

# Madwomen Escaped from the Attic

Senem Üstün Kaya

**Abstract**—Concepts of mental health and normality can be understood within the values, norms and culture of a society, in which gender roles constitute the most crucial role. In many cultures, ‘madness’ has been accepted as a feminine illness because in many male dominated societies, women have been labelled as physically, emotionally and psychologically weak. Phyllis Chesler in *Women and Madness* defines madness as an escape from traditional roles by stating that: ‘What we consider ‘madness’, whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex role stereotype’ [1]. There has been a correlation between femininity and insanity, which paves way to the depiction of female madness in many literary works. This paper explores how male domination causes female imprisonment, which leads to feminine madness. Within this scope, two short stories, *To Room Nineteen* (1978) by Doris Lessing and *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, were analyzed to conclude how female madness is mainly represented as a struggle against male oppression in patriarchal societies.

**Index Terms**—Madness, patriarchal societies, male domination, imprisonment.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of female mental illness, as a literary theme, has existed since the classical periods although the scope of the topic has transformed into different forms towards modern times [2]. In many cultures, ‘madness’ has been associated with women who are driven to illness due to the oppressions and the lifestyle thrust upon them. Many studies have presented the evidence of how oppression drives women to madness (Chesler, 1972; Smart, 1976; Oakley, 1981); how male authority leads to powerlessness of women (Chesler, 1972; Ehrenreich and English, 1979) and how social rules (designed by men) create unfair situations for women (Myers and Bean, 1968; Gove, 1972). In many studies, stress in the lifestyle of women is the cause of mental health (Freidan, 1963; Gavron, 1966). The societal expectations, oppressions and injustices have created physically, emotionally and psychologically weak females for ages.

For Gove and Tudor, mental health is highly associated with women’s marital role [3] because heavy burden of childcare and household create stress and these factors are considered as emotional distress. In the case of gender differences, women perceive and handle their problems differently than men and they report more psychological symptoms [4].

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In a study by Brown and Harris, gender differences indicate that women are more vulnerable than men when faced with stressful events and difficulties [5]. Control of the society, oppressions of male power and burdens of life as a wife and a mother are all the causes of stress, which results in depression for women. According to Ussher, ‘women outnumber men in diagnoses of madness, from the ‘hysteria’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to ‘neurotic’ and mood disorders in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ [6a].

In his book, *Being Mentally Ill*, T. J. Scheff pointed out that social roles and powerlessness in society cause symptoms of mental illness for women [7]. Phyllis Chesler in *Women and Madness* defines madness as an escape from traditional roles by stating that: ‘What we consider ‘madness’, whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex role stereotype’ [8]. Before focusing on female madness in literature, it would be proper to define the two confusing terms: sex and gender.

Sex refers to the biological traits of males and females while gender refers to the societal roles (World Health Organization). In societies, gender roles have been categorized among sexes. When one deviates from the norms of a society, either sex is considered abnormal. In other words, if a woman acts like a masculine and replaces the dominance of men in a patriarchal society, she is probably labelled as abnormal or insane. Since women were the silent part of society in history, they were supposed to obey, listen, accept without questioning and cooperate with the male. Therefore, the reacting women were labelled as abnormal, insane or mad.

Women suffering from mental instability has been a captivating topic for the researchers and writers and the main question is: ‘Are they really suffering from a psychological abnormality or is it a reaction to male domination?’. Before defining female madness and its depiction in literary works, it would be appropriate to analyze the history of ‘madness’.

In ancient Greek texts, madness was depicted as the punishment of gods and ‘By the fifteenth century the assumption that insanity resulted from sin was so widely accepted’ [9]. From the early 14th century to the mid-sixteenth century, thousands of women were victimized as witches because they were capable of curing illnesses with herbs. They were seen as evil, rebel or the scapegoat of society by replacing male power. By the late 16th century, men took their wives to madhouses where they were treated inhumanly. Since advances in science paved way in many forms, medical treatment of madness became popular and it replaced the label of ‘witchcraft’.

In the mid and late 19th century, a common symptom of feminine madness, ‘hysteria’, spread through the middle

class female who reacted against the norms of 19th century in England. The term refers to a condition of nervous excitement in which the sufferer shows strange changes in behaviour [10]. Hysteria was often deemed destructive [11] and was explained as a female condition. The word derives from the Greek word *hysterikos*, which means 'the womb'. Promoted by Hippocrates and later Plato, 'hysteria' was associated with women more than men and it was in the 17th century that it emerged as a woman's illness [12]. Middle and upper class women suffered from hysteria, which prevented them from fulfilling their duties as wives and mothers [13]. They were also considered as morally weak beings who have lost their power to control their lives. Therefore, detached from the real world of men, they were forced to live in asylums, mental hospitals or attics by their husbands because they were uncontrollable, overreacting and revolting.

19th century was an era of changes and scientific progress in the west. Discovery of electricity, Industrial Revolution and medical advances contributed to the ideas related to women as well. During the Victorian period, women, who refused to accept the traditional feminine roles, were not considered as 'witches' anymore, rather, they were seen as weak individuals having psychological and physical problems. As explained by Smith-Rosenberg, symptoms of madness included laughing with cries, loss of sensation, depression, paralysis and exhaustion [14]. Women, who were in search of independence, equal rights and identity, were considered both as unwomanly and insane, and thus, were imprisoned in those asylums by their husbands or fathers. However, instead of a proper medical treatment, the patients faced with the harsh treatment in the asylums, which caused misery and fear among the society.

According to Gilbert and Gubar, 'imprisonment leads to madness, solipsism, and paralysis' [15] and feminine madness was explained in many ways: dysfunction, breakdown, ill fate or punishment of God. Women with strong personality were aware of the restraints and oppressions of men and when they refused to fit into the roles of submissive wives and mothers, their fragility caused hysteria followed by aggression, depression and loss of control.

In the late 1800s, for hysteria and neurasthenia, physician Silas Weir Mitchell initiated 'the rest cure', which was used for post-traumatic stress syndrome to treat soldiers during the Civil War. In Mitchell's therapy, 'the rest-cure could be used to discipline women whose illness became a means of avoiding household duties' [16]. The rest cure therapy lasted six to eight weeks and the patients were forced to stay in bed without any intellectual work until they accepted to obey the rules of society. When refused to obey the rules, ill women were punished physically [17]. For Thrailkill, the rest-cure was interpreted as 'paradigmatic of the patriarchal silencing of women' [18]. As is seen in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the rest cure treatment caused more severe problems for the protagonist. After the therapy, as the writer of the story, Gilman returned home 'close to losing her mind' as she was forced to live a domestic life by staying away from intellectual life.

While Mitchell tried to cure women by isolating from the society, he sent nervous men out to hunting, roping or male

bonding, which reflected cultural stereotypes of the time [19]. In *Wear and Tear: Or Hints for the Overworked*, with this cure therapy, Mitchell stated that the willpower of men was tested to enrich their masculinity, weakened by a feminine illness [20]. The treatment was criticized severely because it was seen both as an archaic notion that women should submit male authority even for the sake of their health and as the suppression of female creativity [21]. Showalter explains the cure therapy in *The Female Malady* as:

When they are bidden to stay a month in bed, and neither to read, write, nor sew, have one nurse- who is not a relative – then rest becomes for some women a rather bitter medicine, and they are glad enough to accept the order to go about when the doctor issues a mandate which has become pleasantly welcome and eagerly looked for. [22]

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Women's Liberation Movement encouraged women to challenge male domination. Although, there are many new treatments and cures for female depression and madness, women's psychological distress was as important as those suffering from hysteria in the 19th century [23]. There are many examples of women who suffer from insanity, depression and hysteria in early literary works. Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was a perfect example of female depression and psychological downfall. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* represents one of the first examples of a woman imprisoned in the attic by her husband, who hides her insanity in a Victorian society. In 1879, Ibsen portrays the hysterical crisis of Nora in *A Doll's House*. In Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss' (1918), Bertha's joy is associated with hysteria. Virginia Woolf also depicts the frustrations and desire for self-assertion of women in *A Room of One's Own*. In many centuries, particularly in the 19th century, the motif of madness was used by writers to indicate how oppressions of society cause female insanity.

The rebel of madwoman was later referred in *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. In their work, Gilbert and Gubar symbolically address the condition of female characters in male dominated societies and how women writers struggle for self-actualization in the literary canon. For Gilbert and Gubar, the mad characters in the literary works are the counterparts of the writers who present the anger, sorrow and rebellion of women. To control and dominate, for Gilbert and Gubar, men labelled women as insane: 'Men have fastened masks over women's faces-identifying them with eternal types of their own invention to possess them more thoroughly' [24].

Either as free souls, victims, witches or insane, many women have suffered from psychological disease caused by their vulnerability, sensibility or intelligence in many patriarchal societies. They were considered as rebels destroying the harmony in the society. With the advances in medical field and science, they are no longer punished at stakes or in asylums, yet, they are put in mental hospitals isolated from the society.

This study analyzes the representations of female madness and the cultural construction of madness in short stories *To Room Nineteen* (1978) by Doris Lessing and *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Both stories

offer a glance at life in which depression and madness destroy the lives of female characters.

## II. ANALYSIS

### A. *Madwomen in Stories*

In both stories, *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *To Room Nineteen*, we witness the images of madwomen suppressed by men within the restraints of the patriarchy. The protagonists try to escape from the oppressions and constraints of the patriarchal society, which lead to nervous breakdowns and suicide. In search of their actual self, they are disturbed by the confusions of their mind, body and soul.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's autobiographical story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist is a 'too wise' Victorian woman, suffering from postpartum depression: 'temporary nervous depression-a slight hysterical tendency'. Both the desperate condition of the 19th century women and the suffering of Gilman are depicted in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The story portrays the status of nineteenth-century women, their frustrations, depressions and rebellions in society ruled by men. The husband, John confines the protagonist to a nursery where she is forced for the rest cure of Dr. Mitchell. In her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Gilman describes her days at the nursery as:

I was put to bed, and kept there. I was fed, bathed, rubbed, and responded with the vigorous body of twenty-six. As far as he could see there was nothing the matter with me, so after a month of this agreeable treatment he sent me home with this prescription: 'Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time... Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live. [25]

During the therapy, the protagonist secretly writes her misery, which represents the misery of all women imprisoned in the bars of male dominated societies during the Victorian period. In the story, treated as a child, she is controlled and protected by her husband, who calls her 'little girl' or 'blessed goose'. She feels trapped and wants to leave the nursery because this cure therapy becomes a torture for her.

As the story progresses, her condition gets worse and she starts seeing hallucinations of some disturbing figures, a figure of a woman 'stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern'. The narrator decides to free her: 'I can see her out of every one of my windows! It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight'. The wallpaper with a 'revolting' color, becomes the symbol of the oppressions of patriarchy. She feels herself being watched all the time because 'those absurd unblinking eyes are everywhere', symbolizing the eyes of society watching women all the time. The narrator regards the wallpaper 'primarily by seeing her own situation - her entrapment, frustration, and anger-reflected back to her' [26]. Throughout the end, she loses her control and even decides to commit suicide: 'To jump out of the window would be

admirable exercise', yet, she thinks that 'a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued'.

For MacPike, the protagonist's desire for freedom is reflected in the trapped woman on the wallpaper, therefore, she desires to rescue both herself and the woman [27]. As she tears the paper, she tears the boundaries of the society: 'I've got out at last [...] in spite of you and Jennie! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back'. As a reflection of herself, she saves the woman in the paper as if she were freeing herself from 'this nervous weakness'. In the story, both the wallpaper and the bars on the windows of her room symbolize the oppressions of the patriarchal society.

Gilman's story is not the story of a mad woman, but the struggle of a woman for the sake of self-expression. According to Craig, 'by forcing women, particularly intelligent women, to sit back and allow their intellectual and artistic gifts to go to waste, women's roles in academic and creative circles became compromised' [28].

Similarly, in *To Room Nineteen*, Lessing depicts the consequences based on the restrictions placed on women in the mid-twentieth century London. Susan Rawlings, the protagonist, is depicted as the angel in the house at the beginning. Abandoning her career, she becomes a submissive, caregiver, loving and sacrificing mother of four children. By blindly accepting the sexual and behavioral patterns imposed by the society, she appears as a perfect sample of 'Cult of Domesticity': the concept that defined women in domestic spheres as wives and mothers in the 19th century. However, as children grow up and start school, she is left alone within the domestic sphere. The loneliness, emptiness and isolation initiate her depression and she becomes a prisoner of her own body and soul. To search for her real identity, Susan tries to escape from the responsibilities of her family and duties of motherhood by renting a hotel room, where becomes 'Mrs Jones'.

Susan's strong personality and intelligence led her realize that she was losing her real identity in the marital bondage and she was unable to continue '*living [my] own life*'. She is tired of 'irritation, restlessness, emptiness' despite her husband and four children. In fact, as she declares to the hotel manageress, the real cause of her madness is her family: 'Miss Townsend, my four children and my husband are driving me insane, do you understand?'. The main crisis of Susan's life starts as she learns the betrayal of Matthew. In fact, her 'intelligence' and 'awareness' cause her frustration in life. She feels trapped, suppressed and isolated in the patriarchal society where she becomes a prisoner. Therefore, as the story progresses, we see her struggling not only with herself but also with the society, represented through the image of a 'demon'. Her fears in life cause a mental breakdown and Susan, the angel, fights with the devil: 'She see nothing but her devil, who lifted inhuman eyes at her from where he leaned negligently on a rock...'. While she brushes her hair in the mirror, she thinks: 'Yet that's the reflection of a madwoman' looking like a 'green-eyed demon with its dry meager smile'. Susan's madness can be explained as the result of the clash between her personality and the public expectations.

In the end, her ‘imprisonment leads to madness, solipsism, paralysis’ [29] and suicide. For many critics, her suicide indicates her success in her quest for true self. In fact, she rebels against the norms of society that imposes roles on women.

### III. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, female mental illness has been a major topic in literary works for ages. ‘Female madness’ can be defined as any female behavior that was outside the social norms in patriarchal societies. In general, it is defined as a diagnosis that many women resist and escape in order to survive in patriarchal societies [30]. Both Gilman and Lessing, who lived at the time when women were more aware of the inequalities in society, drew extensively on inner lives of women. Their female protagonists are isolated, alienated and rebelled against the roles proffered on them by society. The writers of these two stories are the counterparts to the main characters and they represent the inner struggles of women in general.

To further clarify, in order to escape from the oppressions of the male dominated society, protagonists in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *To Room Nineteen* draw lines between madness and death. Since women feel oppressed and imprisoned within the boundaries of patriarchal society and tired of ‘role-playing’ as mothers and wives, they suffer from breakdowns, solipsism and desperation. Although written in different centuries, in both stories, women characters are alike and represent ‘women’ in general. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist is ‘too wise’ and in *To Room Nineteen*, Susan’s story is a ‘failure in intelligence’. They struggle both with their inner selves and with the society ruled by men.

It would not be wrong to conclude that both female protagonists gain victory in different senses. The narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* manages to shift roles with her husband: ‘Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!’. She becomes the powerful one when her husband cries and begs. In *To Room Nineteen*, Susan frees her life rather than accepting the roles imposed upon her by the society.

The concept of madness has been a major topic for the women writers of literature. It has been discussed and defined in many forms and generally explained as a reaction against the rules of patriarchal societies and oppressions of men. However, it would be proper to analyze the causes, alternative explanations and the consequences of female madness from different points of view as is widely discussed in Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive?* (1998). Furthermore, in Lisa Appignanesi’s *Mad, Bad and Sad* (2009), the history of women suffering from insanity from 1800s to present is explained in detail.

Although the ends of the stories reflect the tragedies of women characters: an insanity and a suicide, as Laing states

‘Madness need not to be a breakdown; it may also be a breakthrough’ [31].

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