



Madness in Women's Fiction: A Reading of Subversive/Redemptive Strategies in Three Novels by Jean Rhys, Sylvia Plath, and Margaret Atwood

Saba Marwan Suleiman *

English Department, Al Jouf University, Al Qurayyat, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

This article investigates a sample of women's writing with relation to the depiction of female madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1968) by Jean Rhys, *The Bell Jar* (1971) by Sylvia Plath, and *Surfacing* (1973) by Margaret Atwood. This argument uses feminist theory and focuses on madness as a redemptive strategy for madwomen. The novels under analysis reveal the struggle of the "mad" heroines to have a voice of their own. In addition, the discussion suggests that female writers try to articulate their experiences, which were otherwise culturally muted, through giving madwomen a voice in their texts. This study thoroughly looks into the three selected novels to investigate their heroines' language, identities, and hysteria from a feminist point of view. This discussion exposes the ways women are marginalized in their professional—and private—lives and investigates what might lead them to madness—real or constructed. Women can subversively use their image as mad to protect themselves from patriarchal oppression and to react against this oppression through symbolic writing. These novels serve the aim of this study because of their narrative perspectives and their common but nuanced treatment of madness. My contribution is my selection of such diverse novels and my proposed analysis of the theme of madness as an example of the subversive potential of feminine writing. The issue of madness in feminist fiction may not be particularly new. However, this study proves that this trope of the madwoman is a transgressive one in that it resists dominant power structures and threatens an apparently ordered, "rational" patriarchal culture. It has been possible through dissecting the inner psychology of the protagonists of the novels—Antoinette, Esther, and Atwood's anonymous heroine—to ascertain how male domination has a negative impact on the psychological, social, and spiritual lives of women. Although male-domination has a negative impact on the heroines' lives, their madness sometimes appears as a willed choice against patriarchal oppression. Consequently, in tackling the central issue of madness in women's fiction as subversive/redemptive strategy through analyzing the characters of Antoinette, Esther, and Atwood's anonymous heroine, this article presents madness as a means to express women's real being and resist patriarchal oppression from within its own power structures. The discussed novels are written by female writers and have emerged as major narratives of madness in the twentieth century, whereby the figure of the madwoman ultimately empowers women and thus redeems them.

Keywords: Feminist Theory; Women's Fiction; Madness; Redemption; Language; Identity

INTRODUCTION

"Women are resigning themselves to silence, and to non-speech. The speech of the other will then swallow them up, will speak *for* them, and *instead* of them." (Makward qtd. in Caminero-Santangelo, 1998: 2). This introductory section provides an overview of the history of madness, and it then tackles madness and its relation to literature and women. In this discussion, I want to highlight the influence of patriarchal society on women's mental conditions and how women use their madness as a redemptive strategy, as represented in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1968), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1971) and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1973). In order to analyze these novels, some key terms must be defined before turning to the individual literary works. My feminist analysis is based on concepts such as "subversion," "redemption," and "madness."

To understand the subject of madness as a redemptive strategy, we need to analyze madness in women's writings. Madness can be defined in many ways, and yet no definition will be completely satisfactory. Women have used madness as a strategy to fight for their freedom. However, this study explores madness in women's writing as an escape from patriarchal oppression, which is reflected through their subversively narrated personality or the characters' personality disorders. In other words, such texts by female writers are endeavors in the current postmodern practice of "textual politics." I intend to explore interrelated issues like how the social and historical context contributed to the "madness" of the protagonists in the novels to be considered. The heroines' madness is an evidence of such male oppression. My approach will be to explore female madness in the aforementioned literary works.

The aim of this study is to analyze the theme of madness in these novels as a resistance strategy and discuss how the concentration on the subversive figure of the madwoman leads to redemption. The creation of a madwoman in the previous novels enables the heroines to protest against their submissive position in society. The heroines start by inventing a feminine language, which leads them to create a new identity. However, their revelations further lead them into madness, which is their final step toward redemption.

MADNESS AND FEMININE LANGUAGE

"Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" - Helen Cixous

This epigraph shows how heroines create their own language and write themselves in order to be heard and to have an identity. Therefore, the heroines' language and identity will make them have their own voice and free will to choose madness to redeem them. This section will examine how the heroines refuse male language through inventing their texts to project their opinions and experiences. The heroines' narratives empower and support the heroines' viewpoints. In addition, the heroines' language serves to promote their power; the language of madness gives them great power.

Arguing that men who have historically controlled most of the production of language have privileged rationality, theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous advocate *l'écriture féminine*, a term loosely translated as "feminine writing".

Écriture féminine is basically a term coined by Helen Cixous in “The Laugh of Medusa”. Cixous offers feminine writing as to allow feminine desire and language to reconstruct a movement against male structures that have defined language over time. Thus, the heroines employ the language of madness as a revolutionary movement against male conventions. This kind of language which Cixous “believes best expresses itself in writing, is called écriture féminine (feminine writing). It is fluidly organized and freely associative. It resists patriarchal modes of thinking and writing, which generally require prescribed, correct methods of organization, rationalist rules of logic...and linear reasoning” (Tyson, 2006: 100-101). Therefore, women derive their strength from their own language by emphasizing the theme of madness to empower their literary texts. Therefore, women “need a new, feminine language that undermines or eliminates the patriarchal binary thinking that oppresses and silences women” (Tyson, 2006: 100). Women writers' personal involvement in their literary works appeared through their mentally-ill characters. Moreover, women and their long history of madness in literature led them to write and use this particular theme to represent themselves as resistant and defiant.

In “The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory”, Nina Baym argues that French feminist literary theory appears to approve of the figure of the madwoman as redemptive (1984: 48). Baym asserts that the use of madwoman characters is a salvation strategy for redemption, and this madness is a subversive image for women. Additionally, Baym argues that the madwoman becomes the empowered subject; she also says that a theory of uniquely female language arises (1984: 49). Women writers create the image of a madwoman, and it becomes not only a subject to deal with but a form of praxis. Indeed, from this a new female language springs and emerges in literature.

For some feminist thinkers, Irigaray argues that “the way to get beyond patriarchy is by means of the same vehicle that programmed us within patriarchy: language” (Tyson, 102). Irigaray calls her notion of woman's language “womanspeak” and she “finds its source in the female body” (1985: 29). Since female language replaces male language, women should embrace *feminine écriture* and womanspeak to take us beyond patriarchal oppression.

In her study *Julia Kristeva*, Noëlle McAfee provides a clear explanation of Julia Kristeva's work on the semiotic and the symbolic. She argues that a language produces not only meanings, but also human subjects, in both psychological and physical terms. She also urges the reader to analyze the signifying process, not the surface meaning, and the creative underlying acts which give them meaning. Moreover, Kristeva discusses the representation of male power in our society, and she rejects the idea that language and culture are basically patriarchal and therefore must be abandoned. Kristeva's theory has two modes: the semiotic and the symbolic. Semiotic means relating to the study of signs, from Greek *sēmeiotikos* ‘of signs’, from *sēmeioun* ‘interpret as a sign’ (2004: 17). By contrast,

The symbolic is a mode of signifying in which speaking beings attempt to express meaning with as little ambiguity as possible. The semiotic could be seen as the modes of

expression that originate in the unconscious. Whereas, the symbolism could be seen as the conscious way a person tries to express using a stable sign system (whether written, spoken, or gestured with sign language). The two modes, however, are not completely separate: we use symbolic modes of signifying to state a position, but this position can be destabilized or unsettled by semiotic drives and articulations. (qtd. in McAfee 17)

The heroines in the novels express their unconscious through a certain written language, and their unconscious expresses a rebellion against male values. The symbolic represents the rational male language, but the semiotic represents the irrational female language. The symbolic is interrupted by women's language, and the motivation for establishing their language is to replace the man-made language. The symbolic order becomes unsettled by women's drives of projecting the image of the madwoman. Subsequently, Kristeva observes that

language is the dominion of patriarchy, which controls its symbolic, or meaning-making, dimension. The semiotic, however, remains beyond patriarchal programming, and whatever patriarchy can't control outright, it represses. For these are the vehicles that allow us a new way to relate to language and to thereby overcome the stranglehold patriarchy has on the way women and men think. (qtd. in Tyson 104)

As mentioned earlier, a female language springs from their unconscious where the semiotic resides, for example, through such creative means as literature that makes it a way to communicate with others and express the inner self. Women used a language to express the trope of madness as a means of demonstrating their resistance, opinions, and emotions toward male domination. In addition, madness plays a role in the language used by women as the main strategy to resist patriarchy. Actually, literature also gives a motivation in real life for fighting all forms of male domination.

The woman writer uses symbolism as a way of expression to refer to mad behavior; this behavior originates from her unconscious which carries a patriarchal heritage in language and literature. Women writers refuse to accept the patriarchal language that dominated literature for decades.

Yet, as might be expected, feminist theorists question the effectiveness of madness as a resistance writing strategy. Critics such as Virginia Woolf call for the symbolic resolution of the madwoman in fictional texts. However, in *Women, Men and Language*, Jennifer Coates discusses Virginia Woolf and how she gives women an insight into the "problems of using language that for centuries been in the hands of men" (1993: 29). Woolf asserts that language has been in men's control:

Before a woman can write exactly as she wishes to write, she has many difficulties to face. To begin with, there is the technical difficulty - so simple, apparently; in reality, so baffling - that the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use. Yet in a novel, which covers so wide a stretch of ground, an ordinary and usual type of sentence has to be found to carry the reader on easily and naturally from one end of the book to the other. And this a woman must make for herself, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes one

that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it. (qtd. in Coates, 1993: 29)

Woolf contends that the written sentence is “made by men”, and women continue writing until their writings take the shape of their thoughts and expressions and they have their language. Language contains power; however, women unfortunately were rarely given the chance to use language in a way to have power in society.

Women, who often became hysterics because of men, could be characterized by their display of exaggerated stereotypes of femininity. Hysterical women were put into asylums, which, in return, exaggerated the patriarchal norms and values. The more women raged against social constraints, the more they were constrained. Within patriarchal society and within asylums, accordingly, women had to succumb to what Jacques Lacan calls the “Law of the Father”. As a consequence, women had to yield to the rules of (patriarchal) male language in order to enter the symbolic order and to become speaking subjects accepted in society.

In this chapter, three novels that employ the madwoman figure as their protagonist, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *The Bell Jar*, and *Surfacing*, will be read using Kristeva’s the symbolic and the semiotic understanding of language. Through this application, I will highlight the ways in which the three texts concentrate on specific concepts in each stage in the novels. Though, due to the space limitations of this article, I suggest a possible method that can be further tested on similar novels and thus developed further by other researchers. It is important to also note that the intention of this study is not to criticize novels that break down certain social and literary conventions but rather to build upon feminist scholarship.

CONCLUSION

In women’s fiction, the heroines’ madness redeems them from patriarchal domination which is deeply rooted in society. Although the three heroine narrators discussed in this article are different characters and live in different social situations, they share the choice to escape patriarchal oppression by means of madness. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette resists her husband’s control over her and chooses madness as redemption over her domestic life. She is locked in the attic away from her land and society since her only fault is that she wants to free herself. However, Antoinette manages to subvert and rebel against her situation, and instead of being locked in a closed dark room in the attic under Rochester’s control, a representative of the patriarchal oppression, she finds her own redemption in madness. Madness becomes Antoinette’s means to defy the role assigned to her by the patriarchal society. As a result, madness can be considered as a tool for resistance and redemption. *The Bell Jar* and *Surfacing* may serve as representative texts of mental disorders. Although no technical definition of their madness is clearly stated in the novels, both texts exhibit symptoms which match the status quo of depression and schizophrenia.

The major themes in these literary works are madness, establishing a female language, creating an identity, and hysteria. These themes are interlinked and cannot be handled independently. All themes aim at redeeming the heroines and breaking the patriarchal order which suppresses them. The redemption in the heroines’ madness in *Wide Sargasso*

Sea, *The Bell Jar*, and *Surfacing* starts by inventing language, which leads to creating a female identity. However, their increasing awareness leads them to choose madness, their final step towards redemption.

According to feminist theory, men have always associated women with "otherness", and since otherness means being different, women started to associate being different with being mad and that made them think of madness as an escape or a route to salvation; thus in death or suicide women find a way of ending their suffering.

The heroines' awareness of the potential of subversive madness allows them to affirm their own existence. The process of redemption does not come all at once; it happens step by step. Redemption is not part of a personal quest, but rather a prerequisite for a new and correct social orientation of the heroine. In these novels, suicide, death, and escape are being used as a means for the heroines to achieve redemption. For example, Esther's suicidal decision to lose virginity and to commit suicide echo the heroic female madness of her century meant to move women from voicelessness to subjectivity. Thus, Esther's redemption will come not because of the near-death experience itself but because of the fact that she continues to live and seek to improve. At the end of *The Bell Jar*, Esther is not sure if madness will descend again as when she states: "But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday -- at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere -- the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (126); but just because there is no closure does not mean that there is no redemption. The heroines only need to think about redemption differently, and what is important is the desire to escape, to find redemption in madness that would affirm the disinterested attitude to the past in order to find salvation.

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