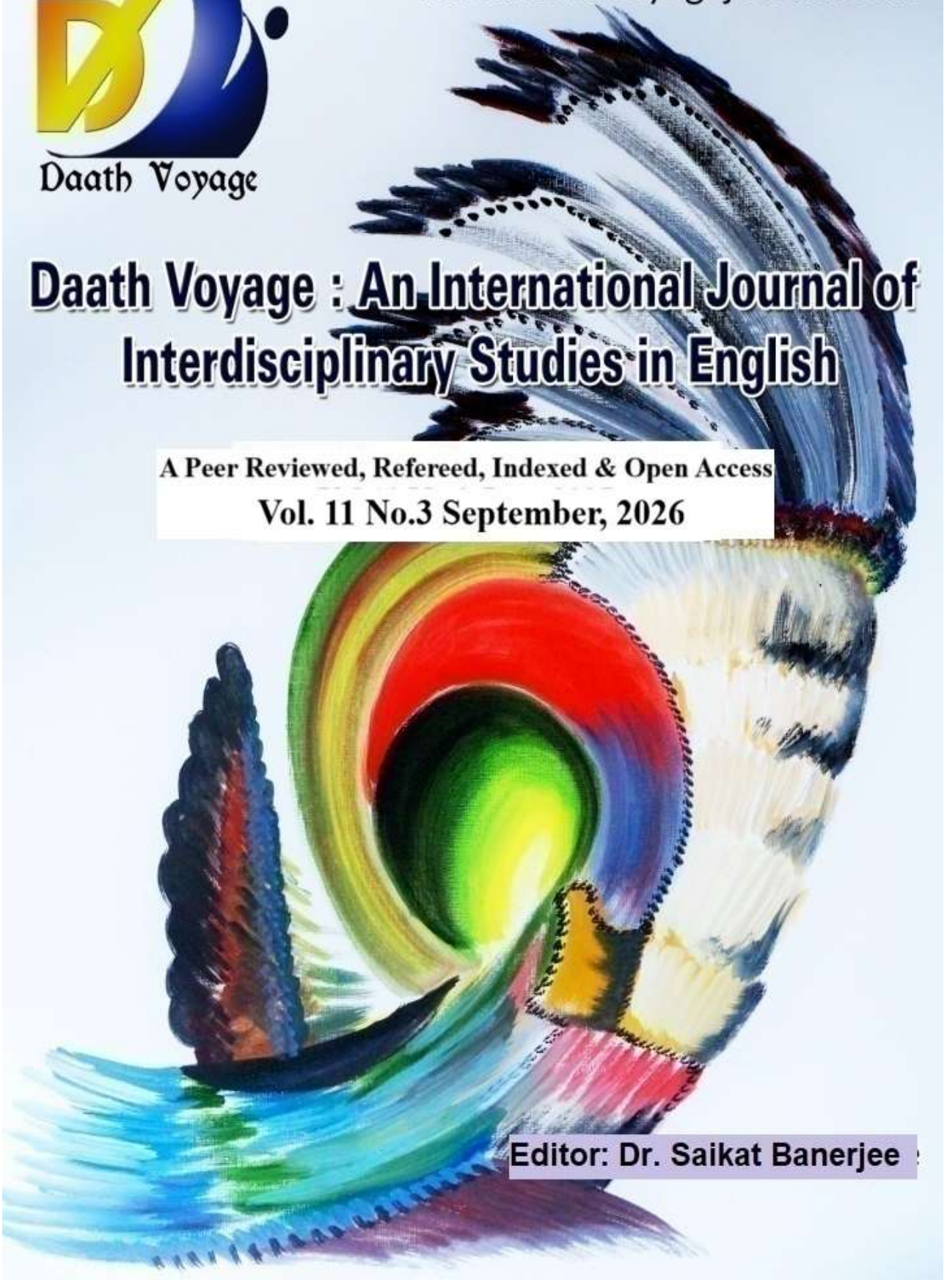
ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access
Vol. 11 No.3 September, 2026



Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed& Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

"She was nothing but a child who had never lived": The Paradox of Choice in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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Received 29 July 2026 Revised 29 August 2026 Published 30 September 2026

Abstract: The choice to accept and refuse certain dogma, especially for women, often comes at a great cost. Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* and Sylvia Plath's renowned 'Fig Tree Analogy' from the novel *The Bell Jar* are the two masterpieces that poetically portray the chaotic consciousness of the female characters. Both works reveal the complex thought patterns, thereby dissecting the psychological rupture of the female characters that put them at the crossroads when it comes to their corporeal and spiritual resistance. This study juxtaposes the female characters from the two works to draw a contrast between the paralysis of plenitude of choices and the radical rupture caused by the lack of the same. Barry Schwartz's *The Paradox of Choice* and Gerald Vizenor's concept of 'Survivance' serve as theoretical frameworks for this study in order to throw light on the resistance and endurance that the characters express. This study also aims to expose the narrative patterns in the above-mentioned works that deal with politicising the female body to use it as a battleground for control through close reading. Through comparison, this study unravels how the arcs of the female characters have been perpetually politicised, stripping them of their physical autonomy, in turn causing a deep psychological wound.

Keywords: Consciousness, corporeal, resistance, choices, survivance.

Introduction

"It is our choices that show what we truly are,
far more than our abilities." (Rowling 245)

Choices, without which one's voyage of life cannot proceed, are profoundly paradoxical because the more the number of choices, the less the degree of satisfaction and liberation, which is contrary to the common belief. In Barry Schwartz's words, "[a]s the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates. It might even be said to tyrannize" (7). Especially, the life choices made by women are highly crucial, as beyond personal desires, they are often saddled with societal expectations and the pressure not to disappoint.

By comparing, closely reading and thematically analysing the character portrayal of the two women, Esther Greenwood and In-hye, from the novels *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, respectively, this research intends to explore the formidable directions in which their lives had to proceed with respect to the choices they made. Employing the theories of Barry Schwartz's *The Paradox of Choice* and Gerald Vizenor's 'Survivance' from the book *The White Earth Nation*, this study strives to demonstrate, through the character arcs of the chosen characters, that reaching the lowest ebb as a woman is not the terminal point of one's life but rather a necessity to reflect on the reality and awaken to the brilliant boulevard of authentic life that lies ahead. It also proposes to show that by choosing to stay, survive and stare right into their failures, In-hye and Esther Greenwood practice Survivance as a form of rebellion.

While *The Vegetarian* (2007) is a contemporary three-part South Korean novel rooted in the short story *The Fruit of My Woman,* written by the Nobel laureate Han Kang brings to life the intricacies of the lives of two sisters In-hye and Young-hye, who are confounded by the myriad systems of oppressions and responds to them in two drastically different radical ways, *The Bell Jar* (1963) was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas is the only novel published by the American author and poet Sylvia Plath. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of this book, narrates the story of her life, where she descends into madness yet recovers to survive everything that tried to annihilate her.

Previous studies such as *Consuming Appetites: Food, Sex, and Freedom in Sylvia Plath's The Bell* Jar, *Fragmented Selves, Madness and Writing: An Analysis of Intellectual Women's Dilemma in Doris Lessing's the Golden Notebook, and Sylvia Plath's the Bell Jar* and *Women*, *Madness & Literature: A Comparative Analysis of 'The Bell Jar' by Sylvia Plath and' Girl, Interrupted' by Susanna Kaysen,* attempt to highlight the disintegration of women characters through peculiar factors like 'food', 'dilemma' and 'madness' by analysing the character of Esther Greenwood. However, researchers have not treated the 'paradox of choice' in much detail, and the major research gap is found to be the absence of a comparative study of the characters from the novels *The Bell Jar* and *The Vegetarian.*

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ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

The Illusion of a Perfect Life

The fascinating story arcs of the characters Esther Greenwood from *The Bell Jar* and In-hye from *The Vegetarian* introduce the two of them as highly efficient and intellectual women who were precocious and successful in everything they chose to do. Their accomplishments in life look sky-high until the climax; their futures ahead look blazing and perfect.

Having come past the "fifteen years of straight A's" (Plath 99) and then bagging a fully paid one-month tour to New York by winning a contest in a fashion magazine, Esther, to all intents and purposes, lands on the road leading to an elite life for a witty young woman who aspires to become a writer. Esther's confidence in her skills and self-esteem looks staunch and unwavering as she comments, "It was a case of honor among honorable people, and the content meant more than the form, and marks were really a bit silly anyway, weren't they, when you knew you'd always get an A?" (Plath 43) as she manages to fiddle with multiple tasks in school, all at once, never failing to become 'the best'. She herself discerns, "I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America" (Plath 2) as she was given a job in "New York for a month, expenses paid, and piles and piles of free bonuses, like ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon and chances to meet successful people in the field of [her] desire" (Plath 3). Whereas In-hye, being the sole bread-winner of her household, owns a cosmetic store which "had expanded to three times its original size" (Kang 35) after her son Ji-woo's birth. She unflinchingly takes care of a husband, an art school graduate who "didn't contribute a single penny to their household finances" (Kang 35) and a three-year-old son. It is also noteworthy to observe that she had managed to secure an apartment with the money she earned even before her marriage. Establishing the dynamic spirit of In-hye, her husband observes that she "was constantly exhausted, but she was the type to press on regardless, diligent and persevering…She was even grateful that he let her take on so much responsibility, running a business as well as a household, without so much as a word of complaint" (Kang 56). From a reader's view, up until this far, nothing can shake the stable life that In-hye has managed to build from scratch for herself and her family.

But as the narratives progress, the emptiness that is lurking behind the surface of both characters becomes prominent and pronounced. Delving deep into the characters of Esther and In-hye, one can unmistakably discern that both characters are exhausted by trying to choose the best out of the options available in order to take control of their perfect lives. At a crucial point of the narration, In-hye comes to the realisation that

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"[s]he had never lived" (Kang 130) and all that she learnt to do from a very young age, as a perfect daughter and a dutiful sister, was nothing but to "endure" (Kang 130). As stated by Han Kang, in a third-person narrator's voice, "[h]er devotion to doing things the right way had been unflagging, all her success had depended on it, and she would have gone on like that indefinitely" (130), unless the ground beneath her feet suddenly started shaking vehemently, and the seemingly perfect castles she managed to build around herself all these years began to crumble in front of her eyes like "a house of cards" (Kang 113). It was only after such a catastrophe that the reality dawns on In-hye as the narrator observes, "Her life was no more than a ghostly pageant of exhausted endurance, no more real than a television drama" (Kang 132).

Such a tipping point that pushed Esther to the fringes of life was when she had to face the multitude of choices laid bare in front of her. The choices that were going to decide the course of her next phase of life were, unfortunately, abundant. On having to choose 'the best' as she always does, she loses herself to the bouts of depression and confesses,

> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath 91)

For a young woman who had a reputation for doing everything exceptionally her whole life, this becomes the one grand defeat. As the narration of the life of Esther manoeuvres, she finds herself hitting rock bottom in her life, despite being someone who had been a luminary. This lies in tandem with the claims of Barry Schwartz, who expounds that,

> [T]here is a cost to having an overload of choice. As a culture, we are enamoured of freedom, self-determination, and variety, and we are reluctant to give up any of our options. But clinging tenaciously to all the choices available to us contributes to bad decisions, to anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction—even to clinical depression. (7-8 Schwatz)

Simultaneously, the desire to steer clear of regret that can arise out of the bad choices may induce people not to act at all; such a phenomenon is called "inaction inertia" (Schwartz 128). In Esther's case, such numbness becomes evident when she confesses, "I waited, as if the sea could make my decision for me" (Plath 182), after being overwhelmed by the choices that are waiting to devour her either way.

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www.daathvoyagejournal.com

The Reflection at the Rock Bottom

The narratives of Esther and In-hye then follow the next consecutive events that push them headfirst into the rock bottom. Esther finds it tedious to engage in any of her day-to-day activities because they seem "so silly" (Plath 152) and "impossible" (Plath 151) to her. She becomes insomniac and delusional. Her mother, then, takes her to the psychiatrist, where she confesses that she hadn't "slept for twenty-one nights" (Plath 175) and "couldn't read or write or swallow very well" (Plath 160). The narration trails on to show Esther in a different yet elite psychiatric hospital where she meets her personal psychiatrist, Nolan, whose help plays an immense role in her recovery. When her mother couldn't afford such treatment for her, Philomena Guinea, a writer who comes to know of Esther's condition and who had undergone something similar herself, takes on the full expenditure for the treatment. But this act of charity bothers Esther as she feels the pressure to recover sooner, not to disappoint her and the other women like her in her life. Moreover, she broods that "they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them" (Plath 263). She also confesses that she hates the visits from her well-wishers as she could feel them "measuring [her] fat and stringy hair against what [she] had been and what they wanted [her] to be" (Plath 243) and witness them go "away utterly confounded" (Plath 243). It is in this status of her life that she cognizes that her whole being is confined in a 'bell jar' of innumerable 'choices' and abundant 'expectations'. As Esther poetically fathoms her current phase of life, "[t]o the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (Plath 282), stranding her in a state of deep-seated hopelessness and helplessness.

Though In-hye finds herself wallowing in the same state of resignation after she had to endure witnessing her perfect life, which is built primarily around the lives of the people that she loves, falling apart. A part of her was stripped off when she had to witness the chronic mental and physical degradation of her younger sister, Young-hye, for whom she has a maternal affection. The rest of In-hye's composure is eroded when she finds out that her husband, who took advantage of her sister's condition, dared to seduce her to have sexual intercourse with him. As a result of all of these events, a sense of guilt and regret grapples In-hye and she looks back at all the choices that she made, including her trivial choice of mentioning the 'Mongolian mark' on her sister's body in front of her husband. Her chest becomes heavy as she keeps asking herself, "[c]ould I have prevented it? Could I have prevented those unimaginable things from sinking so deep inside of Yeong-hye and holding her in their grip?" (Kang 127). When it comes to such a

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death-grip of regrets, Schwartz holds the view that, "it's easy to see that if you experience regret on a regular basis, it will rob you of at least some of the satisfaction that your good decisions warrant" (72). Like asserting the above thought, In-hye becomes blind to how dynamic a woman she is, as she starts recollecting all the 'bad' choices she has made so far and regretting the fatal outcomes of them that may have culminated in tearing her life apart at present. The full-blown breakdown of In-hye's perfect domestic goddess facade occurs when she confesses, "[a]ll of this is meaningless. I can't take it anymore" (Kang 132).

This sense of resignation and anguish drags the two women to a state of psychological rupture where they yearn to end their lives. Esther considers a variety of options such as cutting her wrists using Gillette blades, hanging herself using silk rope and drowning in the ocean. And In-hye, who was a perfect woman that met all the social standards and expectations, "would all of a sudden find herself wanting to stab herself in the eyes with her chopsticks, or pour the boiling water from the kettle over her head" (Kang 131).

The Choice of Survivance

The narratives of Esther and In-hye then lead them to a path where they awaken to the reality that tries to swallow them up through the interconnected tapestry of choices and regrets. But the next phases of their lives show them that the perfect solution to the paradox of choice is 'choosing to survive' and 'continuing to exist' when their flesh tells them otherwise. Their choice of 'survivance', when their lives are in the appallingly abysmal state, awakens the spirit in them that no other living creature can possess. In the same vein, Gerard Vizenor in his book *The White Earth Nation* notes that,

> The conventions of survivance create a sense of [one's] presence over nihility and victimry. Survivance is an active presence ... survivance is the continuance of narratives, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry (11).

The strength to practice survivance is not born overnight for Esther and In-hye; rather, it is a whole journey which had different milestones that need to be claimed. Letting go of things that weigh them down and refusing to claim responsibility for the choices of the people around them is the first stage that prunes and prepares the two women to reach the next.

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Esther regards "my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck" (Plath 272) and chooses to remove the ginormous importance that society had persuaded her to assign to it. She grows tired of habitually defending it and takes a step towards putting an end to it by undergoing the 'fitting' procedure. After which she becomes her "own woman" (Plath 266) and continues to declare, "I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: "I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person… just because of sex…" (Plath 266). This reclamation of the narrative of her life gives her the agency to rise above the catastrophe. Her restoration becomes evident as she continues to observe that "[t]he bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air" (Plath 257), eventually. Whereas In-hye chooses to let go of the burdens that she wasn't supposed to carry. She strengthens herself in the face of an excruciating event at Young-hye's ward by asserting, "[a]t any rate, she is a burden you cannot bear" (Kang 116). And she lets her facade of being a 'good wife' tear down when she refuses to allow her naive yet abusive husband back into her life by avowing "I don't know you" (Kang 128). This becomes lucid as the narrator observes that maybe the one she has so ardently wanted to help was not her sister or her husband but herself.

The next phase is choosing to hold on to the hope. Esther does this by taking "a deep breath" (Plath 289) and listening to her heart that pronounces, "I am, I am, I am" (Plath 289). Whereas In-hye, as the narrator observes, "[t]he only times when the pain simply, miraculously ceases, are those moments just after she laughs" (Kang 134) when she is around her son Ji Woo.

As the next phase towards 'awakening' of the spirit, Esther, who always had answers to everything, arms herself up to step into the world once again, with "question marks" (Plath 290). And In-hye gains wisdom to discern the necessity of the ground beneath her feet being shaken. She later comes to terms with the series of traumatic tragedies by reasoning, "if everything hadn't splintered apart, then perhaps she was the one who would have broken down, and if she'd let that happen, if she'd let go of the thread [of sanity], she might never have found it again" (Kang 144).

Conclusion

"I have dreams too, you know. Dreams…and I could let myself dissolve
into them, let them take me over…but surely the dream isn't all there is?
We have to wake up at some point, don't we?" (Kang 145)

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As an unmarried young woman, Esther, who comes across several male perpetrators who never consider treating her body with dignity, is no different from the married, financially independent woman, In-hye, who gives her body up as a 'vessel' and becomes a victim of marital rape.

The two women beautifully transition from being the 'objects' of the male gaze when the autonomy of their bodies was snatched from them to become the central 'subjects' of their stories by choosing to 'stare' right at their traumas. As mentioned, "In-hye stares fiercely at the trees. As if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something. The look in her eyes is dark and insistent" (Kang 146), proving that choosing to exist is her form of rebellion. "There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (Plath 290), states Esther Greenwood, who records her 'active presence' as a flawed being who is reborn from her ashes.

This research presented thus far provides evidence that for Esther and In-hye, reaching the abyss of their lives is not the end but a necessary wake-up call to face reality. It also provides significant insights into how 'survivance' can become the solution to the paradox of choice through the character arcs of the two female characters chosen.

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