions, terrified of both being loved, and loving someone. If her fears of falling in love are great enough, one can assume that she would step out of any relationships if they started to become real and affectionate. This can somewhat be understood to be the case with Buddy Willard as well. Although they appear to be a perfect match in the standards of the society, Esther appears to recede as soon as Buddy starts talking about the future, or of having a family.

Finding a man to marry appears to be the greatest mission of her college friends. The expected lifestyle for women was that of having a husband and children, and spending their time serving them and making a home. As previously discussed, Esther is full of skepticism and resentment towards these expectations, and makes it clear that she is never going to marry nor have children, as she sees it as incompatible with having a career and pursuing her dreams of becoming a writer. Although Esther had made it clear that she did not want to marry, Esther's mother and grandmother have kept on suggesting what "a fine, clean boy Buddy was, and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for" (Plath 1966, p. 71). Esther's belief in Buddy's sexual inexperience was because he throughout their relationship had come off as a virgin. Although she certain he is a virgin, saving himself to marry a virgin like her, she asks him if he has ever had sex. His blushing response to her question makes her regret asking, and she feels the warm sensation of disappointment spreading throughout her cheeks (Plath 1966, p. 72). When he admits being seduced and having sex with a waitress named Gladys on Cape Cod, Esther ironically thinks "of course, somebody had seduced Buddy, Buddy hadn't started it and it wasn't really his fault" (Plath 1966, p. 73), blaming it on the waitress. Due to Esther's assumption of men having the freedom to have sex with whoever they wanted, although women were expected to defend their chastity, this can be understood as her disclosure of Buddy's extenuating attempt to remove his own guilt from the incident. Somehow, Esther seems to blame herself for his affair, since she had told him that she dated many men, and saw his affair as merely a response to the assumption of Esther's sexual experience (Plath 1966, 72).

On one hand, Esther blatantly expects Buddy to be a virgin, as the societal expectation was that sexual intercourse belonged within wedlock, but on the other hand, it was more socially accepted that men had premarital intercourse than it was for women. Following this train of thought then, one can ask if Esther's demands of Buddy's purity is vindictory, since she both had been, and still was desperate to rid herself of her own virginity. It seems that Esther wants to have the freedom to experiment with different men, and that this is also one of

her main arguments in why she did not want to get married, namely possessing the freedom to choose whom she wanted to have sex with (Plath 1966, p. 87). Although being open for having affairs herself, Esther is certain that she wants to end their relationship after this, not because he had had an affair, but because he “didn’t have the honest guts to admit it straight off to everybody and face up to it as part of his character” (Plath 1966, p. 74). After learning about Buddy’s affair, she thinks she should sleep with someone, and it could not be Buddy, because he was already one person ahead of her (Plath 1966, pp. 81-82). Dismayed by the societal double standard, Esther attempts to seize control over her sexuality by losing her virginity to someone other than Buddy (Badia 2006, p. 134).

During one of her trips from the mental hospital, Esther meets the well-paid professor of mathematics, Irwin: “a tall, young man with a rather ugly and bespectacled, but intelligent face” (Plath 1966, p. 237). Going with him to his apartment, Esther decides to finally lose her virginity. Irwin is intelligent, a crucial characteristic a man had to possess in order for Esther to respect him (Plath 1966, p. 240). Additionally, she wants someone experienced to make up for her lack of it (ibid.). As Esther’s two most important criterions regarding her lover’s characteristics are represented in Irwin, she regards him adequate. Because she had her diaphragm fitted that day, her fears of becoming pregnant are finally absent, and she is in control over her own sexuality (Plath 1966, p. 235). After going through with the painful ordeal, Esther “lay, rapt and naked, on Irwin’s rough blanket waiting for the miraculous change to make itself” (Plath 1966, p. 241). Instead of a miraculous change making itself, blood is seeping out between Esther’s legs. Although instinctively worried she is still a virgin, Esther reasons that the blood must be proof of the loss of her virginity (Plath 1966, 242). Since Friedan (2010, p. 221) asks if sex had become something that was crucial in women’s construction of identity, one can wonder if this is the case for Esther as well. Esther seems to expect that the elimination of her virginity will provide her with identity and fulfillment, and as she awaits the miraculous change to happen, she appears to realize that her needs are not fulfilled in this manner. However, she does feel part of a great tradition (ibid.).

In relation to sex, it appears that Esther struggles to see it as something more than just a physical act. Throughout the narrative, we are encountered with her thoughts on the subject, and for the most part, they seem to encounter violence more than romance and affection. This becomes particularly evident when Esther observes the romantic encounter between Lenny and Doreen. She recounts Lenny screaming as Doreen hangs from his earlobe with her teeth, and flies up to his shoulder (Plath 1966, p. 18). It is challenging as a reader to distinguish if Doreen and Lenny are fighting or flirting, a sentiment confirming my previous claim.

Violence and sex seems to be interchangeable in the eyes of Esther, a presumption that is strongly enhanced in her encounter with Marco, the Cuban woman-hater during the dance at the Country Club. After attempting to rape Esther, she fights him off and is left in tears (Plath 1966, p. 115). This incident can represent the battle she appears to fight against the patriarchy that is prevailing in her contemporary society, a patriarchy characterized by male dominance, a dominance she both repulses and opposes.

After the violent encounter and attempted rape of Marco, Esther returns to the Amazon, and the episode causes Esther to throw her clothes from the sunroof of the hotel. Regarding them as “a flag of truce, once, twice”, she watches her clothes descend into the streets of New York City (Plath 1966, p. 117). As she is letting her clothes go “like a loved one’s ashes”, one can wonder if this is an oppositional practice against the life these clothes represented (Plath 1966, p. 117). Since she has spent most of her scholarship funds buying herself uncomfortable, expensive clothes, this can mark a moment of change for Esther, as she disregards them and rids herself of them for good. Wagner-Martin (1986, p. 61) agree, and argues that in throwing her clothes from the rooftop, Esther rejects the societal traditional image of being a smart, pretty girl and being objectified as man’s acquisition.

Esther appears to oppose male dominancy and masculinity, and this is particularly evident in her encounter with her doctor, Dr. Gordon. In their article “Approaches to Angst and the Male World: A Comparative Study of *The Bell Jar* and the Poetry of a Few Indian Women Poets” in *Plath Profiles*, Akhtar Khan and Bibhudutt Dash (2014, p. 24) see Esther’s bitterness about a male world that rejects women’s emotions become evident in this meeting. Dr. Gordon shows little interest and care when meeting with Esther (Plath 1966, p. 135). He fails to understand her needs and struggles, and does not seem to empathize with her at all. Repeating the same comment regarding her college confirms his superficiality and insinuates that he is not concerned with Esther enough to remember their previous conversations (Plath 1966, pp. 138, 153). Dr. Gordon represents the traditional “voice of reason”, and as a doctor, he is considered a person with authority. Because he lacks empathy and the ability to relate and discuss Esther’s struggles, he seems so heavily indoctrinated in the societal system that he fails to understand her struggles when she opposes them. Representing the male dominancy in her contemporary society that she strongly revolts, she grows more and more hostile towards him, something that is further enhanced by his office that is decorated with framed pictures of his wife and children, representing the life that she strongly wants to dissociate herself from (Plath 1966, pp. 136-137). Instead of experiencing the epiphany she had hoped, Dr. Gordon merely says that he will see her next week. Instead of attempting to understand her and help

her deal with her thoughts, his solution feels like punishment for Esther, since he prescribes her with electroconvulsive therapy treatment (Plath 1966, p. 143). His response to her issues and oppositional practice against the life and ideas he clearly represents and undertakes is painful, and this is reinforced when she wonders what terrible thing she had done in order to deserve such excruciating pain after the treatment (Plath 1966, p. 152).

Although Esther defies masculinity, patriarchy and resents Dr. Gordon for naturalizing marriage, it is evident that Mrs. Willard represents the same ideas. Since the narration takes place in the 1950s, it is important to note that this was a decade in which American middle-class women were expected to conform to a certain kind of lifestyle. As mentioned above, the stay-at-home housewife caring for her husband and children was idealized, and this was the expected career for most women. This was the lifestyle that most women appropriated, and is exemplified in the novel through Esther's mother and Mrs. Willard, both women whom Esther resents. In her book *Sylvia Plath*, Eileen Aird (1973, p. 91) claims that "it is against the attitudes to femininity in her social background that Esther revolts most strongly", and this is supported by Esther's resentment against Mrs. Willard. She can be perceived as the female voice representing the same ideas as Doctor Gordon, as she applauds marriage and often reminds Esther that "what a man wants is a mate, and what a woman wants is infinite security" (Plath 1966, p. 74). Esther, on the other hand, does not seem convinced, and grows tired of the way Mrs. Willard talks about marriage, saying things like "what a man is, is an arrow into the future, and what a woman is, is the place the arrow shoots from" (ibid.). Esther is not in agreement with Mrs. Willard, and refuses to accept this description of female needs, as it disregards her chances of personal distinction (Aird 1973, p. 91). Esther perceives the flaws in men too evident to overlook, and claims that the last thing she wants is infinite security. She is not interested in being the place an arrow shoots off from: wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions [herself], like the colored arrows from a fourth of July rocket" (Plath 1966, p. 87). Her need to "explode" in all directions confirms my previous claim of her internal crisis originating in her obligation of "being it all". The impossibility entailed in this leaves her feeling so frustrated and at a loss that she wants to explode in order to be free, like a rocket. Imagining the chores that would come along with being married to Constantin, one of her dates, Esther envisions the following: "It seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's, but [she] knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean was just what Mrs. Willard did from morning till night" (Plath 1966, p. 88).

Further, Esther thinks about how men shower their lovers with gifts, flowers and

dinners before marriage, but that during the wedding ceremony, everything they want is their woman to flatten out underneath their feet (Plath 1966, p. 89). Either referring to the physical act of sexual intercourse or to the subordination of women in marriage, it reflects Esther's understanding of the woman's value and position in marriage. Her image of marriage is that it is numbing and enslaving for women, and this is confirmed through one of her conversations with Buddy Willard when he tells her that once she had children, she would feel differently about her life, and not want to write poems anymore (ibid.). His failing to understand her passion for poetry and literature, and aspiration of becoming a writer, contributes to Esther's rejection of him as a mate. It appears that it is Buddy's expectations and perception of marriage that makes Esther reject it, and Buddy may serve as a representation of the patriarchy in which women were subjected to expectations in the favor of men. Although she had been in love with Buddy for a long time, she grew confident and cautious in her relationship with him, seemingly attempting to appear superior and no longer act as a puppet. She had imaginary conversations with Buddy, repeating the conversations they previously had had, but finished them by answering him back quite sharply, instead of just sitting around saying "I guess so", which had previously been her general response (Plath 1966, p. 58). Additionally, she shows tendencies of transmitting her arrogance displayed at the Ladies' Day lunch to her relationship with Buddy, by not acting surprised or ignorant to his ideas or opinions in order to oppose patriarchy and male dominancy. However, Buddy proposes to Esther after Mr. Willard had driven her to the Adirondacks to see him during his tuberculosis treatment. Her initial response is an impulse to laugh, before she tells him that she had decided to not get married (1966, p. 97).

Although Esther does not want to marry Buddy, she certainly wants the acceptance and respect of her friends that comes along with having a boyfriend. Perceived as abnormal due to her concern with work more than with men, Esther wants to make sure the senior on watch would see her with Buddy when he came to see her, and this improves their impression of her (Plath 1966, p. 61). It is evident that the girls she lives with perceives her in a different manner after seeing her with Buddy on the porch. After this, the seniors in her house start speaking to her, and Esther gains their respect and admiration because she was with a handsome man (Plath 1966, pp. 62-63). Although the real reason for his stopping by was that he was going to prom with Joan, Esther, cold with envy, took full advantage of his visit in gaining her respect among her friends. Additionally, Esther uses Buddy's move to the Adirondacks for hospitalization as an excuse to avoid announcing that she had broken off with him (Plath 1966, p. 75). Instead of telling the truth, she tells people that they were

practically engaged, so that when she stayed in to study on Saturday nights, she was regarded brave, dedicated to her work although her boyfriend (“practically fiancé”) was sick and had been sent away (Plath 1966, p. 76). His diagnosis became her excuse to avoid the social settings, and escape possible questions and expectations.

The fact that she refuses to marry Buddy, a well-brought up, kind, athletic and intelligent medical student, is something Esther wants to keep secret (Plath 1966, p. 140). She appears to be embarrassed by the fact that she rejected him, something that may point to the pressure she feels to marry a decent man who could offer her security. And although Esther makes it clear that she is not interested in conforming to the expectations of a wife and a mother, she still fantasizes about the life she could have had if she adapted to the role of the domestic housewife. Khan and Dash (2014, p. 24) agree, and they acknowledge that Esther’s disenchantment with the male world simultaneously attracts her. She envisions herself being married to Constantin, and to the prison guard she meets at the beach in Deer Island (Plath 1966, pp. 88, 158). In imagining her marriage with the prison guard, Esther considers how nice it would have been to live out the domestic life in suburbia with “piles of little kids and chickens, wearing what my grandmother called wash dresses, and sitting about in some kitchen with bright linoleum and fat arms, drinking pots of coffee” (Plath 1966, pp. 158-159). Similarly, when considering moving to Chicago and changing her name to Elly Higginbottom to get a fresh start, she enjoys the possibility of marrying “a virile, but tender garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway” (1966, p. 140). These examples provide a basis in which we can begin to understand the conflicting relationship Esther has regarding marriage. On the one hand, she rejects the idea, but simultaneously she desires it. This is another example of the double bind Esther experiences. It seems that her rejection of marriage is not because she does not desire to get married and have children, but more so because she repulses the life her contemporary society expects her to lead when becoming a wife and a mother. Her rejection of this life becomes another act of rebellion against the expectancy of conformity she is subjected to, and once again, she responds with an oppositional practice she is seemingly unaware of.

3.5 IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE TO MARRIAGE?

Throughout the narrative of *TBJ*, Esther struggles to behave in the way that is expected of her as a woman. In her article “‘The Feeding of Young Women’: Sylvia Plath’s ‘The Bell Jar’, ‘Mademoiselle’ Magazine, and the Domestic Ideal” in *College Literature*, Caroline J. Smith (2010, p. 10) claims that Esther preoccupies herself with acting “appropriately”. In order to conform to what the American society in the 50s thought a woman should be, Esther devotes much time in observing other women and how they perform femininity. Aird (1973, p. 90) suggests that Esther’s lack of self-knowledge makes her compare herself to others, seeking their identification. Further, she argues that this is the reason why Esther assesses the female role models available to her, her mother, her benefactress Philomena Guinea, her boss Jay Cee and her friend Doreen in particular. The fact that she is seeking others' identification could signal that Esther is unsure about what she really wants, resulting in an attempt to both fight and adapt to conformity. Although she compares herself with these women and seek their identification, however, it seems to be of little help to Esther. The main purpose of role models is to provide tools for making decisions, and Esther’s potential role models do not seem to experience the same problems and challenges that she faces. Most of them provide tools for succeeding and making decisions in relation to the expectancy of conformity that characterizes her contemporary society, and these tools are not of interests for Esther.

Her lack of women to mirror herself in, may be understood in relation to Showalter’s (2009, p. 30) understanding of female writers' struggle against the cultural and historical forces that resulted in a lack of female writers that could serve as their role models. Although we are not dealing with literary theory in the same sense in this chapter, Showalter’s understanding of the importance of role models may serve as a way of understanding the struggle of finding one’s place and identity while lacking role models. Just as the lack of contact with a female tradition prevented female writers from succeeding in creating a literature or style of their own, and finding their identity as female writers, one may ask if this could be the case of Esther Greenwood’s quest of finding her identity as a woman as well.

Jay Cee is Esther’s boss, and Esther likes her (Plath 1966, p. 6). She is fascinated by the fact that Jay Cee is different from the other bosses of magazines, because she is smart, and she has good connections. Esther says that “Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly look didn’t seem to matter. She read a couple of languages and knew all the quality writers in the business” (ibid.). Obviously, Jay Cee does not conform to the expected appearance or compass the societal “standards of beauty”, but in return, she has brains. In many ways, Jay

Cee is an opposite to the feminine mystique, since she is not considered beautiful, and although married, she still has an important and respected career. Jay Cee seems to successfully combine what Esther perceives as incompatible, namely the role of being a wife and simultaneously building and maintaining a career outside of the home. This can explain why Esther looks up to Jay Cee, even after feeling betrayed by her reprimand in which she questions Esther's lack of will to work and her doubts regarding the direction of her future career. Even after the reprimand, Esther wishes that Jay Cee had been her mother, claiming that she then would have known what to do (Plath 1966, p. 40).

Esther's relationship with her mother appears cold and distant. Mrs. Greenwood has taught shorthand and typing to support them ever since her husband died, and keeps nagging Esther to learn shorthand after college, providing her with a practical skill as well as a college degree (Plath 1966, p. 41). According to her mother, this would make her attractive among the up-and-coming men. The only catch is that Esther is not interested in serving men in any way, not even in transcribing their letters (Plath 1966, p. 79). Esther's cynicism regarding learning shorthand may be due to the general assumption of it being a skill appropriate for women, and especially for secretaries, a kind of career that Esther grudges. Throughout Esther's narration of her childhood, one can assume that her mother appropriated the role of being a stay-at-home wife and mother. Although she started working after her husband died, it is insinuated that she used to stay at home, taking care of the home and children before that. This might allude to the resentment Esther appears to have against her mother, claiming that she is not of much help in finding her career-path, since she represents the traditional life imposed on women in the American contemporary society in the 50s (Plath 1966, p. 40). Additionally, it appears that her mother does not quite understand Esther, especially when she struggles with her mental health after returning home. In her mother's opinion, Esther's mental illness is caused by a lack of morality, since she keeps begging Esther to tell her what she had done wrong (Plath 1966, p. 215). Another factor that may be at the heart of Esther's resentment towards her, is her mother's lack of interest in her writing. On these grounds, one can suggest that her mother wishes that Esther would adapt to the expected role of the feminine mystique, but since Esther fights this kind of life in all possible ways, this can be understood as the roots of their conflicting relationship.

Esther feels inadequate, and lists up what she cannot do, starting with cooking. Although her grandmother and mother attempted to teach her how to cook, she made sure to spoil it to avoid being asked to cook again (Plath 1966, p. 79). She continually compares herself to other women in her life, and concerning cooking, she thinks about Jody, and her

skills of cooking scrambled eggs (*ibid.*). Lacking the skill of cooking, Esther sees herself as deviant, and she shows no interest at all to learn it. Cooking was an important part of the majority of women's lives the 1950s, as they spent most their time at home, cleaning and cooking (Friedan 2010, p. 8). As previously mentioned, Esther did not master the skill of shorthand. Further, she saw herself as a terrible dancer, claiming she had no tune nor balance (Plath 1966, p. 79). What she had wanted to do the most, had been too expensive, for example riding a horse and skiing (*ibid.*). This can be perceived as an intensifier of Esther's resentment against the domestic lifestyle of women, since her mother had not been able to pay for what she wanted to do the most, either due to her mother's homemaking, or to her income as a teacher of shorthand and typing. Additionally, she could not speak German, read Hebrew or write Chinese (*ibid.*). As Esther shows rejection of many skills embedded in the expectations subjected to American women in the 50s, it becomes clear that she is in opposition against these, rejecting to conform to the societal expectations and standards.

Lacking role models, the notion of making decisions appears to be challenging for Esther. As none of her role models provide her with tools to construct her identity outside of marriage and the expectancy of conformity, Badia (2006, p. 133) perceives Esther's frustration as legitimate considering the societal constrictions regarding women's role in mid-century America. Women in the 1950s in America were expected to subordinate themselves, and accept male dominancy, letting themselves subdue by conforming to the set expectations. They were not expected to make decisions, since that was considered the responsibility of men. Women were merely meant to bend and accept the demands of men. If they were given the chance to make decisions, it would generally be in regard to minor choices. As women were only allowed to make insignificant decisions, it is likely that these would be even more difficult to make, because it would not really matter what they would choose. Women did not have a say in the big picture in the 1950s, as men were regarded superior and in authority. The notion of women's inability to make decisions can be understood in regard to food, sex, marriage and career. This appears to be some of the frustrations that leads Esther to perform an oppositional practice against these motions, although she does not appear to embark on these in a conscious mode.

Not wanting to be subjected to choices that would also be relinquishing, Esther ends up indecisive in many situations (Wagner-Martin 1986, p. 59). Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that Esther perceives it as impossible to combine the roles of being a wife and mother while maintaining a career, and this is evident as she admires Jay Cee for mastering both simultaneously (Plath 1966, p. 15). Wagner-Martin (1986, p. 59) explains that the

conflicting feelings of Esther have their ground in her strong belief that women of the 50s were unable to combine a professional career with homemaking. Badia (2006, p. 133) understands the process of choice for Esther as circumscribed by societal rules and expectations, expectations telling her that she can only choose one thing, despite her own inclinations. Since Esther does not want to make choices that are also relinquishing, she is left passive and immobile (Wagner-Martin 1986, p. 59).

Her inability to make decisions is for instance evident in her response to Buddy's proposal, stating that she wants to live in both the city and on the countryside. His response is to call her neurotic, since she does not want to settle for one thing:

Neurotic, ha! I let out a scornful laugh. If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days

(Plath 1966, p. 98)

As we have seen, Esther wants "change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions [herself], like the colored arrows from a fourth of July rocket" (Plath 1966, p. 87). In addition to rejecting his proposal, it is evident that Esther does not want to settle for one particular man, or one particular lifestyle. Instead of settling down and conforming to a set life, Esther wants the freedom to possess "two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time", and is therefore reluctant in relation to marriage (Plath 1966, p. 98).

Esther's approach to her own suicide appears to be an ironic move, since this is a topic in which she shows great indecisiveness. Although Esther shows signs of being depressed during her stay in New York City, it seems that her time back at home triggers her depression and it is there that her obsession with suicide strikes her. Is Esther's urge to commit suicide a response to the void she experiences on the inside, since she is so confused regarding her own identity? She appears lost and unsure of both who she is, and who she wants to be. Because of this, Esther embarks on her numerous attempts to end her life. After failing to slit her wrists, hang herself, and drowning herself, Esther ends up taking an overdose of sleeping pills (Plath 1966, pp. 160, 167, 170, 179). Failing in all her attempts, her heartbreaking quest for death comes close to being comical. Committing suicide appears to be something she is unable to do. Although she is very determined to succeed, something always seems to get in the way.

This can be explained in relation to the lack of responsibility that women were given in her contemporary society, and their freedom of only making minor and insignificant decisions. Ironically, this appears to be transferred to the major choice Esther presumably had made, namely to end her life. Unable to carry through with it, one can ask oneself if this is

because of women's general lack of responsibility in decision-making, and that this episode merely reflect its consequences in a larger frame.

Additionally, it is interesting to note how *TBJ* was received and read, particularly since Plath first published the novel under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963. It was not until the 1966 edition that her real name appeared on the cover (Badia 2006, p. 126). The 1963 reception of *TBJ* was according to Badia small and tempered. Although most early reviewers agreed that it was promising, the praise was not of any significance. However, it is interesting to note that it was considered "often very funny" (Raven 1963, cited in Badia 2006, p. 127). The fact that the novel was perceived as comical before the tragic truth about its author was known, can in some ways be linked to the narrative of *TBJ*. Plath chose to write about Esther's failing suicide attempts in a comical way, but this does not change the tragedy of it.

It is clear that the reception and reading of the novel changed after Plath's death, and in his review of the novel in *Spectator*, M. L. Rosenthal wrote that "[he] very much regret missing [*The Bell Jar* in 1963], for now it is impossible to read without thinking of [Plath] personally and of the suicidal poems in *Ariel*" (Rosenthal 1966, cited in Badia 2006, p. 127). In his review of *TBJ* in *New Statesman*, Robert Taubman claimed that "the novel's identity in 1963 is that of a first novel by a literary newcomer, rather than the work of a literary icon known widely and equally both for her poetry and her suicide" (Taubman 1966, cited in Badia 2006, p. 127). This explains that the awareness of the author's suicide affected both the reception of the novel, and the way it was read.

3.6 CAREER, EDUCATION AND AMBITIONS

When we get to know Esther in the first chapters of the novel, she appears to be a bright and hardworking student. She has after all won several scholarships and prizes, and is living in New York City working for a fashion magazine (Plath 1966, p. 3). Her ambitions appear to be grand and pompous, until we learn that she is questioned and "unmasked" by Jay Cee regarding her work ethics and future aspirations (Plath 1966, 32-33). During their meeting, Esther is directly asked if her work does not interest her (Plath 1966, p. 33). Esther has told herself all her life that "studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true" (ibid.). She has done everything well, receiving all A's and felt invincible (ibid.)

Although Esther had always been prepared to answer questions regarding her future

career, she hears herself say “I don’t really know” when Jay Cee asks her what she wants to do after she graduates. Jay Cee pauses, and says that she would not get anywhere like that (Plath 1966, p. 35). This conversation makes a great impact on Esther, and she feels unmasked, and that all the uncomfortable suspicions she has had about herself are coming true. Unable to hide the truth any longer, Esther realizes that she is “letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race” that she has been running for the past nineteen years (Plath 1966, p. 30). Feeling insecure and depressed due to her indecisiveness, a feeling of inadequacy comes over her during her observation of the UN meeting with Constantin (Plath 1966, p. 80). Realizing that the era of doing what she was good at, winning scholarships and prizes, is coming to an end, she continues her comparison to that of a horse, claiming that she feels like a “racehorse in a world without race-tracks” (ibid.). This can be explained as her feeling of running after something for so long that she has forgotten what she is running after.

Seeing her life branch out before her like a green fig-tree, she sees her future of possibilities (ibid.). The different figs hanging on the tree represents her different alternatives and aspirations in life, such as a husband and a happy home and children, a famous poet, a brilliant professor, an amazing editor, Europe, Africa and South America, her lovers, an Olympic lady crew champion, and many, many more (ibid.). Further, she sees herself sitting in the crotch of the fig-tree, starving to death because she cannot make up her mind as to which of the figs to choose (ibid.). She wants all of them, but realizes that choosing one would mean losing the rest. Unable to decide, the figs begin to wrinkle and go black, falling off the tree. It is her immobility and indecisiveness that leaves her sitting at its trunk, unable to choose. This supports Wagner-Martin’s (1986, p. 59) assumption of Esther’s struggle to make decisions that would also be relinquishing. Her insecurity regarding her future career and life is evident, and overwhelmed by her many options, she is left paralyzed. C. J. Smith (2010, p. 4) argues that the fig-tree passage proves Esther’s doubts of her “proper” place in society, and that she must choose before her many choices and opportunities “go bad”. Believing that it is impossible in her contemporary society to combine a professional career with homemaking Esther is left unable to choose (Wagner-Martin 1986, p. 59). Badia (2006, p. 133) understands Esther to be so overwhelmed by her choices in life that she fails to understand what the branches represents seen in a positive light. Drawing links between her last name, Greenwood, and how it may be seen in opposition to the once green fig-tree, her damaged self-image turns the once-green branches into rotten, dreadful fruits of choices that she is unable to make (Badia 2006, p. 133). The problem of Esther, is not that she does not possess opportunities or that she lacks interest in them. Her immobility is caused by her desire

of wanting what her culture tells her is impossible, namely two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time (Plath 1966, p. 98).

3.7 CONFINED TO THE “BELLE” JAR

The title of the book, *The Bell Jar*, can be understood as a metaphor for the imprisonment and separation Esther experiences in relation to finding her own room and identity in her contemporary society. A *bell jar* is in the Merriam-Webster dictionary defined as “a bell-shaped usually glass vessel designed to cover objects or to contain gases or a vacuum.” Aird (1973, p. 93) argues that the symbolic title “indicates the nature of the prose, which seeks to combine narrative immediacy with the creation of a more, subjective, internal world through the use of imagery of alienation and inadequacy”. The title then, represents this double meaning entailed in *The Bell Jar*.

Arguing that the title can serve as a symbol of women’s role in the 1950s in America, D’Elia (2003, n.p.) makes it clear that when the word "bell" is written as “belle”, it describes a woman in American culture who cherished to be a desired object of her husband. In the 1950s, the "belle" was supposed to happily embrace the expectancy of conformity, and be content in the role that was socially constructed and imposed on women (ibid.). Thinking about the title in these terms then, the bell jar becomes a transparent but sealed space in which the social expectancy of conformity is portrayed. Esther mentions the bell jar a few times throughout the narrative, and it appears to represent her madness, possibly originating in the societal expectancy of conformity. By claiming that wherever she was, she would “be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in [her] own sour air”, Esther insinuates that the isolation she experiences when performing an oppositional practice by rejecting the societal expectations circumscribed and confined all her relationships (Plath 1966, p. 196). Although Esther’s mental health improves throughout the narrative, she saw that “the bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above [her] head” (Plath 1966, p. 227). Esther’s mental health appears to improve when she rejects conforming to the expectations she is subjected, but she does not know if or when the bell jar “with its stifling distortions” will descend again (Plath 1966, p. 254).

This chapter has shown that Wagner-Martin (1986, pp. 56-57) was right when she claimed that *TBJ* has two primary themes: Esther Greenwood’s developing identity, or the lack of it, and her battle against patriarchy, especially in relation to the authority of older

people, and the authority of men. Since the identity Esther had constructed for herself prior to her time in New York City seems to be based in organized intellectual efforts and her own academic success, Esther's realization of her own shortcomings intellectually is evident when she experiences the stress of Jay Cee's questioning, and her insecurity regarding her future career becomes evident (Aird 1973, p. 91). In New York City, Esther is expected to construct her identity as a woman based on her external appearance, following the feminine etiquette and by living up to the social expectations she is subjected to. In addition, Esther's intellectual confidence seems to be diminished when she learns that she was rejected from the summer creative writing course and this seems to trigger the decline of her mental health, and she becomes unable to read or write – the crucial skills she is dependent on in order to follow her dreams of becoming a writer (Plath 1966, p. 125). The identity and confidence she had found in her previous academic success quickly fades. While struggling to construct her own identity, Esther looks to the women around her, something that leaves her feeling even more alienated and deficient as her shortcomings and rejection of these becomes evident.

Not wanting to conform to just one lifestyle, Esther is left wanting to combine several of them, a notion that is not accepted, nor seen as possible in her contemporary society (Wagner-Martin 1986, p. 59). Her own ambitions, her mental illness and the societal constraints is circumscribing her, and she is left immobile and passive. Throughout the narrative, Esther appears to experience an inner conflict, since she does not want to conform to the set expectations she is subjected to, but instead she breaks with these and chooses to go her own way. Because she knows that she is different from the women in her contemporary society who willingly conform and follow the social conventions, Esther feels lonely, misunderstood, alienated and divergent. This leaves her flustered and insecure as to who she is, something that has been discussed and exemplifies in relation to the narrative of the novel.

Esther is perceived as an outsider both by herself and by her contemporary society, but at the same time it is in that society that she must find her identity. Her quest for her own room, and the construction of her identity becomes overwhelming when she feels trapped between the bell jar and the expectancy of conformity that her contemporary society subjects her to. By breaking with both the feminine etiquette and the expectancy of conformity, Esther appears to oppose the expectations disclosed in gender roles prevalent in America in the 1950s. Aird (1973, p. 92) argues that the gap Esther experiences between the world she perceives as constructed and her own worldview from the bell jar is hard for her to rationalize and tolerate, and claims that Esther's challenge is to accept and live with her own worldview, while existing within a society in which she feels alienated. Regarding her own perception of

the authentic world, she must find her identity in the reality that she finds in the bell jar, and not in the attitudes of those outside of it (ibid.). In this, Esther can finally find out who she is, and she succeeds to do so by rejecting to exist in the room society has attempted to create for her.

The turning point of the difficulty Esther experiences in relation to her construction of her own identity as a woman appears to be after she had her diaphragm fitted, and is finally in control over her own sexuality (Plath 1966, p. 235). After her affair with Irwin, Esther's mental health seems to improve and her sexual debut occurs to be an important part of her recovery. Her opposition of the societal expectations of women's chastity appears to leave her empowered, as she defies these by taking control over her own sexuality and no longer letting herself be controlled by the societal conventions. She successfully makes a room for herself and finds freedom in her own sense of her identity as a woman, although this seemingly sends her mental sanity spiraling down the road of mental illness. This chapter has shown that Esther resists the social conventions in her contemporary society by performing an oppositional practice against them. By doing so, Esther provides a template in which we as readers can understand the struggles she experiences by living in a society in which she is told who she should be. Just as Friedan (2010, p. 59) urged women to rise and fight against the contemporary distorted image of reality, Esther is a prime example of a woman who does just this, and makes a new image of herself and her life, by opposing the expectancy of conformity.

CHAPTER 4: *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

Since this thesis seeks to investigate how the female characters of the respective novels struggle to construct their identity as women, the analysis of *HYS* will be undertaken with a particular focus on the character and narrative of Olanna. Olanna crosses traditional boundaries and breaks with many expectations she is subjected to in her contemporary society, on the quest of constructing her identity and reclaiming her independence. As mentioned in my first chapter, the female characters in the three respective novels are connected in that they are all struggling to construct their identities in societies saturated with male dominance. This is both true of Esther Greenwood, and of Olanna Ozobia, as this chapter will illustrate.

In the article “Focalisation and Polyvocality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*”, Aghogho Akpome (2013, p. 33) holds that *HYS* can be characterized as a *bildungsroman* because of Olanna’s “radical transformation”. This radical transformation is important for this thesis, as it points to her quest for independence and identity. What is more, even though there are three narrators in the novel, one could easily argue that Olanna’s role is crucial as the individual at the core of the narrative. She is also the one who links the characters together, and is what Jane Bryce refers to as the “dominant emotional ‘consciousness’ of the novel” (Bryce 2008, cited in Akpome 2013, p. 30).

As we have seen in the analysis of *TBJ*, Esther Greenwood, as part of her struggle to construct her identity as a woman, performs “oppositional” practices against the “expectancy of conformity” that women in her contemporary society are subjected to. Esther appears to feel confined in a patriarchal society, in which women are left passive and silenced. Additionally, she feels alienated since her own perception of herself diverges from the societal expectations she is subjected to. Her contemporary society presses upon her various ideas as to what she *should* want in life, but these ideas are conflicting with the desires of Esther. This leaves her both fragmented and insecure about her identity and aspirations in life. As a response, she acts in a rebellious manner, thus opposing the prevailing social expectations she is subjected to.

Olanna’s struggle of constructing her identity as a woman in her contemporary society can in many ways be seen in correlation with the struggles of Esther Greenwood. Just as Esther, Olanna finds herself in a patriarchal society, in which women are subjected to various expectations *because* they are women. However, Olanna’s advantage becomes evident in relation to her class. For Olanna, independence is within reach, as she is both willing and able

to go to the lengths acquired in order for her to construct her identity alone, and not in correlation to who she is to others. She is determined to reclaim her independence, and as the following chapter will show, she succeeds in constructing an identity for herself aided by her ability of taking control over her own life.

4.1 OLANNA OZOBIA AND HER CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

In order to investigate Olanna's struggles it is important to understand the social and cultural expectations that characterized Nigeria in the 1960s. In "Negotiating Power and Privilege: Career Igbo Women in Contemporary Nigeria", Philomina E. Okeke-Ihejirika (2004, p. 79) contends that marriage was considered to be the primary rite of passage into adulthood. She explains that the establishment of the proper marital status marks the first step in climbing the ladder of social expectations for women, and understands marriage as society's way of "shepherding its flock" (Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, pp, 13, 85). Marriage becomes an institution in which social stability is maintained, a means of social organization in which women are subordinated and designed the roles of mother and helpmate (Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, p. 11).

Safiya Muhammed contends that the Nigerian society perceive marriage to be much more of a commitment for women than it is for men (Muhammed 1985, cited in Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, p. 41). This also seems to be Adichie's (2014b, pp. 25, 28) understanding, as she claims that women are expected not only to aspire to marriage, but also to make their life choices while always keeping in mind that marriage is most important. Although Adichie's contentions are based on experiences in our time, it is likely that these notions were also true in the 1960s. Whether to marry or not is not a choice women are free to make, but an expectation placed on all women, as a life without marriage is seen as a personal failure and a sign of irresponsibility and thoughtlessness (Adichie 2014b, p. 29, Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, p. 41).

In order to secure marriage, it is rendered crucial for women both personally and socially. Okeke-Ihejirika (2004, p. 41) contends that unmarried women stand a risk of remaining excluded from many adult roles and attendant privileges, and that it hinders them from other forms of social success. The only way women can climb socially is by entering wedlock, which results in women belonging to the lower social class becoming particularly dependent on the institution of marriage. This is because education is a privilege only accessible for those who are benefitted in terms of their class and wealth. Unable to provide

for themselves due to the lack of education, marriage becomes a means of which women in the lower social class can survive and attain a life for themselves, by being provided for, both socially and financially.

In her article “Portrayal of the African Woman in *Half of a Yellow Sun*” in *Journal Research in Peace, Gender and Development*, Gloria Ajami Makokha examines the conditions that women endured, and the expectations they were subjected to, both before, during and after the Biafran War. In her article, she for instance writes that the women of the postcolonial Nigerian society were expected to become mothers as soon as they started living with a man (Makokha 2014, p. 114). Childlessness was looked down upon and considered sinful, as motherhood was what gave females an identity as real women (ibid.). Additionally, bearing boys was considered more significant than bearing girls, and the respect a mother received was based on the sex of their child (Makokha 2014, p. 115).

In relation to education, Makokha (2014, p. 114) explains that it has traditionally been considered a male’s dominion, and women in the postcolonial Nigeria were not supposed to attend universities and achieve higher education. Men were perceived as superior to women, and it was also feared that if educated, women would become aware of their rights and capabilities and reject subordination (ibid.). As the traditional belief was that women were inferior to men, older women would regard educated women as tarnished and “ruined” due to their education and ability to oppose the generational assumptions regarding their inferiority (ibid.). As far as the older women were concerned, they wanted submissive, uneducated women to marry their sons, and this was generally the preference of men looking for a wife to marry as well (ibid.). Adeola James contends that in the African society, traditional attitudes toward women have been preserved, even among educated women (James 1990, cited in Makokha 2014, p. 115). As women in Nigeria are expected to have children as soon as they marry, the knowledge attained from their education is not considered important. The general expectation subjected to them as women is that of raising children, taking care of the home and tending for their husband.

All of the above are themes that Adichie problematizes in *HYS*. Makokha argues that patriarchy was so interwoven in the African culture in the 1960s, that women were colonized in their minds – embracing patriarchy and willingly submitting as inferior to men (2014, p. 119). For Makokha (ibid.), such a colonization of the mind is still a problem and she urges African women to decolonize their mindsets, and reclaim their position as men’s counterparts and not as second class citizens. Realizing that their value is equal to that of men’s value is important in order for them to be able to construct their own identity as women.

Adichie (2014b, p. 25) explains that in Nigeria, feminism is generally regarded as a means of manipulation, and women may be advised to refrain from absorbing feminist ideas and concepts as it is perceived to challenge the traditional, cultural beliefs of women's inferiority. Since the African culture is very different from Western culture, it is generally perceived that African women have been omitted in matters of feminist causes. Beasley (1999, p. 104) argues that the critique of feminism is inattentive to race and ethnicity. He contends that feminists dealing with race/ethnicity point out that most issues faced by black/ethnic minority women are not readily comparable with those relevant to white women, since the relationship between the two is structured by racism (Beasley 1999, p. 109). Based on this, one may begin to understand the gravity of black women's struggle to survive and claim their rights in a society in which they are regarded as second-class citizens, and how the fight for women's rights in many ways have been left for themselves to fight, a fight characterized by societal resistance (Makokha 2014, p. 119).

Because black women are placed in such a problematic place in society, feminism is even more important in the African society than anywhere else. Adichie's narrative in *HYS* becomes therefore particularly important since it deals with this controversial and problematic topic. In order for women to regain their equal opportunities and decolonize their minds, women must become aware of the strains and suppression patriarchy causes. It is important to avoid the internalization of these ideas, as it leaves women unaware of their apparent inferiority in comparison to men, and leaves them passive. Adichie's narrative is particularly important in relation to the enlightenment that is conveyed through e.g. the transformation of Olanna, as she is able to oppose patriarchy due to the awareness of her capabilities.

4.2 CLASS, EDUCATION AND INDEPENDENCE

Born into a family belonging to the upper middle class, Olanna is privileged in her contemporary Nigerian society which is characterized by poverty and class distinctions. Her upbringing in the upper-middle-class with powerful and respected parents provides Olanna with the freedom of choice in many aspects of her life. This is particularly illustrated in relation to her ability to choose if she wants to aspire to marriage at all, and if so, who she wants to marry. In "Gender: Belonging to Yourself Alone", Gabriella Edelstein (2015, n.p.) contends that the only reason Olanna can take the matters of marriage into her own hands is because of her class. Adichie also shows us that it is largely because of her privileged

background and class that Olanna is able to take feminist standpoints in a society characterized by patriarchy and male dominance.

The importance of class is specifically portrayed in Odenigbo's mother's impression and condemnation of Olanna, as her disapproval of her appears to mainly be rooted in Olanna's upbringing in higher social class. Mama is unable to relate to the upbringing and opportunities Olanna has been given due to her own class, and because of this, she calls her an abnormal woman and a witch (Adichie 2014a, pp. 96-97). Her ignorance is due to her own uneducated and primitive background. Her way of life is already established and traditional values are internalized based in her lower social class, thus making her resistant to the possibility of change or of understanding other alternatives. As her worldview is closely integrated in her life, she opposes anything that clashes with her set ways of life.

Makokha (2014, p. 118) holds that older women disregarded educated women, and viewed them as threats against the system, and this is illustrated when Mama rejects Olanna because of her education. Further, Makokha (2014, p. 118) argues that Mama's ego had collapsed as a result of colonization, as formal education was brought to Nigeria by imperialism, and that she therefore saw it as transforming women into "disrespectful and tough-headed" women. Mama's background in the village provides her with the perception of education as introduced by "the white man", the same "white man" who brought with him Western values and colonized her homeland, values which are in breach with the traditional values she has internalized throughout her life (ibid.). As Mama perceives Olanna to have embraced the recent opportunity of education introduced by the "white man", Mama's perception of Olanna as an other may be understandable, as she is considered a threat when compared to Mama's status. As a consequence, Mama sees Olanna as unfit to live with her son (Makokha 2014, p. 115). Her concern of Odenigbo's happiness and freedom in choosing a wife is not of significant importance for Mama. Instead, she is more concerned with her son finding a submissive, uneducated woman who will make his life "easy" and uphold traditional values. She has internalized the perception of wives being subordinated and dependent on their husbands as natural. The solution to their difference can only be found in Mama's acceptance of Olanna as she is (Makokha 2014, p. 118).

Adichie also raises issues of class in relation to Olanna's cousin Arize, who encounters the same challenges as Mama. Belonging to a lower social class, Arize is aware of the importance of her own aspiration to marriage for her financial and social survival. Although she is fully aware of this, she is also aware that other women can in fact reject the set social expectations in relation to marriage. She realizes that her inability of rejecting the same

expectations as Olanna is due to her background in a lower social class. The importance of class can in this be seen to determine one's prospects in life, as well as the ability to promote feminist standpoints is illustrated in accordance with class and privileges.

This is illustrated when Arize asks Olanna if she is moving to Nsukka to marry Odenigbo (Adichie 2014a, p. 41). Olanna responds that she is not sure about marriage yet, but that she wants to be closer to him and that she wants to teach. Arize looks at her, admiring and bewildered: "Its only women that know too much Book like you who can say that, Sister. If people like me who don't know Book wait too long, we will expire" (ibid.). It becomes clear that Arize realizes that Olanna's freedom of choice is closely connected to her privileged background and education. For women belonging to the same social class as Arize, there are no options outside of marriage. Belonging to a lower social class, she is aware that aspiring to marriage is the most important mission she has in life, because it is the framework in which she can finally be regarded as a real woman, since it allows her to be reproductive. In comparison with Arize, one can understand Olanna's relative freedom to refuse marriage. Once again, the importance of class becomes evident, as the only reason Olanna is able to break with the expectations she is subjected to as a woman in her contemporary society is due to this.

The resentment and disapproval of Olanna's relationship to Odenigbo from her parents can also be explained with reference to social class. In the case of Odenigbo, his wealth, income and occupation are determined by his profession as a mathematics professor, and his village background signals that he was brought up in a lower social class. Her lack of concern regarding his social class may be explained due to the fact that Olanna's prospects of their relationship is not connected to the financial support he could provide her with, as she is self-reliant. By being indifferent to the social class of her potential husband, Olanna furthermore disassociates with her own class, and breaks with the social expectations.

Makokha (2014, p. 118) understands Olanna's move to Nsukka as important in her quest for independence, as it gives her a sense of freedom in making personal decisions for herself. By doing so, she breaks with the traditional notion of finding a husband, since it was culturally perceived as the parents' responsibility to find good husbands for their daughters. Okeke-Ihejirika (2004, p. 12) explains that in the Igbo-culture, parents' intervention in their children's marriage decisions are natural. Further, she contends that Igbo parents not only express great concern over the marriage of their children, but that they also want their children to marry as close as possible to home (ibid.). This is possibly also some of the reason

why Olanna's mother keeps suggesting potential husbands for her (Adichie 2014a, p. 34).

Olanna is hesitant towards marrying Odenigbo, though:

Each time he suggested they get married, she said no. They were too happy, precariously so, and she wanted to guard that bond; she feared that marriage would flatten it into a prosaic relationship

(Adichie 2014a, p. 52)

Olanna's attitude towards marriage is in many ways comparable with the attitudes of Esther Greenwood. Just like Esther, Olanna resents the expectations subjected to women in marriage, and is fearful of the loss of her independence. In a way, they both resist entering marriage because of its construction as a social institution leaving women passive and unable to lead their own lives and follow their dreams. Olanna and Esther are strong females who want to obtain their independence and refrain from letting themselves be defined in relation to men and social conventions.

Through her struggle to construct her identity apart from others, one can understand that Olanna wants to avoid being subordinated and defined within the frames of marriage. Instead of being concerned with how she can be provided with financial and social security, Olanna is interested in the emotional fulfillment her relationship can provide her with and her own independence. The choice of choosing whether to marry or not is a luxury that very few women her in contemporary society possessed, and is an opportunity provided by her class.

At the same time she is clearly privileged, Olanna is not concerned with her class, and in many ways, she seems to distance herself from it. As she outruns her class, she appears to realize the injustice women in a lower social class experiences, e.g. in being incapable of reclaiming their independence in the way she is able to. This is illustrated when Olanna visits Amala and the baby at the hospital. She appears to experience an epiphany and realizes that she is not the victim in Odenigbo's affair. She suddenly sees Amala as "a plain village girl curled up on the bed as if she were cringing from one more furious blow from life" (Adichie 2014a, p. 250). Thinking about Amala's unvoiced feelings, Olanna considers her a victim of patriarchy and the social hierarchy. This comprises yet an example of how strongly class affects the lives of individuals. In the interview "Between the Lines: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with Zadie Smith", Adichie explains that she has always been interested in how class affects not just the way we deal with the world, but also how the world deals with us (Schomburg Center 2014, n.p.). Amala does not have a choice, nor a voice in her contemporary society, and can therefore not express her will to Mama or Odenigbo, due to her inferior class (Adichie 2014a, p. 250). Amala lacks the ability to reject both Mama and

Odenigbo, making apparent the worldview constructed in relation to a lower social class and how the world deals with her. In Amala's contemporary society, girls and women belonging to a lower social class often became a commodity for those belonging to a higher social class (Makokha 2014, p. 119). This is the reason why she is forced into accepting the furious blows the world provides her with. Her obliviousness in relation to her own worth and freedom is revealed in her passivity, as she apparently accepts the role she is given. Her class robs her of her independence and identity, leaving her silenced and dominated. Olanna's realization of Amala's innocence, however, provides her with maturation and growth when she recognizes that Amala is merely a product of the same society that subjects her to expectations against her own will.

4.3 BEAUTIFUL AND INDEPENDENT?

Another important feminist topic raised by Adichie is that of beauty. Olanna's beauty appears to comprise an obstacle in her quest for independence. This is mentioned numerous times throughout the story, and is particularly exemplified through the courting she experiences after leaving Odenigbo, both from single men stopping by her flat, and from married ones who bump into her outside her apartment (Adichie 2014a, p. 228). Further, Miss Adebayo tells Olanna she is illogically pretty, and although Olanna tells her that she takes that as a compliment, she is secretly offended by her remark (Adichie 2014a, pp. 49, 52). Miss Adebayo's comment of her illogical beauty is not further described in the text, but it may be explained by the fact that she apparently does not possess the typical Igbo features. In his article "History of An African People: Igbo people of Nigeria; JEWS OF AFRICA", Leonard Madu (n.d, n.p.) explains that the Igbo's were a despised people, and this can explain the negative connotations attached to the typical Igbo features and characteristics. Olanna's lack of these features becomes evident in the conversation she has with the man seated next to her on the plane returning to Nsukka after visiting her aunt in Kano (Adichie 2014a, p. 227).

Another possible explanation of Miss Adebayo's comment may be in relation to the predilection of the Western beauty ideals. Jha (2016, p. 33) explains that dominant beauty standards in the US position black women as inferior in terms of beauty. Olanna is Nigerian and does not possess these features, so her beauty may be "illogical" when compared to what many associates as the "norm" of beauty. We have seen that Wolf (1991, p. 12) considers the beauty myth to deal with beauty ideals as a "gold standard", which means that women are

robbed of their power to define themselves, and in some ways, this is what Olanna experiences when she is told that her beauty is “illogical”.

In this regard, it is interesting to note the connection between beauty and identity. Women feel expected to look a certain way in order to be considered feminine. This shows us that the social standards and expectations of beauty affect women and is closely related to their construction of identity. If the standards of beauty are grounded in the Western ideals of the white “Barbie”, black women are left powerless and are incapable of attaining the certain traits necessary in order to be regarded as beautiful. They become victims of a double bind, in which they are both unable to adhere to the beauty ideals, and unable to change their race. This leaves them in an awkward position, as they will never be “good enough” in terms of the Western beauty ideal. As beauty becomes a means in which women’s identity and worth becomes based upon, women who lack these specific traits may feel insecure or as failures as their affirmation becomes based on their physical appearance alone.

Although the beauty myth is capable of robbing women who do not possess certain feminine traits of their power to define themselves, it seems that Olanna struggles to construct her identity as a woman *because* of her beauty. In many ways, her beauty is what defines her. It seems that she has had to struggle to mediate her intellectual abilities, as they were not considered essential due to her physical appearance. She feels undermined and not taken seriously due to her beauty, which means that her external appearance becomes something she must challenge in order to succeed in creating an identity for herself more than just being beautiful. While Esther Greenwood appears to lack the certain feminine traits her society expects in relation to femininity, leading her to ground her identity in academic achievements, Olanna struggles to overcome her beauty so that her intellectual abilities may also define her. Olanna’s lacking confidence and struggle in constructing her identity as a woman may be explained by the objectification she experiences because of her beauty, as her internal qualities, skills and education are somewhat neglected due to her external appearance.

Objectification and Wolf’s ideas on beauty ideals as a means to suppress women are two techniques used to uphold patriarchy in order to keep women locked in institutions. *Objectification* is according to the OED (2006) “the action of degrading someone to the status of a mere object”. Objectification refers to the gaze that examines women, turns them into objects and gives them value accordingly. Just as the beauty myth is a violent backlash against feminism, one can understand objectification in the same terms, as images of women are used as a political weapon against women’s advancement (Wolf, 1991, p. 10). Wolf (1991, pp. 245-246) argues that images that objectify or eroticize the degradation of women

have arisen to counterbalance their recent self-assertion, and that it keeps them apart wherever the restraints of religion, law and economics have grown too weak to continue their work of sustaining the sex war. Another aspect of objectification that is worth noting is women's appropriation of it. Wolf (1991, pp. 266-267, 249) contends that strong cultural influence positions women outside their bodies to look at both themselves and other women as sexual objects, stirring in them an urge to become objects.

The internalized effect of objectification in Adichie's novel is illustrated best through Mrs. Ozobia. She is beautiful just like Olanna, and has presumably been objectified throughout her life. Olanna experiences the strains of objectification first hand when her father uses her as a means of bribery in order to get a better deal with Chief Okonji (Adichie 2014a, p. 34). Makokha (2014, p. 114) explains their notion of attempting to convince Olanna to prostitute herself for tenders from the businessmen her father negotiated with as an example of public patriarchy. Kandiyoti cites Sylvia Walby who explains that private patriarchy is "based on the relative exclusion of women from arenas of social life other than the household and the appropriation of their services by individual patriarchs within the confines of the home" (Kandiyoti, 1993 cited in Makokha 2014, p. 114). Walby understands women not as excluded from the public arena, but subordinated within it (*ibid.*). As Mr. Ozobia attempts to impose a man on her, exchanging her for money and tenders, Makokha (2014, p. 114) understands this as a means of public patriarchy. Olanna's mother does protect her, nor does she stand up for her, but helps Mr. Ozobia with the arrangements instead. By doing so, she appears to have succumbed to this view and accepted it.

The way in which her beauty affects how she is treated as a sexual object is further exemplified as Chief Okonji tries to make a move:

He pulled her to him, and for a while, Olanna did nothing, her body limp against his. She was used to this, being grabbed by men who walked around in a cloud of cologne-drenched entitlement, with the presumption that, because they were powerful and found her beautiful, they belonged together

(Adichie 2014a, p. 33)

When Chief Okonji tries to force himself onto her, Olanna tells him to stop before walking away from him (*ibid.*). Her rejection of being objectified is evident as she stands up for herself, and in this, Olanna opposes the cultural notion of women as submissive and as sexual objects, and at the same time, she opposes her parents who evidently set her up for it. Her rejection of objectification is further exemplified when she defends herself against sexual

harassment from one of the soldiers when they are returning to Nsukka after the war, and as she resents the romantic attention she receives after moving out of Odenigbo's house (2014a, pp. 417, 228).

4.4 INDEPENDENCE AND IDENTITY

Cobley (2014, p. 258) argues that identity is closely connected to the feeling of belonging, and Olanna appears confused as to where she belongs, a notion which may explain her lack of a sense of self. In one way, she wants to dissociate herself from her family and their way of life and be with Odenigbo, but simultaneously she does not want to be dependent on him. Her notion of disassociating from her family is displayed as she rejects their attempts of setting her up with their powerful contacts, and moves to Nsukka to be with Odenigbo. When her dependency on Odenigbo is in question, however, it quickly becomes clear that she is reliant on him in many ways.

Olanna leaves her own life in Lagos to live with Odenigbo and adjust to his way of life in Nsukka. Olanna moves in with him, and although he is going away the next day, she decides to stay in his house because she wants to “make peace with her fears of his absence” (Adichie 2014a, p. 47). This indicates her dependency on him, as she is fearful without his presence, a notion which displays her struggle of making a room for herself and constructing her own identity apart from it mainly being based on who she is in relation to Odenigbo.

When Odenigbo comes to her flat after Olanna leaves the house due to Mama's yelling, her dependence becomes particularly evident when she wishes she could walk away from him:

Then she wished, more rationally, that she could love him without needing him. Need gave him power without his trying; need was the choicelessness she often felt around him

(Adichie 2014a, p. 101)

The realization of her emotional dependency on Odenigbo is conveyed by her feeling of choicelessness. As she recognizes her need for him, she appears to feel the need to protect her independence. Olanna appears to want to make a statement in relation to her own independence, but her dependence on Odenigbo seems obvious to me as a reader. Simultaneously as she attempts to break from Odenigbo, she longs for *him* to need her, and to be dependent upon *her*. This is illustrated as she wishes he would ask her to come back to his

house just before she tells him to get lost (Adichie 2014a, p. 101). Additionally, she visits Odenigbo's house to pick up her things after she moved out, and is disappointed when Ugwu tells her that things are as normal at the house. What she had "wanted to hear, was that Odenigbo could no longer bear to live the life that had been theirs" (Adichie 2014a, p. 228). These examples illustrate the conflicting feelings of Olanna in relation to her independence.

While attempting to become emotionally independent, Olanna crosses social boundaries by revealing her anger. When Odenigbo trivializes the whole incident of Mama's great blow, Olanna is overwhelmed by anger, and rejects being belittled by Odenigbo (Adichie 2014a, p. 102). Claiming that it is her right to be upset, she is determined "not to brush her humiliation aside in the name of an overexalted intellectualism" (ibid.). By revealing her anger, Olanna rebels against the prevailing expectations pressed upon women, who were expected to be submissive, naïve and accepting. Adichie (2014b, p. 22) contends that in the Nigerian culture, women are not supposed to express their anger, because it is threatening. Many women are raised to believe that the trait of being "likeable" does not include showing anger, being aggressive or disagreeing too loudly (Adichie 2014b, p. 24).

As Olanna continues her quest for independence, she decides to go to Kano to clear her head. Her aunt Ifeka advises her to "never behave as if your life belongs to a man. Do you hear me? Your life belongs to you, and you alone, sosogi" (Adichie 2014a, p. 226). Aunt Ifeka's acute advice appears to urge Olanna to stand up for herself, and regain control over her life. On the one hand, it is clear that Olanna is emotionally dependent upon Odenigbo, and wants to be with him, but on the other hand, she seems to want to take her aunt Ifeka's piece of advice into consideration by not giving him the power entailed in her dependency, and in letting her happiness rest on him alone. In an attempt to regain her independence, she can be perceived to explore her own identity apart for letting herself be defined in relation to someone else. The change in Olanna becomes particularly compelling when she travels back to Nsukka. Seated next to a handsome, wealthy man, Olanna experiences a feeling of possibility through his insulting prejudice against the Igbo people:

She did not have to be the wounded woman whose man had slept with a village girl. She could be a Fulani woman on a plane deriding Igbo people with a good looking stranger. She could be a woman taking charge of her own life. She could be anything

(Adichie 2014a, pp. 227-228)

This incident enhances the presumption that Olanna has decided to take charge of her own life, not allowing herself to be restricted or dependent upon anyone else in constructing her

identity or allowing herself to be happy. Strengthened by her aunt's advice, there appears to be a change in her attitude as she continues her quest of reclaiming her independence.

Although Olanna attempts to free herself from her dependence on others, she simultaneously appears concerned with their affirmation. This becomes evident as she struggles to reveal her true emotions. She develops a habit of presenting herself as if everything is fine, although her life appears to crumble. The betrayal she feels after learning about Odenigbo's affair with Mama's maid Amala is hard for her to handle, although she is working through the motions of allowing herself to be happy despite his transgression. This is illustrated as Olanna struggles with the idea of things becoming how they used to be between her and Odenigbo (Adichie 2014a, p. 228). This is the reason for her resentment of the courting and romantic attention she receives from other men after their breakup, because they assumed that their relationship was permanently over. Olanna tells them that she is not interested, while hoping it would not get back to Odenigbo. She wants to seem fine, independent and strong, and not as if she is pining (Adichie 2014a, pp. 228-229). However, Olanna seems to fail in her attempt of regaining her independence, since she is so obsessed with maintaining her façade in order to seem fine.

After learning that Odenigbo's infidelity with Amala had impregnated her, and Olanna is heartbroken, and her façade can be perceived to become the means through which she can cope with her emotions. This is illustrated when she runs into Richard at the store and invites him to her flat. She decides that she would be her "normal, gracious self", motivated by the thought that Richard then would go back and tell "Odenigbo that she was fine. She *was* fine" (Adichie's emphasis 2014a, p. 233). This is done so that Odenigbo would not find out how she grappled with his misdeeds. Once again, her need to be perceived as strong and independent outpaces her honesty, both in relation to herself and to others.

Adichie (2014b, p. 32) provides us with interesting insight on the topic of shame in the Nigerian society. She contends that girls are taught shame from birth, as if they are already guilty of something because they were born female. The result, she claims, is women who cannot say that they have desires, who silence themselves, who cannot say what they are thinking, resulting in pretense being turned into an art form (ibid.). Due to her upbringing in a society which teaches women to silence themselves and not speak their mind, Olanna's need of maintaining a façade may be understood, as pretense apparently permeates the African culture.

Grief-stricken after learning that Odenigbo is having a baby with the girl he slept with,

Edna asks Olanna “What the hell is wrong with [her]?” (Adichie 2014a, p. 232). Olanna is baffled at her question, and Edna continues:

Look at you. You’re the kindest person I know. Look how beautiful you are. Why do you need so much outside of yourself? Why isn’t what you *are* enough? You’re so damned weak!

(Adichie 2014a, p. 232)

Edna recognizes Olanna’s dependence on Odenigbo, and wants her to realize her own worth apart from him. In her mind, however, her whole life and her happiness are still dependent on Odenigbo and the sense of fulfillment he is able to provide her with. Although her grief is both understandable and justifiable, Edna wants Olanna to rise above it, become aware of her own worth, and stop looking to others in order to be content. Based on Olanna’s response to Edna’s advice, it is evident that she has not yet succeeded in reclaiming her independence and constructing an identity for herself apart from Odenigbo.

While striving to construct an independent identity, it becomes clear that she struggles with being honest with both herself and others, and share her hardships out of fear of being unmasked or perceived as weak. It appears that Olanna wants everyone to perceive her as strong and independent, although the reader may quickly disregard her as such, perceiving her as flustered and insecure throughout the narrative. She appears to struggle to construct an identity of her own, as she both longs to be independent and for someone to lean on. This is illustrated as she wishes that “there was someone she could lean against, and then she wished she was different, the sort of person who did not need to lean on others” (Adichie 2014a, p. 103). This sums up her conflicting emotions, and shows how Olanna struggles to find the balance between showing strength and independence and weakness and codependency.

4.5 OLANNA'S INDEPENDENCE IN TERMS OF MARRIAGE, SEXUALITY AND AFFIRMATION

When Olanna talks to her mother about having children, and tells her that she has never felt that “fabled female longing to give birth”, her mother calls her abnormal (Adichie 2014a, p. 104). Childlessness is considered a sin in Nigeria, and the greatest challenge any married Igbo woman can face is the inability to bear children for her husband (Makokha 2014, p. 114, Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, p. 85). It is expected that married couples have children as soon as marriage has been constituted, and other aspects of marriage are supposed to revolve around their children (Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, p. 85). Although Olanna had not envisioned herself becoming a mother, she now knows that she wants to have Odenigbo's child (Adichie 2014a, p. 104). “The longing in the lower part of her belly was sudden and searing and new. She wanted the solid weight of a child, his child, in her body” (ibid.).

Although Olanna is inconsolable by Odenigbo's infidelity, she is even more distraught when learning that Amala is pregnant. This might be explained in relation to their own attempts of conceiving a child, and when this does not happen, Olanna is concerned that she might be infertile (Adichie 2014a, p. 107). After learning that Amala conceives Odenigbo's child after only having sex once can be understood to intensify Olanna's feeling of guilt and fear of not being able to have her own children. Her feeling of inadequacy by not conceiving is illustrated when Olanna stands in front of the mirror squeezing her belly with both hands. “The pain reminded her of how useless she was: reminded her that a child nestled now in a stranger's body instead of in hers” (Adichie 2014a, p. 232). Thinking about the importance of having children and her infertility in terms of her contemporary society, one can understand how she feels like a failure, as it is through childbirth that women receive their identity as women (Makokha 2014, p. 114).

The sexual aspect of Olanna and Odenigbo's relationship appears to be of great importance for their intimacy, and she is confused when he rejects her initiative of lovemaking, because he's too tired (Adichie 2014a, p. 332). Olanna seems to be dependent on their intimacy, and even more so through hard times. Makokha (2014, p. 199) agrees, stating that “whenever Olanna was distressed, she always found her comfort through a sexual encounter with Odenigbo”. This is particularly exemplified after Olanna becomes lame after returning from Kano due to the horrific events she witnessed. Although she is very sick, she wants Odenigbo to touch her breasts (Adichie 2014a, p. 160).

Sexual intimacy appears to be a means of reconciliation between Olanna and Odenigbo, as there are several instances where sex resolves their disagreements and quarrels. This is illustrated when they end up in bed together after Olanna learns about Amala's pregnancy (Adichie 2014a, p. 242). Through this reunion, one can assume that Olanna takes her aunt Ifeka's advice of taking her life and happiness into her own hands. In her act of allowing their intimacy to be reestablished, Olanna can be perceived to make peace with Odenigbo. Makokha (2014, p. 118) agrees, and understands this incident to show that Olanna excuses Odenigbo's "betrayal and transforms it into the basis for increased intimacy instead of disruption, reversing therefore the patriarchy's dynamic".

Their sexual intimacy reflects their romantic relationship, which is characterized by their love and free choice of being together. In their contemporary society, marriages are not established with emotional fulfillment in mind, but rather with focus on financial security and social acceptance (Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, p.11). Because their contemporary society is characterized by patriarchy, women are viewed as a sexual object rather than participators, and the general assumption is that they are commodities for the satisfaction of men. The societal notion of women's sexuality appears according to Adichie (2014b, p. 30) to be obsolete, as she thinks about how African girls are taught that they cannot be sexual being in the way boys are. Based on this, one can claim that Nigerian women in many ways do not own their sexuality. Okeke-Ihejirika (2004, p. 14) explains that in most parts of Nigeria, women's sexuality is strongly tied to reproduction and since the society is characterized by patriarchy, women are neither expected to initiate lovemaking nor use it as a means of their own enjoyment.

Additionally, the fact that lovemaking becomes a source of enjoyment for Olanna may be explained by the independence she shows in choosing to be with Odenigbo instead of merely accepting to marry someone else due to the prevailing societal expectations (e.g her parent's suggestions of potential husbands). Olanna breaks with these expectations and conventions, and is generally the one who initiates lovemaking, wanting to have sex for her own enjoyment. In this, Olanna turns the traditional roles within relationships, as she is the one who acts on her sexuality, a notion which was primarily designated to men. This notion can be linked to the reclamation of her independence as she constructs an independent identity for herself, in which she performs a sense of authority.

Olanna's sexual affair with Richard enhances how her sexuality is connected to her independence. This act seemingly provides Olanna with a defining moment, and gives her a sense of self-worth and self-dependency. Makokha (2014, p. 118) agrees, and suggests that

Olanna's affair with Richard was an act through which she discovered her self-worth. Olanna decides to reverse the roles when she has an affair with Richard, in which she jeopardizes her relationship with Odenigbo (Adichie 2014a, p. 233). The result of her infidelity could lead to his rejection of her and the end of their relationship, but Olanna appears prepared to take the possible consequences. If Odenigbo could be unfaithful and still expect Olanna to stay with him, her affair with Richard may be grounded in her testing his boundaries as well, to see if he would forgive her and give her a new chance. Feeling that her affair with Richard provides her relationship with Odenigbo with "evenness", she is satisfied since they would finally be on equal terms in what they brought into their relationship (Adichie 2014a, p. 245). Due to the general presumption in her contemporary society which said that women are men's commodities, Olanna can be seen to challenge the expectation of women accepting whatever choices their men may make (Makokha 2014, p. 119).

Olanna wants Odenigbo to know that her affair was not done as some kind of revenge, but that the selfishness of her act had liberated her (Adichie 2014a, p. 244). She appears to feel better about Odenigbo's betrayal as well as about herself after her own infidelity. In this, she makes him aware that her life and happiness does not rest on him alone, a notion that will possibly make him more careful in the future, as he realizes that her dependence was not on him alone (Adichie 2014a, p. 245). Since they both had been unfaithful, she feels that their relationship is now on different terms (*ibid.*). In a way, she can be perceived to reclaim her independence through this act, as she practically illustrates her sexual and emotional independence to Odenigbo.

We have seen that Olanna Ozobia and Esther Greenwood share similarities when it comes to their sexuality. They both find themselves in societies in which their sexuality is expected to be confined within the frames of wedlock, and as a means of reproduction. Longing to break from these for their own pleasure, they both practice their sexuality out of lust and physical enjoyment, and break with the conventions of their respective societies. Their sexuality becomes a means in which they can take the matters of their identity into their own hands, and this may explain why they both are so captivated by dominating it, as it becomes an instrument in which their position as women is no longer subject to subordination and dependency. By rejecting to be objectified and defined as inferior to men, they exercise their sexuality freely.

Although Olanna uses her sexuality as a means of independence, it appears that she still struggles to be independent in a general way. This is particularly illustrated in her need for affirmation, particularly her parents' affirmation. Kainene asks Olanna why she has always

wanted to please their parents so much (Adichie 2014a, p. 389). Although Olanna comes across as independent to me as a reader in relation to her parents, it appears that she's generally had a tendency of succumbing to the expectations they subject her to. She responds that she did it because she felt sorry for them, and that her mother's disapproval made her want to apologize (ibid.). Children generally want to make their parents proud, and may be understood due to the formation of one's own independence as adults, as throughout one's early life, one have been fully dependent on one's parents.

Her desire to make her parents proud becomes particularly evident as she decides to talk to her father about his mistress on her mother's behalf, because that was "what [her mother] wanted" (Adichie 2014a, p. 217). After showing maturity and responsibility by talking to her father about his affair, Olanna feels an odd sense of accomplishment, thus making a difference. Olanna's need to please her parents may be fueled by her feeling of disappointing them in other areas of life, such as her move to Nsukka to be with Odenigbo and the rejection of their well-meant suggestions of potential husbands. Her parents', and particularly her mother's disappointment in Olanna may be explained due to the choices she has made which are in breach with the traditional values and norms her parents have internalized. She might view the opportunity of doing what her mother wants as a means of reconciliation due to her previous shortcomings in accepting their suggestions. She feels useful when she stands up for her mother, and in her talking to her father she can be perceived to oppose the contemporary norms entailed in patriarchy.

Striving towards the affirmation of her parents, Olanna can be perceived to attempt to regain their acceptance. Adichie (2014b, p. 24) addresses the issue of women's urge to feel accepted and liked, and argues that women in Nigeria "have been raised to believe that their being likeable is very important and that this 'likeable' trait is a specific thing". This can explain why it was so important for Olanna to feel affirmed. In terms of independence and identity, Olanna needs to free herself, or decolonize her mind from her mindset in which she is dependent on Odenigbo and her parents. In the same manner as Copley (2014, p. 258) understands identity to be connected to the feeling of belonging, we can understand Olanna's need for affirmation to be connected to her relationships in her formation of an identity. Since the feeling of belonging is closely connected to relying on others, relationships become important in the process of attaining an identity. In Olanna's case, she appears to have a twisted image of the mutuality of relationships, as she seems infatuated with others' approval, obliterating her own inclinations. This may indicate that Olanna has a lacking realization of her self-worth, leading her to pursue it in her relationships.

4.6 RECLAIMING HER INDEPENDENCE AND BECOMING HERSELF

As part of her quest to construct an independent identity, Olanna takes control over her life. In some ways, she can be perceived to allow herself to be happy by making choices based on her own desires. This is illustrated when she decides to keep Odenigbo's baby (nicknamed Baby) (Adichie 2014a, p. 251). Feeling right about it, she explains that it feels like something she had always wanted to do. Acting assertively as she independently decides to keep Baby, Odenigbo is surprised. The fact that it was important for her that Odenigbo did not see it as a favor to him, proves that she did it for her own sake (Adichie 2014a, p. 253). This might reveal yet another aspect of Olanna's attempt of reclaiming her independence in her relationship with Odenigbo. After all, she wants to have his child, but as they do not conceive, this might be her best option (Adichie 2014a, p. 104). She appears intent to shape her own life, and here she is presented with an opportunity in which she could change the life of an unwanted baby. Olanna's selfless love that is illustrated when she decides to adopt Baby may be explained in relation to her maturation and understanding of society's unfair play, as neither Mama nor Amala wanted to keep her because she is a girl. Olanna wants to have Odenigbo's child, and although it does not happen the way she envisioned it, she feels right about her decision. By doing so, she crosses traditional boundaries and breaks with the social expectations. Acting independently, Olanna chooses to become a mother, and in this she breaks with the general perception in Nigeria that it is the husbands who make decisions about having children and the size of their family (Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, p. 14). Furthermore, Olanna becomes a mother before marrying. Okeke-Ihejirika (2004, p. 15) explains that adoption has generally not been considered an option in the Igbo culture, so Olanna undoubtedly breaks with the contemporary norms and expectations. Although Olanna does not have her own biological children, she still becomes a mother for Baby, in which she gains her identity as a "real woman" as a mother, although it is done on her own terms and not in the way that is socially expected. This appears to be a crucial moment in the reclamation of Olanna's independence and in the construction of her personal identity.

Throughout *HYS*, Olanna experiences various valuable lessons that leads to her growth and maturation. Although Olanna's insecurities and self-doubt are made particularly evident in the beginning of the novel, it becomes clear her background and class enable her to break with many expectations she is subjected to. Due to her class, Olanna is not dependent on following the set societal expectations in order to provide a life for herself. This is illustrated in various ways, for instance by choosing to stay with Odenigbo despite his class, and by

refraining from marriage. Although marriage is considered the most important aspiration in life for women in the Nigerian society, Olanna does not embrace it, since she is not dependent on Odenigbo to provide her with financial security. It appears that she is more concerned with the emotional fulfillment of their relationship rather than financial security and social acceptance. Throughout her maturation and growth, Olanna's relationship to Odenigbo improves. Perhaps this is the key element, that Olanna is finally free to give and receive love in the same manner as Odenigbo, when they perceive themselves as equals. Olanna does not see herself as inferior or dependent on Odenigbo in the same way as she used to, and their relationship becomes characterized by their mutual dependence.

Her maturation and growth are particularly exemplified as she takes control over her sexuality and becomes the one who initiates lovemaking, taking on the expected role of the husband. Another example is her decision to adopt Baby in which she becomes a mother without being biologically connected to her child. Additionally, her appropriation of the role generally perceived to belong to the husband is portrayed when she finally decides to marry Odenigbo.

While Olanna is able to exceed and oppose these cultural expectations that very few women in her contemporary society could withstand, it is not only due to her privileged position. Her struggle of constructing an identity of her own as an independent woman comes about when she learns to take control over her own life and choose her battles. Just as Olanna decides to no longer let the war "dictate the terms of her life", she seems determined not to let what life gives her dictate her life either (Adichie 2014a, p. 280). Based on the examples above, it becomes clear that her ability to oppose the expectations she is subjected to is not only provided by her class, but also her brave and successful attempt of regaining her independence, in which she jeopardized both her relationship to Odenigbo and to her friends and family by breaking with contemporary conventions.

Reflecting on the transformation Olanna experiences throughout the story, I support Akpome's (2013, p. 33) claim that the transformation of Olanna is the key element of the story. Olanna becomes more confident in herself and her own abilities as she does what is required of her in order for her to construct her identity alone. She succeeds in constructing an independent identity by finding her true self and defining it apart from others. By refraining from marriage and bearing children, she clearly breaks with her contemporary society which is characterized by women's dependence on men, the institution of marriage and on reproduction. Additionally, she learns how to trust in herself, and not base her worth and sense of self in the affirmation of others alone.

CHAPTER 5: *WHITE TEETH*

In *WT*, we see Irie Ambrosia Jones embarking on a quest aimed towards understanding where she belongs. Esther, Olanna and Irie all struggle to make a room for themselves in their contemporary societies, but Irie is presented with different challenges because of her background as a second-generation immigrant in England in the 1990s. Just like Esther and Olanna, Irie is subjected to various expectations as to how she should look *because* she is a woman. However, in the case of Irie, the struggle of constructing her identity becomes particularly challenging due to her distinctive physical appearance provided by her Jamaican roots, as well as her lacking awareness of her familial background. In her article “Kinship, Affinity and Connectedness: Exploring the Role of Genealogy in Personal Lives” in *Sociology*, Anne-Marie Kramer explores the role of genealogy in personal lives in the UK. She introduces the term “identity-work”, and explains that ancestors are used as a means of establishing a sense of self in the present, by understanding where one comes from (Kramer 2011, p. 391). The topics of belonging and the awareness of one’s roots are interesting topics raised in *WT*, and because these are factors that affect how one perceives oneself and constructs one’s identity, the character of Irie becomes particularly interesting since she feels that she does not belong in her contemporary society, and additionally, she lacks the awareness of her familiar roots.

The novel is written by Zadie Smith and was published in 2000. Z. Smith and Irie share a similar personal background, as they are both born in England with an English father and a Jamaican mother. Z. Smith admits that her personal background affects her writing, and points out that “your roots come with baggage. And the baggage isn’t always fun” (Penguin Books Limited n.d., n.p.). Although the awareness of one’s roots and heritage is considered essential in terms of forming an identity, Z. Smith’s own diverse personal background has made her skeptical of the idea that simply knowing one’s roots can resolve the struggle for identity (*ibid.*). However, despite her beliefs of the inessentiality of knowing about one’s heritage, Z. Smith has chosen to rummage through that baggage to learn more about her heritage, and this is something that becomes important for Irie as well, as she is on the quest of constructing her identity as a woman in her contemporary society, and create a room for herself, both internally and externally (*ibid.*).

By writing about Irie Ambrosia Jones, a 15 year old, second-generation immigrant with Jamaican heritage who attempts to find her place in the British society, Z. Smith raises

her voice to address the struggles and challenges that may arise when geographical, historical and cultural borders are crossed. When separated from one's original roots and background, one may experience challenges that are difficult to comprehend for those who find themselves in the same society and culture as their ancestors. The topic of estrangement is an important aspect that Z. Smith sheds light to in her novel, and may serve both immigrants and natives to better understand the implications of such a separation.

In her article "Happy Multicultural Land? The Implications of an 'excess of belonging' in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*", Molly Thompson investigates how immigration to Britain is depicted in *WT*, and how it affects their feeling of belonging. She argues that *WT* marks a significant moment in Black British writing, and understands its unprecedented success and excessive media coverage to declare "a new era in the literary history of Great Britain" (Thompson 2005, p. 122). Further, she cites Kwame Dawes who argues that Z. Smith belongs to a generation of writers who are articulating "a new intervention: the Black British voice" (Dawes 1999, cited in Thompson 2005, p. 137). The "Black British voice", she claims, "negotiates a route between genealogical history, the history of colonization as well as the present cultural moment" (ibid.). By articulating "The Black British voice", Z. Smith writes in a way that is both relatable and recognizable particularly for people of mixed-race backgrounds, and by doing so, Z. Smith can be perceived to perform a political kind of "oppositional" practice. Because of her own mixed-race background and her personal experiences as a second-generation immigrant in England, one may claim that she is provided with the ability to reflect these in a significant way in her literature.

5.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING

As we have seen in the first chapter of this thesis, Cobley (2014, p. 258) points out that identity is closely connected to the feeling of belonging. The feeling of belonging is affected by who one defines oneself as in one's contemporary society, but it is also connected to one's familial roots, and factors such as ethnicity and nationality (Cobley 2014, p. 258). In her article "'History' and 'Root' in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*" in *The Journal of Academic Social Science Studies*, Seda Arikan discusses the importance of ancestry in the identity formation process, and she complies with Cobley's claim. She is convinced that one cannot acquire a healthy identity without being aware of one's personal history (2013, p. 1687). As we can see here, the importance of knowing one's familial country, nation, culture and history is crucial

in the process of forming an identity. These are crucial factors that affect one's feeling of belonging, and thus one's construction of an identity. Therefore, I find it appropriate to provide some theory that sheds light to the significance of the feeling of belonging, awareness of one's familial history and general ideas related to Britishness, because that is the culture in which Irie finds herself.

5.1.1 ENGLISHNESS, BRITISHNESS AND IMMIGRATION

In *WT*, we are dealing with the English society, which also brings up ideas of Britishness and Englishness. As both terms will be used deliberately throughout this chapter, I find it appropriate to distinguish between the two before moving further into this chapter. In his article "Englishness is a cultural identity", Paul Kingsnorth (2009, n.p.) argues that there exists a lot of confusion when it comes to the differences between Britishness and Englishness, and that this confusion may be explained by immigration and multiculturalism. In his article "A question of identity (II)", Stuart Hall (2000, n.p.) agrees and warns against the continuing consolidation between "Englishness" and "Britishness".

Kingsnorth (2009, n.p.) understands Englishness to be a cultural identity that binds people together by culture, history, language, homeland, and a shared sense of self. Further, he argues that one cannot say that Englishness is multicultural in itself, because a culture cannot be multicultural. He also explains that the reason for the exclusivity of the English identity is connected to the exclusivity of all identities, and that the key ingredient in becoming English is the internal inclination of wanting it, and if the desire is present, one's geographical background is irrelevant and one can still become English. Kingsnorth (2009, n.p.) understands Englishness to involve a commitment and a sense of belonging to a place, which means that being English according to him involves "seeing yourself as part of a historic nation, with specific cultural markers and traits, with a specific sense of itself and of its place in the world".

Britishness, however, is a trickier concept. Arikan (2013, p. 1682) discusses the topic of "Britishness" and argues that in the multi-ethnic and multicultural London, second generation children often experience conflicts in relation to their color, due to the racial code entailed in being British. Britain has always been, and still is a nation of nations, according to S. Hall (2000, n.p.), however, historically, the idea of Britishness has carried "largely unspoken racial connotations", meaning that the nation is usually imagined as white. Şebnem

Toplu agrees with S. Hall's claims, and explains that "[w]hiteness nowhere features as an explicit condition of being British, but it is widely understood that Englishness, and therefore by extension Britishness, is racially coded" (Toplu 2005, cited in Arikan 2005, p. 1682).

Based on Toplu's claim of immigrant families experiencing societal attitudes and resistance due to the belief that whiteness is connected to Britishness, one can understand how immigrants, and especially second-generation immigrants, may feel secluded from calling themselves British when they are not necessarily recognized as such. The reason why second-generation immigrants are more likely to feel secluded, is therefore grounded in the general assumption that Britishness is connected to whiteness, resulting in people of other skin colors being deprived of the right to consider themselves British. An interesting note provided by Arikan (2013, p. 1683), is that the historical aspect of England's former colonies have shaped the belief that immigrants from former colonies are still under the dominance of England. The consequence is a gap in which second-generation immigrants are not able to construct their identity as British, which may lead to a potential identity crisis because they are both excluded from their contemporary society while simultaneously lacking connections to their familial roots. This can lead to a feeling that they do not belong anywhere.

This is true for Irie. Irie has lived her whole life in England, and is half English, but it seems that it is not enough for her to consider herself as "one of them", although she is English by birth. Oyserman, Elmore and Smith (2012, p. 76) explains that in relation to the construction of identity in social contexts, identity is likely to be formed in relation to people's contemporary environment, and in relation to what matters to others. Since Irie has a Jamaican mother, she is not white, and since Britishness is connected to whiteness, Irie appears to feel that she does not belong in England. Based on this, we can understand Irie's lacking sense of belonging, since she finds herself in a society where she stands out in so many ways, and is in some ways not recognized.

5.2 THE ROOTS OF IRIE'S ROOTLESSNESS

We have seen that one's construction of an identity is closely connected to one's contemporary society and to what matters to others, but in addition to this, the awareness of one's roots are equally important. When thinking about the connection between knowing about one's roots and the formation of an identity, it is interesting to note that second-generation immigrants are often unaware of their family's historical roots (Arikan 2013, p. 1687). Irie is a second-generation immigrant, something that provides her with distance to her roots. Feeling that she does not belong in her contemporary society because she is neither recognized as British nor feels British, tracing her roots becomes an obsession for her. It appears that she hopes that once she is able to find out where she comes from, her problems of feeling disconnected from herself and her contemporary society will dissolve. In the following, I will provide theory that examines and explains the importance of knowing about one's familial roots, and I will investigate how Irie's background as a second-generation immigrant affects her sense of belonging, and also how the lacking awareness of her roots affects her.

In addition to the important role ancestors serves in relation "identity work", Kramer (2011, p. 393) explains that "individual identity remains firmly anchored to, and rooted within, kinship networks, and that kinship itself remains fascinating and central to personal lives". As we can see here, "identity-work" is crucial to the individual, but at the same time, it exceeds the individual, because it is part of a bigger context, namely family origins and history. It is clear that family history and one's roots are closely connected to the formation of an identity. Thompson (2005, p. 124) also connects roots and belonging because she is convinced that one cannot talk about *belonging* without thinking about familial origins and historical genealogies. Because many immigrants have had their personal and cultural identities eroded, she understands the tracing of their roots to be particularly important for their construction of an identity (ibid.).

Challenges connected to ideas of roots and belonging can furthermore be connected to colorism. J. Gupta understands colorism as "a systematic discrimination, in which dark-skinned people are seen as inferior, less beautiful, less competent, less intelligent, and less accomplished than light-skinned people" (Gupta 2012, cited in Jha 2016, p. 57). Ronald Hall understands colorism as "an internalization of psychologically damaging dominant Western beauty ideals by non-Western people and/or by people of color as a consequence of colonial domination" (Hall, R. n.d., cited in Jha 2016, p. 57). Jha believes that R. Hall's understanding

of colorism enhances the belief that fair-skin will provide people with “upward class mobility and structural assimilation into a better quality of life” (ibid.).

Further, Jha (2016, p. 57) makes a link between hybridization and “colorism”, and understands hybridization to present the problem of “colorism”. In *WT*, we are presented with the topic of hybridity through Irie, who is half English and half Jamaican (Arikan 2013, p. 1679). In his book *Location of Culture*, post-colonialist theorist Homi K. Bhabha (1994, p. 151) claims that hybridity is produced “through the strategy of disavowal” and “process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different – a mutation, a hybrid”. According to Bhabha (1994, p. 73), hybridity is an effect of colonial power, and he understands hybridity to be a third space in which hybrids are experiencing a split sense of self, or are removed from the norm. “The inbetween space”, Bhabha claims, “carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (ibid.)

Irie’s insecurities in relation to her body are largely provided by her hybridity, as can be seen in grandmother Hortense’s remark that: “[b]lack and white never come to no good. De Lord Jesus never meant us to mix it up” and “[w]hen you mix it up, nuttin’ good can come. It wasn’t *intended*” (Z. Smith’s emphasis 2000, p. 330). Because Irie is a hybrid, Hortense’s contentions that nothing good can come out of it is painful to read, as one can understand how this enhances her preexisting complexes. While Hortense adds that “you’re about de only good thing to come out of dat” one can understand how this incident fuels Irie’s embarrassment and insecurities due to her race, because she considers her mixed-race heritage to be a hindrance in her quest for belonging (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 330). One may think that Hortense would be of great help to Irie, and that she could learn how to appreciate her Jamaican heritage since she shares it with her grandmother Hortense. However, her grandmother’s response seems to do nothing but enhance and confirm Irie’s preexisting complexes and self-condemnation, as she hears her say that nothing good can ever come out of hybridity.

Because of her status, Irie is neither “this nor that”, not black nor white, and in many ways, she is removed from the norm of her contemporary society and marginalized because of this. If the white heterosexual middle-aged male is the norm, Irie is twice removed from it, because she is a colored woman. As we will see further into this chapter, Irie feels like a misfit in her contemporary society because she cannot see a reflection of herself in what she considers as “a gigantic mirror” that is England (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 230). Considering England as a giant mirror, one may suggest that this represents her feeling of everyone

looking the same (i.e. white), and that she stands out in so many ways because of her mixed-race heritage that there is no reflection of her. Her feeling of alienation is particularly compelling, because she feels that she stands out among everyone else. This is in accordance with Bhabha's (1994, p. 73) contentions that hybrids find themselves in a "inbetween space" or as removed from the norm, since it is clear that Irie's hybridity provides her with just that. As she appropriates the role of a stranger in her home country, the gravity of how her identity is on shaky ground is displayed as she lacks someone to identify with, and feels unrecognized in her own contemporary society.

Her lack of a reflection in her contemporary society is further illustrated when Irie's teacher reads Shakespeare's Sonnet 127 in class (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 235). Irie finally feels a string of hope when she thinks she sees "something like a reflection", and assumes that the poem speaks about a dark woman in England (ibid.). Enthusiastically she asks her teacher if the woman in Sonnet 127 is black. When her teacher denies this, and says that there weren't any "Afro-Carri-bee-yans in England at that time", her hope dissolves "and the reflection that Irie had glimpsed slunk back into the familiar darkness" (ibid.). In her article "Assimilation as the Norm" in *Hog Creek Review*, Beverly Steele (2015, n.p.) argues that this incident destroys Irie's confidence, and leaves her shameful over her mixed-race heritage. Since Irie already feels like a misfit in her contemporary society, it is likely that this incident confirms her preexisting feeling of not belonging in England.

S. Hall (2000, n.p.) admits that belonging is a tricky concept, since it requires both identification and recognition, and that the binding function of national identity only works if individuals can see themselves reflected in the culture. Because Irie is neither aware of her familial roots, identifies with the British, nor experiences recognition, one can understand her lacking feeling of belonging.

5.3 IRIE'S QUEST FOR ROOTS

Irie feels alienated, disparate and unrecognized in her contemporary society, and therefore, she embarks on a quest of retrieving information about her past in the hopes of it providing her with something she can belong to. Irie appears to be under the impression that once she succeeds in retrieving information about her ancestors and her familial roots, she will be provided with a solid ground upon which she can construct her identity. This is supported by Kramer (2011, p. 386), who claims that finding one's connection to one's roots brings certainty of meaningfulness in the future.

5.3.1 IRIE'S QUEST FOR HOME

Irie appears to be on a quest of belonging, and finding her ultimate *home*. The possibility of feeling at “home” in this multicultural world is particularly unlikely for second-generation immigrants (Thompson 2005, p. 122). Previous generations of migrants have been able to “maintain a strong identification and connection to 'home', but for the following generations, definitions of 'home' becomes less distinct” (ibid.). This results in a problematic relationship with their racial identities, in which they often have to straddle two different, conflicting cultures (ibid.). Because Irie so desperately attempts to find out where she belongs and is unable to feel belonging in her contemporary society, she turns to her Jamaican roots with the hopes of it providing her with what she longs for.

Since we are dealing with the concept of *home*, I find it appropriate to elaborate on this before moving on. According to the OED (2006), *home* is “the place where someone lives, or a place where something flourishes or from which it originated”. In their book *Stories of Home*, Devika Chawla and Stacy Holman Jones explore ideas about home and how it affects us as people. They cite Carole Després who explains that “[h]ome has historically been viewed as a multidimensional theoretical concept that can have contradictory meaning and interpretations – home may be understood as spaces, places, feelings, practices, and active states of being in the world” (Després 1991, cited in Chawla & Jones 2015, p. xi). Chawla and Jones (2015, p. xi) explain that “home is both in the heart and in a place”, meaning that home is not only connected to location, geography and landscape, but also to affect, emotion and feeling. This means that “home” is also a space of the imagination, in which “it offers freedom and control, creativity and regeneration, and intimacy and closeness”

(Chawla & Jones 2015, p. xiii). As we can see from these definitions, defining home is a complex task, because it carries heavy individual connotations. Although home often is referred to as “haven” or “where the heart is”, Dorinne Kondo finds this connection problematic, because it can evoke a “nostalgia for a past golden age that never was” (Kondo 1996, cited in Chawla & Jones 2015, p. xiii).

Kondo’s contentions about home eliciting a nostalgia or yearning for a time that never existed become particularly compelling when considering Irie’s desperation for her familial roots. Although she knows that her mother has her origins in Jamaica, she knows nothing about it. Additionally, Irie struggles to get her hands on information about it because her parents are very secretive and reticent about it (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 326). She perceives her parents as damaged people, “full of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear. But she didn’t want it anymore, she was tired of it. She was sick of never getting the whole truth” (ibid.). She is tired of the “Jones/Bowden gift for secret histories, stories you never got told, history you never entirely uncovered, rumor you never unraveled” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 325).

As a result, Irie decides to stay with her grandmother Hortense for a while. Thompson (2005, p. 132) understands Irie’s move to her grandmother to represent a metaphorical journey to her original homeland, Jamaica. Unfortunately, Hortense shares the same attitude about their Jamaican heritage as her parents, so Irie decides to take the matters of her family’s history into her own hands. By going through Hortense’s old things, she finds that “[i]n cupboards and neglected drawers and in grimy frames were the secrets that had been hoarded for so long” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 342). Captain Charlie Durham was her grandfather, a “no-good djam fool bwoy” Englishman, according to Clara (Smith, Z. 2000, pp. 305-306). When Irie finds his picture, she is aroused by her natural curiosity and she hopes that he can “tell someone or another a thing or two about something. Maybe Irie herself. Just in case, she kept him under her pillow” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 343). Although the awareness of one’s familial roots is important for one’s sense of self, Irie overestimates it by thinking that his picture will literally be able to talk to her. In addition to this, her desperation is also displayed when she starts to store whatever she finds under the sofa, “so that as if by osmosis the richness of them would pass through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 343). Both of these examples shows that Irie attempts to ground her belonging in the past in an unrealistic way. The past is, like it is for all of us, unavailable and unattainable, but it appears that Irie does not realize this. She seems to be asking the wrong questions, since she

thinks that what she finds of clues will provide her with belonging, and because the past neither can be reconstructed nor brought into the future.

To Irie, Jamaica appears like a paradise, a well-wooded and watered place where “things simply *were*” (Z. Smith’s emphasis 2000, p. 345). Irie longs for a place where she does not have to worry about conforming to certain ideals and reconstruct herself in order to feel a sense of belonging. Her life in England is characterized by her continuous quest for change, and she appears to long for a place in which she can just be. Therefore, Jamaica becomes a place in which she constructs her ideal home, a place in which she belongs as she is. In agreement with Kondo’s claim of the problematic connotations viewing home as “haven” elicit, we can see how a longing for a time and place that never existed is generated in Irie (Kondo 1996, cited in Chawla & Jones 2015 p. xiii). Irie imagines her home to be a place that does not exist. This is further illustrated when Irie identifies with “Columbus himself, just by discovering it she had brought it into existence” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 345). This shows how her lacking connection to what she considers as home takes on mythical proportions, and that for Irie, home becomes what Chawla and Jones (2015, p. xiii) calls a “space of the imagination”. As we have seen, they claim that this space “offers freedom and control, creativity and regeneration, and intimacy and closeness” and Irie appears to approach it as such (ibid.). Jamaica becomes a place she idolizes, because she knows so little about it. Due to her lacking knowledge about Jamaica, and her geographical disconnection to it, she imagines it how she wants it to be, and she thinks about it as a place with “no fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 345). Because she is disconnected to her geographical roots since she lives in England and has never been to Jamaica, it becomes a utopia in which she attempts to construct her identity. In terms of belonging to one’s familial roots, Kramer (2011, p. 392) provides interesting insight as to the importance belonging ‘in time’ serves, even when the sense of belonging to a geographical community is not or no longer possible. Supported by her previous claims that embeddedness and ‘rootedness’ is foundational and of utmost importance in relation to one’s identity, one may begin to fathom Irie’s obsession with what she considers as her homeland (Kramer 2011, p. 386):

Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity* that have now passed into the language. And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a new beginning. The beginningest of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after the apocalypse. A blank page

(Z. Smith’s emphasis 2000, p. 345)

It seems odd that Esther refers to Jamaica as her homeland, when the only life she knows is in England. It appears that her discovery of her original “homeland” i.e. Jamaica provides her with unrealistic expectations of a country free of pressures and conflicts. One may suggest that she would not feel alienated because of her Jamaican figure there, since her contemporary women would share the same traits. She might also be intrigued by the thought of them sharing the same history, as she would live in the country that had been colonized, and not in the country of the colonizer. This is further illustrated when she finds it “tiring and unnecessary all of a sudden, that struggle to force something out of the recalcitrant English soil. Why bother when there was now this other place?” (ibid.). Additionally, it is worth noting that Irie compares the word *homeland* to concepts such as *unicorn*, *soul* and *infinity*, which are philosophical and abstract concepts (ibid.). These are also fantastical signifiers that don’t exist in the world. *Homeland* can be understood as a state of mind, something that does not exist. Irie’s obsession with the concept of *homeland* reveals once again that she is asking the wrong questions. What she is looking for will not be found where she is looking, because it does not exist. Thompson (2005, p. 133) argues that this reveals that her search for her origins will inevitably be futile, ending in “the perfect blankness of the past” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 345). It seems that her obsession with her ultimate *homeland* has nothing to do with Jamaica in theory, but the sense of chaos she experiences on the inside. It appears that this feeling of chaos and disconnectedness gets its outlet in her desperate attempt of being able to answer the question “who am I?”, and establish a feeling of belonging to *something*.

Irie is dreaming about the country of new beginnings, and is therefore thrilled when Hortense asks her to come with her to Jamaica in the year 2000. Although it is seven years ahead, Irie’s response is to scream of joy and hug her (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 352). Hortense’s motivation of going to Jamaica is the thought of it being “the year of the Lord” in which the chosen Jehovah Witnesses will be taken to paradise (ibid.). Although Irie is not convinced of her grandmother’s beliefs, it is her hopes of being taken to paradise that provides Irie with the opportunity of going to what she considers as her paradise. Because Irie obsesses over Jamaica the way she does, and sees it as a utopia in which she can finally be herself, it is understandable that she is excited to get there. However, one may ask what her visit to Jamaica will provide her with, because it is most likely very different from what she imagines it to be. In some ways, one can suggest that her own image of Jamaica provides her with a stronger feeling of belonging than visiting Jamaica may provide her with. It seems that the way in which she associates safety and feeling of belonging with her *homeland* Jamaica, provides Irie with the feeling of being connected to her familial roots. By making it into her

own paradise, she produces a ground upon which she can construct her identity, and it appears that her idea of Jamaica leads Irie to give up her attempt of assimilating into Britishness, at least for the time being.

5.3.2. IRIE'S FASCINATION WITH THE CHALFENS

When Irie is acquainted with the Chalfen family as part of a program she undergoes after being caught smoking weed at school she is “enamored after five minutes” (Smith, Z. 2000, pp. 261, 275). The Chalfen family’s way of life is remarkably different from Irie’s experience in her own family, and she is mesmerized. Their way of communicating is “untrammelled, unblocked by history, *free*” (Z. Smith’s emphasis 2000, p. 275). Her fascination is further illustrated as she had “never been so *close* to this strange and beautiful thing, the *middle class*, and experienced the kind of embarrassment that is actually intrigue, fascination. It was both strange and wondrous” (Z. Smith’s emphasis 2000, p. 277). Irie has grown up in the Jones’ household, a working-class family (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 146). The fact that they belong to the middle class is exotic in itself for Irie, since she has no experience with functioning families belonging in this class. Just like Olanna Ozobia in *HYS*, the Chalfens are in many ways provided for by their class. They do not face the same battles as those who belong to lower social classes, and this presumably allows them to live in the moment, unaffected and undisturbed by their past or by their familial roots.

The Chalfens intrigues Irie to the extent that she wants to become like them, and she develops an overwhelming passion for them, she “wanted to, well, kind of, *merge* with them, she wanted their Englishness, their Chalfishness. The *purity* of it” (Z. Smith’s emphasis 2000, p. 283). Irie seems to long for the purity of their Englishness, in the same way she longs for the purity of Jamaica. Apparently, there is something about this sense of the pure that attracts Irie, the possibility of simply being, and being free from everything else. When she finally meets someone who is able to do just this, she wants to merge with them, and become like them. Although she wants to merge with them, she appears to be stuck between her desire of assimilating into Englishness, and establishing her identity in relation to her mixed-race heritage. It appears that Irie is under the impression that there is no middle way, and that she somehow has to choose one or the other as if they are mutually exclusive, i.e. basing her identity in her contemporary English society, or in her mixed-race heritage. She appears

oblivious to the possibility of constructing her identity in relation to both, because she is so concerned with how others see her and feels that she cannot be accepted for who she is.

Considering them to be more English than the English, Irie feels like she is crossing borders when she enters their house and that she is sneaking into England (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 283). In addition to the fact that they belong to the middle class, they have their familial roots fully displayed in “an elaborate oak that stretched back into the 1600s and forward into the present day” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 290). Their awareness of their roots both intrigues and fascinates Irie, and she tells Marcus that she cannot imagine how it must feel to “go so far back” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 292). His response is “[n]onsensical statement. We all go back as far as each other” (ibid.). Based on this comment, it is fair to claim that because the Chalfens are able to trace their familial roots far back, it is not of particular interest to them. They are more concerned with the present and future more than with the past, and have no need to find out about their past or attempt to change it. This could inspire Irie to realize that one’s familial roots are not essential for the construction of one’s present identity.

Her desire to merge with the Chalfens may be in the same way she wants to merge with her own past. It may be due by the possibility that Irie feels that she can finally become English once she knows where she comes from, and that the awareness of her familial background may become the ground upon which she can construct her identity as British. This is confirmed when Irie is pleased by Marcus' job offer, because she views it as an opportunity to “merge with the Chalfens, to be of one flesh; separated from the chaotic, random flesh of her own family and transgenically fused with another. A unique animal. A new breed” (Z. Smith, 2000, p. 295). By wanting to become a new breed, she may finally consider the possibility of constructing her identity on both aspects, by both embracing her mixed heritage background, while simultaneously constructing her identity in her country of birth.

What starts out as idolization, however, appears to change into aversion as Irie spends more time with the Chalfens, and their true attitudes and perceptions are revealed. Irie feels that Joyce’s interest in her is declining the more progress she makes, both in relation “to her studies, her attempt to make polite conversation or her studied imitation of Chalfenism” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 288). Further, Joyce inconsiderately assumes that Irie inherited her intellectual abilities from her white grandfather, a notion in which her prejudices of Irie’s heritage is illustrated (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 305). Since Irie is enchanted by her Jamaican heritage, one can understand why this view would be hurtful and belittling. Another aspect that might explain her lesser interest in the Chalfens, may be in relation to a letter Irie finds

while organizing Marcus' papers (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 316). In the letter from Marcus to Millat, Marcus degrades Irie's physical appearance by commenting her "tremendous breasts", intellectual abilities and teeth (ibid.). Although she is not offended by his inconsiderate remark, it seems likely that this contributes to her declining fascination with the family.

The declining fascination Irie shows towards the Chalfen family may also be rooted in her newly acquired knowledge about her roots and heritage. This has been discussed in relation to how she sees Jamaica as something that resembles paradise (2000, p. 345). Either way, it appears that Irie's acquaintance with the Chalfens has provided her with personal growth. This is evident as her brain changes "from something mushy to something hard and defined, as she slowly gained a familiarity with the Chalfen way of thinking" (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 289).

5.4 "ENGLISH ROSE"

In *WT*, Z. Smith also raises the topic of beauty, particularly in terms of white beauty ideals. We have discussed how Britishness is generally connected to whiteness, and we have seen that Irie struggles to feel belonging and consider herself British because of her mixed-race heritage. This subchapter will have its focus on how Irie's physical appearance affects her sense of self and belonging, as well as its effect on her construction of an identity. Beauty can be connected to the feeling of belonging, and Jha (2016, p. 92) explains that beauty "creates capacities and consciousness that open individual women as subjects to articulation of belonging". With this, and Wolf's (1991, p. 145) contentions of the connection of female self-love and a woman's feeling of social worth in mind, the link between one's external appearance and feeling of belonging has already been constituted. Since we clearly can see that Irie despises herself and is enraptured by self-hate throughout the narrative, one may begin to understand its connection to her feeling of social worth, and how she struggles so much to find her place in her contemporary society.

In relation to the political aspect of beauty, Z. Smith raises a particularly interesting term by writing that Irie desires to become an "*English Rose*":

The mantra of the make-over junkie, sucking it in, letting it out; unwilling to settle for genetic fate; waiting instead for her transformation from Jamaican hourglass heavy with the sands that gather round Dunn River Falls, to *English Rose* – Oh, you know her – she's a slender, delicate thing not made for the hot suns, a surfboard rippled by the wave"

(Z. Smith's emphasis 2000, p. 230)

“English Rose” is a description associated with English culture, and according to Wikipedia (2017), it is an epithet that “may be applied to a naturally attractive woman or girl of traditionally fair complexion who is from or is associated with England”. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the term also carries a cultural reference, since the rose is the national flower of England, and withholds a long tradition within English symbolism (ibid.). Irie wants to transform to this image that the *“English Rose”* represents: beauty, whiteness, and Englishness. In the following paragraphs it will be investigated how the beauty ideals presented in her contemporary society affect Irie's feeling of social worth, belonging and sense of self.

5.4.1 THE LACK OF A REFLECTION

Irie Ambrosia Jones is obsessed with her physical appearance (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 236). Because of her figure and physical appearance, she considers herself *“all wrong”* (Z. Smith's emphasis 2000, p. 229). Z. Smith (ibid.) writes that Irie has not inherited her mother's *“European proportions”*, but is *“landed instead with Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame”*. With a figure characterized by her Jamaican heritage, she is *“loaded with pineapples, mangoes and guavas; the girl had big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth”* (ibid.). Dissatisfied with it, she blames her feeling of *“wrongness”* on her Jamaican roots (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 229). She feels that she has been *“dealt the dodgy cards: mountainous curves, buck teeth and thick metal retainer, impossible Afro hair”* (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 232). Her feeling of wrongness may be explained in relation to how her contemporaries look, and the prevailing beauty ideals in her contemporary society. We know that one's feeling of belonging is connected to feeling similar to those around one, and therefore, Irie's differences leaves her feeling *“wrong”*, because her physical appearance derives from what is considered *“the norm”* in her contemporary society.

Her discontent with her physical appearance is further illustrated as she attempts to hide her figure by the strategic placement of her arms, and in how she ties her cardigan around her behind (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 229). She does what she can to conceal her figure: *“The endless mystery: how to diminish that swollen enormity, the Jamaican posterior?”* (ibid.). She is wearing belly-reducing knickers, breast-reducing bra, and a meticulous lycra corseting, and in this, her dissatisfaction with her figure is revealed, a notion that is further illustrated when

she repeatedly covers her stomach with her hand and sucks in (Smith, Z. 2000, pp. 231, 232, 234, 236, 336). Ulrike Tancke's article "*White Teeth* Reconsidered: Narrative Deception and Uncomfortable Truths" provides us with insight as to the degree in which Irie's body affects her. Tancke (2013, p. 78) contends that because Irie is "unable to transcend the corporeal constraints to which her body subjects her, Irie feels disconnected from England". Thompson (2005, p. 128) complies, and understands Irie's bodily self-hate to result in a feeling of alienation both from her body and from the wider community. It seems that the uniqueness of Irie's physical appearance forms the grounds of her feeling of alienation from her contemporary society, because it clearly reflects her mixed-race heritage.

Irie lacks someone in her contemporary society to reflect herself in, and appears convinced that the only solution to her problem is found in reconstructing herself and change into something that can provide her with a reflection in the English mirror (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 230). Her feeling of being distinct from her contemporaries is particularly illustrated in the following: "[t]here was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land" (ibid.) Irie's lacking ability to construct her identity can be connected to the expectations she feels subjected to in relation to how she should look and behave to be considered British, and she feels alone as she has no one to look to because of her uniqueness produced by her mixed-race heritage. In accordance with the claims of Toplu, Irie appears convinced that Britishness is racially coded, and that she is excluded from the national identity her homeland may provide her with because of her mixed-race heritage (Toplu 2005, cited in Arikan 2005, p. 1682). This can be connected to Bhabha's (1994, p. 73) contentions of hybridity leaving people of mixed-race feeling disparate in a "third space", because it is clear that Irie struggles to find someone in her contemporary society with whom she can identify. Steele (2015, p. 5) argues that Irie's non-homogenous background with white and black heritage in her blood leaves her unique, and that this leads to her struggle of finding her place in a society characterized by multiculturalism. She argues that although London is depicted as multicultural in the novel, Irie does not fit into their multicultural fold, because she in some ways stands alone with her mixed-race background.

Realizing that her distinctiveness deprives her of being considered British by her contemporary society, and of her own sense of belonging, Irie appears to be determined to do whatever she can to change her appearances. She appears to be under the impression that her physical distinctiveness is what causes her lacking affirmation and her feeling of disconnectedness. Therefore, Irie becomes obsessed with the idea of losing weight when she sees a sign that says, "Lose weight to earn money" (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 229). Although she is

uncertain as to how she can earn money aided by her weight “Sponsored slim? The earning capacity of thin people?”, the idea of change appears appealing to her (ibid.). This is further exemplified as she doodles during class, in which she draws the outline of her torso before and after potential weight loss (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 230). Irie can be perceived to glimpse a hope of assimilating into Britishness (and an “*English Rose*”) if able to conform to the contemporary beauty standards by losing weight.

Her dissatisfaction with her body can be connected to the beauty ideals. In terms of figure, the beauty ideal favors thinness (Wolf 1991, p. 200). Because the beauty ideals have become a “gold standard” in which women’s beauty or femininity is sought measured by, women feel that they must possess specific traits or a particular figure in order to be considered beautiful. Jha (2016, p. 22) explains that body dissatisfaction tends to focus on body size, weight and shape. Further, she argues that slimness is integral to beauty ideals, and contends that large women may be perceived as lazy or in lack of self-control and discipline (ibid.). Wolf (1991, pp. 193, 200) explains that “dieting” is a “trivializing word” for “what is in fact self-inflicted semistarvation” and that it is the essence of contemporary femininity. Further, she contends that the thin “ideal” is not beautiful aesthetically, but beautiful as a political solution (Wolf 1991, p. 196). By connecting the ideal of thinness to politics, she confirms that the beauty myth is a violent backlash against feminism, in which images of female beauty is used as a political weapon against women’s advancement (ibid.). This is explained as dieting and the expectation of women’s thinness arose as women received the vote, and is closely connected to the women’s movement and economic and reproductive freedom (Wolf 1991, pp. 184, 187). Resulting in women feeling guilty about being overweight, Wolf (1991, p. 186) contends that this reflects women’s bodies belonging to the society more than to themselves. As Irie’s contemporary society is characterized by women unable to expose the lies of the beauty myth, one can understand Irie’s complexes with her figure, since so many attempted to reach the “essence of femininity” which was considered to be found in e.g. thinness (Wolf 1991, p. 200).

Because Irie’s physical appearance is connected to her Jamaican genes, her figure will most likely be permanent regardless of a potential weight loss, and in addition, losing weight can only be done over time. In addition to her displeasure of her Jamaican figure, she also despises her hair and her eyes because it makes her stand out from her contemporary society’s beauty ideal. Before her birth, her father Archibald hopes Irie will be born with blue eyes (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 58). Although she is, they only last two weeks before “Clara looked again and there were brown eyes staring up at her, like the transition between a closed bud and an

open flower” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 232). Jha (2016, p. 33) contends that dominant beauty standards in the US position black women as inferior in terms of beauty. Having blue eyes is less common than having brown eyes, and is generally connected to having white skin. Since having blue eyes is connected to having white skin, one can understand how this becomes a sensitive topic for Irie, especially since her father wished she would be born with traits connected to whiteness. Feeling prejudices from both her father and grandmother, her struggle of accepting her hybridity becomes particularly recognizable, and she seems to envy and covet traits connected to whiteness. Thompson (2005, p. 136) argues that Z. Smith attempts to expose the fact that “white” ideals are still dominant in terms of beauty and cultural values and practices, and this is exemplified when Irie feels that she must conform to these in order to be accepted in her contemporary society.

Intent on transforming into an “*English rose*”, Irie decides that her hair is the only thing she is able to control and change immediately (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 230). After receiving a passing note after class in which she is referred to as one of Shakespeare’s “KINKY-HAIRED BIG ASS BITCHES”, it seems that her change cannot come soon enough (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 235). Her best option of resembling Britishness and appropriating traits of an “*English rose*” immediately may best be done by dealing with her hair. Jha (2016, p. 41) explains that hair is an essential aspect of black women’s beauty, and is important for their experience of beauty and identity. She points out that in order to fit in, appear respectable, feminine and attractive, black women have felt compelled to imitate whiteness, something that can be achieved through beauty aids such as skin bleaches, hair dyes and straightening combs (Jha 2016, p. 44). Kobena Mercer explains that “white” hairstyles have been privileged over “black”, a notion illustrated as “good” hair is used to describe straight, not too curly or too kinky hair (Mercer 2000, cited in Thompson 2005, pp. 126-127). Further, Thompson (2005, p. 126) explains that for many black people, hair is not only an aesthetic issue, but that it carries cultural and political meaning as well. Thompson (ibid.) explains that “‘Afro’s’ have been used as a statement of rebellion against ‘white’ ideological values by many”, and Jha (2016, p. 40) confirms that during the Black Feminist Movement, Afro’s signified racial pride. However, it is clear that Irie despises her hair which is curly and wild, and she is determined to be in control over it, and fight the genes that have provided her with these traits (Smith, Z. 2000, pp. 239, 245, 236). She is not proud of her genes that provides her with an Afro, and instead she wants “straight hair, straight, straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakeable touchable finger-throughable wind-blowable hair. With a fringe” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 236). Irie rids herself of her Afro for the benefit of straight hair, and in this, her

disassociation from her own race and her attempt of imitating whiteness is displayed.

Intent on transformation, Irie tells the hairdresser that she wants it straight and red (ibid.). Although she is warned against straightening her hair since she recently washed it, Irie is determined to get it done immediately, because she wants to impress Millat (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 237). After blacking out from the pain of the ammonia, Irie comes to herself only to learn that her hair is falling out in clumps (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 240). Her remedy is to have someone else's hair glued onto the remains of her own hair, and after getting the extensions put in, the hairdresser strongly advises her to get it plaited, because it will fall out if she keeps it loose (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 244). Irie ignores her hairdresser's advice because she is intent on impressing Millat (ibid.). After her disastrous attempt of taming her hair, Irie is bewitched and pleased by her own reflection (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 240). Her satisfaction may be explained due to her transformation, in which she exchanges some of her Jamaican attributes for the benefit of traits connected to whiteness. However, it is important to note the calamity displayed in this incident. Although Z. Smith writes about this in a comical way, it does not reduce its tragedy. When Irie attempts to imitate whiteness she literally blacks out. She experiences so much pain from attempting to "kill" her Jamaican traits (e.g. her Afro) that her body shuts down. Not only does she remove her Jamaican genes that her Afro represents, but most of her hair is also removed, and she has nothing but inches left of her own hair. Keeping Jha's (2016, p. 41) contentions about the essentiality of hair for black women's experience of beauty and identity in mind, we can begin to understand how Irie's quest for whiteness is futile, although she momentarily appears satisfied.

In agreement with R. Hall's contentions about "colorism" being an internalization of psychologically damaging dominant Western beauty ideals by people of color, it is evident that colorism, caused by her hybridity, has been internalized in Irie (Hall, R. n.d. cited in Jha 2016, p. 57). She has adopted the belief that dark-skinned people are inferior, less beautiful, less competent, less intelligent, and less accomplished than light-skinned people, and therefore she wants to adapt to the Western beauty ideals (ibid.). Although Irie wants to transform into an "*English Rose*", it is clear that because her physical appearance, characterized by Jamaican traits which are incompatible with those idealized in England, Irie is unable to conform to contemporary society's beauty ideal. White teeth are not enough, and the other traits connected to whiteness, such as skin-color, thinness, hair-texture are out of reach for Irie because of her mixed-race background. The traits or beauty ideals associated with the "*English Rose*" are unachievable for Irie, and Irie will forever be rendered a stranger by these, because she is unable to change to the extent that is necessary. Her feeling of

belonging cannot be grounded in the beauty ideals in her contemporary society, because she is unable to conform accordingly.

As we can see from this, although Esther Greenwood, Olanna Ozobia and Irie Ambrosia Jones all struggle to construct their identity as women in their contemporary societies, their struggles are very different. Of the three female characters, Irie stands out because she is the only one to find herself in a society in which her skin color is not shared with most of her contemporaries. Esther lives in America where people of color were discriminated and segregated, and there are no characters in *TBJ* who have colored skin (although some prejudice is displayed with references such as “negro” and “ugly as Aztecs” (Plath 1966, pp. 190, 108). In *HYS*, Olanna Ozobia finds herself in Nigeria, where the majority of people share her skin color. Irie, on the other hand, finds herself in a society in which she is outnumbered by people with white skin. Additionally, she struggles to find her place within the multicultural community because of her mixed-race background, as she does not fit into any particular group. When thinking about how her physical appearance affects her sense of self and her construction of an identity, Lauretta Ngcobo explains how the process of self-definition is more difficult for those of mixed-race heritage, and that “[i]nstead of being drawn to identifying with either half of themselves, they (those of mixed-race) are often pushed one way or another or else repelled both ways” (Ngcobo 1987, cited in Thompson 2005, p. 127). In accordance with Ngcobo’s claim, it is evident that Irie’s mixed-race background makes her “repel both ways”. Paradoxically, Irie distances herself from her contemporary society because she feels alienated, while she simultaneously repels her heritage and wants to disassociate herself from her mixed-race background in an attempt of conforming to the expectations she feels her contemporary society subjects her to. In many ways, one can understand her distinctive background and her skin color to form the starting point of her insecurities that leads to her struggle of constructing an identity. Lacking a reflection in the “mirror” of England, she does what she can to change her appearance, in a desperate attempt of adapting to the expectations she feels subjected to, hoping to gain acceptance and union with her contemporary society.

5.4.2 LOVE AND SEXUALITY

We have seen, Irie is dissatisfied with her physical appearance and despises herself for her Jamaican figure and traits. She appears to be insecure because of it, and her self-esteem seems non-existent. Wolf (1991, p. 145) explains that women's sexuality is connected to their sense of self-love, and that their sense of self-love is again connected to social worth. She explains that women's sexuality has been affected by pornography in the sense that women develop a deep sexual shame when what is displayed in pornography becomes the norms or expectations of their own physicality (Wolf 1991, p. 150). Studies have found that dissatisfaction with one's body leads to "higher social anxiety, lower self-esteem and *sexual dysfunction*" (emphasis by Wolf 1991, p. 150). Poor self-esteem results in women distancing themselves from their sexuality, according to Wolf (ibid.). If Irie is unable to love herself, how can she love someone else? Irie's self-hate may explain why Irie does not show a particular interest in her sexuality. As she is suffering from low self-esteem due to her mixed-race heritage, this presumably affects her sexuality in the sense that she feels distanced from it.

Irie is in love with Millat, and after getting her hair straightened and colored, she is eager to get to his house in her desperate attempt to impress him (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 232). To her great disappointment, he is out "with some girl with a stomach like a washboard when she shows up at his house" (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 245). Neena asks Irie why she is following him around like a lost dog, and if she has ever wondered why he has "snogged everyone, everyone apart from [her]" (ibid.). Her answer to this, is "because [she is] ugly. And fat. With an Afro" (ibid.). Irie's complexes are once again revealed, resulting in her lack of confidence and self-hatred. In an attempt of cheering Irie up, Neena tries to convince her that Millat has not made a sexual move towards her because he needs her, and that she is different. Irie is not content with this explanation, and she rolls her eyes, thinking that "[s]ometimes you want to be different. And sometimes you'd give the hair on your head to be the same as everybody else" (Smith 2000, pp. 245-246). Irie does give the hair on her head to be like everybody else, but to her dismay, it still does not provide her with what she longs for.

Although Irie does not show any sexual lust nor any particular fascination with her sexuality, Irie is "making her own personal plea for compromise, peace and caution (everybody was doing it)", and has sex with Millat on his prayer mat (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 394). The act is quick and leaves Irie feeling ashamed and embarrassed when instantly realizing that Millat regrets it. She weeps and leaves momentarily (ibid.). The fact that Irie "made her own

plea for compromise”, and had sex with him may be yet another (disastrous) attempt of attaining a feeling of belonging and that she fits in, since she presumably did it because “everybody was doing it” (ibid.). Further, Irie’s sexual act may be a result of her frustrations of never feeling wanted or accepted, and that her way of dealing with her emotions is to take control over them. Additionally, it is clear the Millat is sexually active throughout the novel, and as Irie has never touched him in that way, she may foresee a hope of it producing in him the right feelings.

This incident confirms Irie’s conjecture of his lacking love for her. Although she has been in love with him for years, she is under the impression that someone had “damaged him so terribly; she wanted to find whoever had made him *unable to love her*” (Z. Smith’s emphasis 2000, p. 395). As she attempts to trace what causes his inability to love her, she somehow traces it back to his twin brother Magid, who, according to Irie, has made Millat feel inadequate because he was born last (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 396). Intent to make Magid pay for his misdeed in this, Irie is “determined to make Magid the second-son for once, this time by 25 minutes” (ibid.). 25 minutes is the time it takes her to get to the Chalfen household where Magid lives, and Irie marches into his room and has sex with him, violently and angrily “without conversation and affection” (ibid.).

Irie feels victorious when Magid climaxes, and “feels satisfied to take something from him” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 396). One may ask oneself why Irie feels that she takes something from Magid by having sex with him. One may rather ask if Irie in a way takes away something from herself as she uncaringly forces herself on him? Irie abuses her own sexuality to perform a heroic deed, a kind of redeeming sacrifice, to make up for Millat’s lacking interest in her. Instead of merely accepting that Millat is not in love with her, she is intent on punishing someone else for the pain this causes her. However, Magid unmasks her, and know exactly where she has been, what she has done and why she was there, and he is saddened (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 396). Realizing that her motives are exposed, and that he knows that she had sex with him only to “check the box”, or perform some kind of oppressive act, Irie “wept like a baby” (ibid.).

Irie’s sexual acts puts her in a strange dilemma. She becomes pregnant, and there is no way for her to find out who the father of her child is. This is because she had sex with Millat and Magid the same day, and they share the same DNA since they are twins (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 440). Her child was “a perfectly plotted thing with no real coordinates” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 450). When Irie realizes that her “child can never be mapped exactly nor spoken of with any certainty” she is saddened, because her child will share the same feeling of rootlessness as she

feels (ibid.). She appears to accept that “some secrets are permanent”, and clings to her hopes of a time “when roots won’t matter any more because they can’t because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too tortuous and they’re just buried too damn deep” (ibid.).

Initially, Irie is saddened when she realizes that her child will suffer from uncertainty regarding who her real father is. The reason why this saddens Irie is most likely because she can relate to the feeling of not knowing crucial details about one’s personal history. However, Irie hopes for a time where roots won’t matter, and the optimism entailed in this may indicate her maturation and realization of who she is apart from her roots alone.

5.5 THE PERFECT BLANKNESS OF THE PAST

Sparked by her feeling of alienation in her contemporary society, Irie embarks on a quest for identity. First, she wants to change into something that can provide her with a reflection in what she considers as a giant mirror, i.e England (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 230). She appears to be under the impression that this can only be done if she is able to adapt to the physical expectation she believes are connected to Britishness. Her attempts of physical change becomes disastrous, and her hair falls out when she tries to conform to whiteness by getting her hair straightened (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 236). Realizing the pointlessness of it, and that she is unable to conform into the image she feels subjected to, she continues her quest for identity by obsessing over tracing her roots. “The perfect blankness of the past” appears to be what Irie is left with after her quest of finding her roots (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 345). Although she gains more familiarity with her past, she fails in tracing her familial history and embellishing her family tree. However, it seems that her quest of tracing her roots makes her realize that she can in fact construct her own identity without knowing every detail of her familial history. This is illustrated as Irie has had enough with the past. When she is walking through the streets of her childhood town, she is overwhelmed by memories. Instead of appreciating them, she feels that “[she] could drown in memories like these, but she tried to swim free of them” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 393).

As she utters her frustrations on the bus on their way to celebrate New Year’s Eve, Irie has had enough of her complicated past and her family’s way of dealing with it (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 440). She envies other families who don’t have to deal with skeletons in cupboards and great-grandfathers (ibid.). For them, “every single fucking day is not this huge battle

between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be” (ibid.). This appears to be a moment of change for Irie, and she realizes that the past will always somehow be present, but that she can live free of the past by living in the moment. She is sick of the stronghold of the past, and appears to be set free from her conviction that the only way she can construct her identity is in relation to her familial roots. Despite her uncertainty in relation to each branch of her family tree and her original homeland, Irie appears to withdraw from letting it control her. This is illustrated when she envisions:

a time, a time not far from now, when roots won't matter any more because they
mustn't because they can't because they mustn't because they're too tortuous. And
they're just buried too damn deep. She looks forwards to it

(Smith, Z. 2000, p. 450)

Through her quest of finding her roots, Irie appears to reach an epiphany in which she realizes that the blankness of the past is perfect *because* it is untraceable, and that she can choose to live her life in the present, regardless of what she knows or does not know about her familial history. When she realizes that the past is done with, and is unable to provide her with what she longs for, Irie realizes that her identity can be constructed in the present.

This is illustrated when Irie returns to her roots and is “sitting by a Caribbean sea” with Hortense, Joshua Chalfen and her daughter (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 462). What Irie so long has yearned for is finally coming true as she finally comes home. Her experience of actually returning to the “paradise” she so long has imagined is not conveyed, but one can assume that she feels fulfilled because she finally made it to her ultimate *homeland*. Her return to Jamaica is significant because it is inconclusive. As readers, we are not informed as to how she experiences the reality of Jamaica compared to her imagined perception of it. Perhaps this is the point Z. Smith attempts to make by avoiding to conclude with all the details of Irie’s return. Because the concept of *home* carries such heavy individual connotations, Z. Smith may attempt to make a point of the fact that *home* is not restricted to a specific time and place, but that home can be wherever one feels belonging.

Her daughter is writing letters to her “uncles” Millat and Magid, and “feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 462). Her daughter is free of paternal strings, since it is impossible for her to know who her father is. Through this, we may understand that to Irie, her past has been something that has restricted and chained her. It appears that her quest of tracing her familial roots became a journey in which she realized that roots are not as important as she first thought, and somehow, she is relieved that her daughter

does not have to struggle to construct her identity on her roots alone. Just as Archie tosses a coin whenever he is subjected to choices, Irie seems to learn that life is not predestined but coincidental, and that she is in control over her own happiness. This is illustrated in her conversation with Samad, where she finds “that the land of accidents sounded like *paradise* to her. Sounded like freedom” (Z. Smith’s emphasis 2000, p. 350).

It is clear that Z. Smith raises the topic of belonging in *WT*, and although the theory that has been discussed in this chapter highlights the important connection between the awareness of one’s roots and acquiring a healthy identity, Irie’s character proves that knowing one’s roots does not necessarily resolve the struggle for identity. In many ways, one can see Irie as an antithesis of theory and practice, as becoming more aware of her past does not provide her with a healthy identity alone. Z. Smith appears to problematize this belief through the character of Irie, and further, she warns against spreading the myth and believing the wicked lie “that the past is always tense and the future, perfect” (Smith, Z. 2000, p. 462). In this, Z. Smith appears to recon the danger entailed in paying so much attention to the past and the future, that the present is neglected. The change in Irie happens after realizing that her quest of her familial roots has led her to the present, and that the present is what really matters. Irie learns that one can outlive one’s past, and construct one’s identity based on other aspects than familial roots alone. She learns that although the past may be tense, the present is what really matters.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

“The past is always tense, the future perfect”

(Smith, Z. 2000, p. 462)

This thesis has been a comparative analysis of Sylvia Plath’s *TBJ*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *HYS*, and Zadie Smith’s *WT*, in which I have investigated how the main female character of each novel struggles to construct her identity as a woman in her contemporary society. Either directly or indirectly, the female characters are all attempting to answer the question “who am I?”. They are connected by their quest of finding their place in this world, and their pursuit of making a room for themselves both on the inside and on the outside while living in societies in which they are subjected to expectations and demands based on their sex. Throughout the narratives, Esther Greenwood, Olanna Ozobia and Irie Ambrosia Jones are subjected to expectations that are grounded in general presumptions that have been internalized by their contemporaries regarding how they should look, what life they should live and what their mission in life should be, because they are women. We have seen that their feelings of self-worth and sense of self are on shaky ground when they either willingly reject, or are incapable of conforming to these.

We have also seen that because these women are living in a world that is telling them who they should be, their sense of self and personal desires become jeopardized, resulting in a battle in which they experience the strains of the demands their society subjects them to in relation to who and how they should be. Moreover, they are struggling to deal with the beauty ideal they are subjected to in their contemporary societies, and although their struggles look different, it is clear that it is this “golden standard” of how they *should* look (i.e. the beauty myth) affects their sense of self, confidence and feeling of worth. In *WT*, Irie shows a need for freedom, and a desire of being allowed to just *be*. This is true of Esther and Olanna as well, and appears to be the ultimate destination of their quest in which they are attempting to independently construct their identity as women.

The reason why it has been both purposeful and useful to analyze and compare *TBJ*, *HYS*, and *WT* in order to understand how women may struggle to construct their identity, is because the struggles of Esther, Olanna and Irie are similar, although their contexts are very

different. They live in different decades, on different continents, and are of different age groups, but they all share similar experiences. This proves that their challenges are not restricted to their own reality, and may indicate a global phenomenon that exceeds time and geographical location. In the same way that it is difficult to talk about feminism in a general sense, it is complicated to generalize the challenges women are subjected to, because women are so different. However, it is interesting to note that the struggles that the female characters in these novels experience represents struggles that women all over the world both have battled, and are still battling today. Stereotypes and expectations attached to sex and gender still exist, and women experience the demands of how they should look, what choices they should make and what life they should live still to this day. In this thesis, we have seen how these conflicting interests and pressures affect the female characters' feeling of acceptance, self-worth, belonging, and last, but not least: it's effect on their sense of self and construction of identity.

However, women's rights and position in society have progressed since the 50s-60s, and it is clear that, at least in the Western world, women are not victims of patriarchy and expected to adapt to the feminine mystique in the way they were before. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that when Wolf published her book *The Beauty Myth* in 1991, she discerned that the increasing pressure women experienced in relation to conforming to certain beauty ideals was a backlash against women's newly acquired freedom (1991, p. 10). This claim can be considered confirmed when thinking about the female characters of the respective novels that have been investigated in this thesis. Irie, living in the 90s, does not experience the strains of patriarchy, male dominance and pressure of conforming to the feminine mystique in the way Esther and Olanna does. However, Irie experiences the strains of the beauty ideal in a much higher degree than the other two, something that indicates that the increase of women's liberation and freedom from patriarchy has only increased the pressure women feel of conforming to the beauty ideal. During my analysis and comparison of these novels, I was surprised to see how dominant the idea of beauty is, and I have realized that it is much more important for women's sense of self and construction of an identity than I thought it would be.

In the finishing chapter of her book, Wolf (1991, p. 291) hopes that beauty can be considered as unexclusive. She urges women to challenge and act beyond the beauty myth, and "adorn [themselves] with real delight". Unfortunately, it seems that the beauty myth is still alive and well in our societies in 2017, and that we have not gotten as far as Wolf hoped we would. It seems that the pressure of conforming to a certain beauty ideal has only

increased since Wolf addressed this important topic in 1991. Today, women are freer than ever before, but perhaps more restricted than ever in relation to the unattainable beauty ideals. Additionally, it is important to note how the channels in which these ideals are spread are more available than ever. Most women today use social media, and are constantly presented with images of unattainable beauty. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, are flourishing with images of what is considered beautiful. We have seen that identity is constructed in social contexts, and in relation to what matters to others, and because women are human beings, they are social beings (Oyserman, Elmore and Smith 2012, p. 76). Therefore, these images that women are surrounded with becomes “the norm” of what they think they should look like, and sadly, these standards are often not natural.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the beauty ideal today is characterized by unnatural standards of beauty, since plastic surgery is used by many who want to change their physical appearance. Statistics shows that cosmetic surgery has increased with 132% from 2000 – 2015 (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2017). Although some of these are medically recommended, most are done to cosmetically alter one’s physical appearance in order to feel more beautiful and adapt to the beauty ideals women feel that they should fulfill. It is also interesting to note that the top three cosmetic surgeries are breast implantations, liposuction and nose reshaping, all representing that the beauty ideal favor big breasts, thinness and aesthetically beautiful faces (ibid.). Additionally, minor cosmetic surgeries such as soft tissue fillers which remove wrinkles and make skin look more youthful has increased with 298% from 2000-2015. These increasing numbers confirms what Jha (2016, p. 3) considers as favored in the beauty ideal: physical attractiveness, thinness and youthfulness.

Today, the beauty ideal is in many ways regulated by the fashion industry. Therefore, I find it interesting to note the kind of models that are represented on the runway. In her article “Runway Diversity Report: New York Leads The Charge for Spring 2016”, Maria Denardo (2015) presents the results after mapping over 9000 models who walked the runway for the lines being released Spring 2016. The results are disheartening, and reveals that the beauty ideal is still connected to whiteness. She found that 77,6% of the models were white, while only 8,5% were black. Additionally, she found that 0,1% of the models were plus-size, and only 0,05% were over 50 years old. These numbers show that the beauty ideal still to this day favors whiteness, thinness and youthfulness, and explains why women feel the pressure of conforming to these ideals.

Now that we have seen that the beauty myth still has a stronghold on the lives of women and their feeling of worth and beauty, we may ask ourselves: where do we go from

here? It seems that women need to become aware of the irrevocable lies entailed in the beauty myth, and understand that attempting to adapt to these ideals is both futile and exhausting. The possibility of reconstructing women's impression of beauty begins in the lives of the individual, and I believe that enlightenment is key in this process. Moreover, it appears that we do not only need a new way to see beauty, but also a new perception of what a woman is. It is liberating to remember De Beauvoir's claim that people with female bodies does not have to fulfill any specific requirements to be considered women (De Beauvoir 1949, cited in Moi 1999, p. 77), and that because the concept of a *woman* and the expectations entailed are social constructs, the women's liberation is accessible (Srinivasan 2017, n.p., n.d.).

We have seen that storytelling can be used as an "oppositional" practice, and it is clear that the authors of the novels that have been investigated in this thesis perform an act of resistance by portraying the women of their novels in the way they do, possibly to exploit the narrative situation and change the reader of the story through the maintenance of authority (Bennett & Royle, 2016, p. 59). Furthermore, Esther, Olanna and Irie may serve as an antithesis to the prevailing understanding of what a woman is or should be, and scatter the existing confusions and misconceptions. By using these narratives as an oppositional practice, the authors are taking control and (re)gaining authority over the representation of concepts such as *beauty* and *woman*. The respective novels that have been investigated in this thesis can serve as a counteract to the misconceptions and injustices women have been (and still are) subjected to, and can help women all over the world regain their equal outsets and decolonize their minds by becoming aware of the strains and suppression these expectations generate.

By drawing lines from the novels to our present time, it is evident that women are subjected to certain expectations because they are women. In Moi's opinion (1999, p. 120), the word *woman* carries metaphysical baggage that creates misconceptions of what a woman should be, how she should look and behave. Wittgenstein complies and claims that "[a] picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (Wittgenstein 1968, cited in Moi 1999, p. 119). Along with Moi and Wittgenstein, we should yearn for a liberation from this baggage and the predicamental picture of what a woman is. In *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf (1991, p. 19) shares the same prospect, and says that:

If we are to free ourselves from the dead weight that has once again been made out of femaleness, it is not ballots or lobbyists, or placards that women will need first, it is a new way to see

In *WT*, Z. Smith writes that “The past is always tense, the future perfect” (2000, p. 462). In terms of the pressures and expectations women have been subjected to throughout history, I agree with her claim. The past is tense indeed. But is the future perfect? Grammatically, yes, but in terms of women’s freedom to be whatever she wants and however she wants, only time will show. It seems that we still have a long way to go before women can feel free to be themselves, but let us hope that women will realize the hopelessness, exhaustion and emptiness entailed in this quest, and realize that no matter what society tells them, they are beautiful the way they are, and they are in control over their own bodies and their lives.

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