

## **Beyond The Walls: Female Agency And Madness In The Bell Jar, The Yellow Wallpaper, And Wide Sargasso Sea**

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### **Abstract**

This paper critically explores the intersection of gender, mental health, and patriarchal oppression as represented in literature and medical discourse. Through a close analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), the study investigates how these texts portray the confinement of women labelled as "mad" and their responses to such diagnoses. The analysis foregrounds the role of patriarchal medicine in pathologizing women's mental health by associating it with their physical bodies, particularly the uterus, thus justifying their exclusion from public and intellectual life through isolation and restrictive treatments like enforced bed rest. These literary works challenge patriarchal medical narratives by subverting representations of women as irrational or weak, instead presenting female protagonists who resist these oppressive structures through imaginative and psychological rebellion. The paper traces the historical roots of the medicalization of female madness, from ancient Greek conceptions of hysteria to its institutionalization in the 19th and 20th centuries, while engaging with feminist critiques that reveal how such medical practices functioned as mechanisms of control. This study highlights how these texts enact a feminist revision of dominant narratives by reclaiming female agency and critiquing the patriarchal underpinnings of mental health treatment.

**Keywords** - La écriture féminine, Patriarchy, Mental Health, Hysteria in Literature, Female Writers and Protest

Religion is often criticized for promoting gender discrimination. But it remains a ground of contestation among scholars about how the field of science and medicine have very prudently excluded women from almost everything by labeling them as more sensitive and thus, likely to possess less rationality. These fields have made women victims of scientific and medical practices through its recommendation of confinement or 'bed rest' too often for the diseases which are many a times results of women's loneliness and alienation. (Brizendine, 2009) Very often science and medicine have shut women's voice by projecting them as weaker human beings owing to their possession of an uncontrollable uterus. Even when studies actually suggest otherwise, women are routinely confined for their own 'safety' and asked to restrict their activities often to the detriment of their own personal and professional lives. This paper proposes to analyse Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), which between them cover around 150 years of literary imaginations of women's madness, in order to see how women receive, whether to ratify or rebel, confinement as their treatment. While such confinement is for most duration solitary, there are also wardens and custodians appointed for their care. Gilman and Plath talk about the madness among women of colour while Jean Rhys presents how a Creole woman, rejected both by the Whites and the Blacks, could be forced by the society to survive only by losing everything including her saner self and by becoming somebody else. The paper will further close-read the texts in order to extract how the severe power imbalance between the confined woman and her custodian-jailor creates the requirement of a liminal imaginary space- an imaginative escape from the horrors of confinement in order to preserve some degree of sanity. The esemplastic power of imagination becomes a fuel for the creation of *la écriture féminine*, as the authors create a

unique voice that while depicting the mental and physical breakdown of their protagonists simultaneously deconstruct the underlying patriarchy that informs the 'medical' ministrations.

Human beings' curiosity to understand mental aberrations have crossed the boundaries of time, place and also the divisive wall among different disciplines. As Shoshana Felman has said in *Writing and Madness* that madness has 'converged,' 'subvert'(ing) the boundaries between sociology and philosophy, linguistics and literature, history and psychology (2003, p. 12). In Greek mythology, Dionysus- the god of wine, grape cultivation, fertility was cursed with madness. In Greek culture, madness was then seen as a divine punishment for human transgressions or sins. But later Argonaut Melampus associated women's madness with uterus and claimed to have cured women from hysteria which was caused due to their 'uterine melancholy' (Sigerist, 1951). Hippocrates (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) used the term 'hysteria' for the first time and diagnosed the movement of uterus ('hysteron') as the main cause of the disease (Sterpellone, 2002). Plato in his *Timaeous* agreed with Hippocrates and said madness occurs from a sad and infertile uterus (Adair, 1995, pp. 153-54). In eighteenth century, mad people used to be treated like animals, "an object of the attention and curiosity of a frivolous, irresponsible and often vicious public" (Foucault, 1965, p. 69). Foucault in his *Madness and Civilisation* (1965) has mentioned how when leprosy was gone, madness took its place (p. 7). Mad people were sent to places far away from the residential area. This exile became an excuse for punishing ambitious women with a desire to get education or for women who fearlessly expressed their unconventional opinions (Shreve, 2017). Working as a tool of patriarchal power, theory of madness or hysteria further oppresses women. Thus, nineteenth century witnesses a great surge in the number of asylums for keeping insane women confined under a doctor, nurse or caretaker. The texts under study reflect the same aspect. Nineteenth century also witnessed a number of female writers being vocal about women madness and rebelling against and challenging the patriarchal power that tried to construct negative narratives of women's madness. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1984) in *The Madwoman in the Attic states:*

By projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them. What this means, however, is that the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. Indeed, much of the poetry and fiction written by women conjures up this mad creature so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be. (p. 78)

To protest against the patriarchal system and to express their anger the female authors of nineteenth century express their voice through author's double. In all the three texts under study author's double plays a crucial role in voicing the authors' protest.

In her semi-autobiographical story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Charlotte Perkins Gilman presents how women madness was treated in the nineteenth century by taking away their every right on their own lives and by making them confined in a specific domestic space. After getting married at the age of twenty-four, Charlotte Perkins struggles to balance between her duties as a wife and her ambition as a writer first and then as a wife, mother and as a writer. After the birth of her first child, she suffers from depression hence the doctor prescribes complete bed rest for several weeks. She is not allowed to engage herself in any creative or imaginative activity. After few years Charlotte Perkins writes this story to record her protest against the biased medical practices. The story opens when in one fine summer the narrator moves into a rented house with her husband John. The strange environment of the house concerns the narrator and she tries to express her concern to her husband. Her husband John, who is also her doctor, dismisses her thoughts in a patronising manner as he considers his scientific, unbiased, rational and practical temperament to be far superior to his wife's imaginative, sensitive and less scientific temperament. The narrator is prescribed to do practically nothing. When after insisting repeatedly that writing might make her feel better her husband doesn't allow her to do so, she hides a journal and keeps making entries secretly. From the description of the bedroom, it appears

like a nursery of young children. The wall paper is torn in several places. While making the entry in her journal, she suddenly starts seeing strange patterns on the wall. Just at that moment John's sister, Jennie who is working as a housekeeper and nurse for the narrator comes and the narrator hides her journal. Being alone most of the time, the narrator becomes fond of the yellow wallpaper. Gradually as her obsession grows, she figures out the pattern of a woman caged behind bars in the yellow wallpaper. She pleads to leave the house but John doesn't agree. Being lonely she becomes more and more obsessed with the wallpaper in which the sub pattern of a trapped woman trying desperately to escape becomes quite clear. The narrator can even see the mark of the women's crawl all over the wall paper. The horrifying image of a woman's crawling can appear 'gothic' to many but the image becomes a metaphor for the horror of women's existence in the nineteenth century. Alan Ryan (1988) has said about the story, "quite apart from its origins, it is one of the finest, and strongest, tales of horror ever written. It may be ghost story. Worse yet, it may not" (p. 56). The narrator now is determined to come out of this horrifying existence. One day with all her strength she tears the entire wall paper down to free the woman. She feels liberated from her previous caged condition but she knows that there are many trapped women around her. Charlotte Perkins publishes the story five years after recovering from depression. While talking about the purpose behind writing this story, she herself says in her *Why I Wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper"?* (2018) that she wants to bring a change in the medical practices.

*The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath is called by Linda W. Wagner (1986) as a "testimony to the repressive cultural mould that trapped many mid-century women" (p. 67). The text opens in the summer of 1953 after the execution of Rosenbergs with the protagonist Esther Greenwood as a college student who lives in New York and works as an intern in a fashion magazine. Assuming that young women can desire nothing more, free makeup and concert tickets are the perks that this job offers to attract bright young female students. Esther Greenwood, rather than finding happiness in this job stresses herself about the electrocution of the Rosenberg couple who was convicted of spying for Soviet Union and was sentenced to death as punishment. Esther Greenwood's sensitivity and ability to question the incidents happening around her, establishes her as an unconventional and rebellious character from the very beginning. She looks for friends who will resemble her but she can hardly find friendship and belongingness among the people around her. This feeling of non-belongingness creates a sense of loneliness and alienation within her. Being brought up by a single mother, for Esther, working hard or doing well in her school and college is not a matter of choice; it's rather a matter of her survival. One day lying on bed she ponders

I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired. (p. 30)

The conflict between her inability to be an 'ideal' woman and her desire to rebel and break the mould and rules of an 'ideal lady' becomes the cause of her perturbation. In *A Ritual for Being Born Twice*, Marjorie G. Perloff (1972) states,

For Sylvia Plath's focus in *The Bell Jar* is not on mental illness per se, but on the relationship of Esther's private psychosis to her larger social situation. Indeed, her dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject. (p. 511)

Contrary to society's expectation Esther feels marriage will bring an end to her ambition and imagination, engaging her in washing and cleaning all the time. Esther feels the pressure of her family for getting married and having children but she desires to be a professor, a poet, a traveller and so many other things that the idea of being only a wife and a mother terrifies her. But as her eternal conflict remains between being an ideal woman and a rebel, she remains unable to take a decision. This indecisiveness further torments her mind. The road to one's identity travels rough through breaking many of society's expectation. If Esther's act of throwing away all her clothes out of the New York hotel window can be interpreted as a sign of her madness, it can also be analysed as her rebel against New York's material expectations and desired codes for a proper lady. After Esther remains unable to read, write or sleep anymore, she has been taken to Dr. Gordon for shock treatment.

Esther does not understand what sin she has committed to have gone through such punishment. The symptoms of her disease become severe and she plans to take her life several times but remains unable to do so. Philomena Guinea, the sponsor of Esther's college scholarship pays for her treatment in a private mental hospital. Guinea herself had to go to an asylum once. In the new asylum Esther enjoys much freedom. Under Dr. Nolan she feels protected as well. Esther meets a college acquaintance Joan Gilling in the asylum. Dr. Nolan understands when Esther expresses her fear about being a mother and the burden of society's definition of chastity that she has carried all along. The trust she could put in Dr. Nolan helps her to recover from the fear and worry she had. Under Dr. Nolan, Esther feels liberated by claiming her right over birth control and with the burden of chastity and purity gone. Esther leaves the asylum as a completely transformed woman who is not ready to conform to the society's rules any more.

John Rhys has written *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as a response to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys tries to unravel the history of *Jane Eyre*'s madwoman Bertha Mason. The novel begins in 1838 West Indies, where the abolition of slavery in 1833 has introduced many changes. As a child, Antoinette Cosway was followed by a little girl singing "go away white cockroach, go away" and for hours she hides herself. This derogatory refrain originates within her a permanent sense of fear of being followed, tracked and watched. Even as an adult she could never come out of this fear. She looks for belongingness and acceptance in the society as a Creole woman. She again encounters the same experience of being followed, watched, threatened to be hurt by two adolescents on her first day of school in a Spanish Town. She is even called crazy like her mother. Antoinette gets rid of her recurring forest nightmares for some time when she is in her convent school, under the shade of Christianity and surrounded by her family of 'mothers' or the nuns. The nightmares keep occurring again when Antoinette moves to Granbois after getting married. Ironically, the meaning of Granbois is 'great forest'. As a Creole woman, Antoinette and her mother have been portrayed as fragile and vulnerable unlike black women. Antoinette is often compared with images of petals falling from blooming flower to emphasize her fragility and vulnerability as a Creole woman. Antoinette is again called "white cockroach" by Amelie. As an expression of her helpless anger, Antoinette tears up a bed sheet with scissors. Antoinette tried to explain to her husband what it feels to be rejected by both black and white people. Instead of understanding her identity crisis which is a result of societal conflict, her husband finds it easier to dismiss it as her mental crisis. A lunatic woman's daughter can very easily be accepted by the society as lunatic. The label 'lunatic' rejects any logical explanation of her sense of alienation, isolation, displacement and anger. It even takes away from the woman the right to voice her crisis. As Antoinette's husband, Rochester becomes the owner of her fortune. As if this is not enough, Rochester now desires to have complete control over his wife, he wants to shift to England. Torn by her husband's disloyalty, Antoinette becomes indifferent towards everything. Even the thought of going away from her favourite island Granbois, only results into her staring first angrily and then blankly towards her husband. In England, Grace Poole was given the responsibility to watch over Antoinette in the attic. The attic has only one window placed so high that Antoinette can hardly look through. The only person she sees every day is Grace Poole who counts her money every night before drinking alcohol and falling asleep. Without a mirror to look at her image, Antoinette gradually forgets who she is. Sometimes she sees the figure of her mother. When Grace Poole falls asleep, she takes the key and walks into the outside world. Through Grace Poole's thought Rhys even manages to give the reader a chance to see the similarities between Grace Poole's fear of the world outside of Thornfield Hall and Antoinette's fear of the world that denies to accept her Creole existence. When Grace Poole reminds her of the attack she made on her own step brother Richard Mason, her idea of being the madwoman, Bertha Mason grown stronger in her. But like her other fits she doesn't remember anything about it. Gradually she feels, being confined in the attic and being repeatedly referred to as 'madwoman' she has truly become the madwoman, Bertha Mason that her husband wanted her to be. She dreams of attaining freedom by putting the house on fire. The text ends with her moving towards the house with the determination of fulfilling her dream. Thus, the misrepresentation of women in literature was so common that nineteenth century women felt the necessity of writing their own stories. Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* builds a

relationship of trust with Dr. Nolan that liberates herself. Through the three texts discussed above, we can see the unscientific practices carried over women in the name of treatment for several centuries. These unjust, unscientific practices of confining women in the name of treatment, is deeply rooted in society's patriarchal psyche that these authors tried to reveal and subvert through their writings.

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