

# The Women's Struggle in a Patriarchal Society

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**Abstract:** Among the many different female images in literature, a special group is "mad women". The stereotype of mad woman may have changed along with the social transition, but their rhetoric functions in literature share some common grounds. This paper tries to apply feminist approach to analyze the classical mad women images in English literature, demonstrating that the female characters' madness in a patriarchal society is not mental disorder; but a female self-expression to challenge the male-dominated social structure.

## 1. Introduction

Madness was diagnosed as psychiatric disease at the end of 18th century. Since then, the exchange between madness and reason was split off. The language of psychiatry became the rational monologue about madness. However, the psychiatric language is built upon the silence of the mad who have already lost the discourse power so it is just assertion on the one side. One of the most influential studies on madness is contemporary philosopher Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. In this book, Foucault traces the evolution of the concept of madness and argues that the mad are marginalized as "the other" with the development of civilization. The madness is the consequence of specific powerful social structure instead of the mental or physical abnormality.

In contemporary English literature, with the emerging of feminism, the female images have undergone significant change, from the aristocratic lady waiting to be rescued by knight's love to the housewife who is tortured by family and marriage, from woman worrier fighting for freedom and liberty to mad woman without discourse power, the women images are more and more diverse. Among them, the "mad women" constitute a special group of female characters in English literature.

## 2. The mad women in English literature

### 2.1 Ophelia in Hamlet

The most well-known mad woman in Renaissance literature is Ophelia in *Hamlet* (1599-1602). *Hamlet* famous monologue [Frailty, thy name is woman!] (Shakespeare, 26) shows the stereotypic devaluation of female image in a male-dominated society. The only two female characters in the play, not only the queen Gertrude shows the frailty of woman, Ophelia also reflects it through her obedience to the dominate male characters in her life.

When Ophelia's brother Laertes instructs her to stay away from Hamlet, Ophelia's answer is [I shall the effect of this good lesson keep as watchman to my heart] (Shakespeare, 36) and reassures him again with [Tis in my memory locked, and you yourself shall keep the key of it] (Shakespeare, 40) Another dominate male character, her father Polonius also charges Ophelia to do so and Ophelia has nothing to argue just [I shall obey, my lord] (Shakespeare, 42). Ophelia does not possess much discourse power before she is "divided from herself" (Shakespeare, 196), most of her lines are simple and brief as a way to demonstrate her submission to the patriarchal discourse. After that, she talks in riddles and rhymes, and sing songs with reasonable implication. The courtier comments [Her speech is nothing, Yet the unshaped use of it doth move The hearers to collection; they aim at it. And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts] (Shakespeare, 190). Even her brother Laertes regards distracted Ophelia's speech as [A document in madness! Thought and remembrance fitted]

(Shakespeare, 202). The madness is the sensible choice for Ophelia since she is unable to utter her thought under the patriarchal discourse power. Only in madness can she express her own voice.

## **2.2 Bertha in Jean Eyre and Antoinette in Wide Sargasso Sea**

The British novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) is generally acknowledged as a classic of feminism with its heroine Jane Eyre's fulfillment of adulthood through pursuit equality in love. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) propose that the all female characters male authored literature can be categorized as either an angel or a monster, determined by whether their qualities cater to the social norms for daughter, wife and mother. However, many contemporary female authors do not limit their female characters into these two categories. If Ophelia is portrayed as "angel" by male writer Shakespeare, Jane Eyre possesses mixed qualities of angel as well as monster: pure, moral and sensible while extremely independent, courageous and passionate. Especially for her childhood experience, Jane is a typical monster who shows much anger and rebelliousness.

The happy ending of *Jane Eyre* is achieved at the cost of Rochester's mad wife Bertha Mason's life. While Jane has an invisible monster side inside of her, Bertha in *Jane Eyre* is directly depicted as a deformed monster: [In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forward. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face] (Bronte, 415-416). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpret Bertha as the embodiment of rage and frustration of the female writer Charlotte Bronte in a male-dominated literary tradition in the landmark of second-wave feminist criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, which title is derived from Bertha Mason in the *Jane Eyre*, who is locked in the attic and accused of madness by her husband Rochester. So the mad woman Bertha is interpreted as Bronte's resistance to male-centered culture. Nevertheless, under the influence of the patriarchal social norms, the mad woman is silenced and deformed by the female writer.

In the prequel to *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Jean Rhys endows Bertha, who is originally named as "Antoinette" and renamed by Rochester as "Bertha" later, with the power to narrate her own story and tells her madness from different narrative perspectives: Rochester's perspective in chapter two and Bertha's perspective in chapter three. Rochester narrates himself to be the victim of their marriage and refers Antoinette as [a drunken lying lunatic] (Rhys, 135) and [a mad girl...She'll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would or could] (Rhys, 136). Rochester accuses Antoinette of being mad for three reasons: she inherits the madness from her mother; she is too passionate about love and sex, which is against the Victorian moral norm for women; When Antoinette is hurt, she would moan, cry, curse and drink excessively, even tries to kill Rochester when she finds herself is betrayed by him. Of course, those behaviors violate the moral norms for English women.

According to Blaire Showalter, the female come to represent kind of madness in the 19th century and this female "madness" derives from unchecked sexual behavior. During this era, the major defined symptom of female madness is associated with incontinent sexuality (Showalter, 74). Rochester, who grows up in England, is restricted by the old world values. He can appreciate neither the exotic view of Caribbean island nor the passionate nature of Antoinette, so does Charlotte Bronte, who unsympathetically depicts Bertha as dehumanized and deformed howling animal in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is deprived of authority of discourse and facing charges from the narrator Rochester.

Antoinette's abnormal behavior is the result of her passionate nature. As Christophine says that Antoinette is "Creole girl, and she has the sun in her" (Rhys, 130). Antoinette grows up in Caribbean area without the restriction of Victorian values, so it is hard for her to act according to Rochester's norms. When she detects the crisis in her marriage, she drinks to paralyze herself. Drinking is a typical way to ease the misery for man, but for woman, it is a behavior of intemperance according to the double standards. Not only drinking, curse and physical violence are also considered as the unique rights for man that Antoinette's such behaviors disobeys the norms set for the women. Antoinette's

madness is the accusation of violation social norms by the patriarchal power.

### **2.3 The nameless woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper***

Similarly, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), the unnamed woman is diagnosed as "temporary nervous depression--- a slight hysterical tendency" by her physician husband John. Different from Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, the heroine "I" is a female writer with authority of discourse. However, she is forbidden to write after marriage. From her husband standpoint, pursuit a career in the writing goes against the family role of the female, and that's the root of her nervousness. As the great female writer Virginia Woolf points out in *A Room of One's Own*, [A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction] (Woolf, 2). In a male-centered culture, writing is regarded as privilege of men. Without independent status in the society as a writer, she degenerates into a wife as an attachment to the husband.

Even since being confined in a house chose by her husband on her account, she loses the ability to write. The crawling and creeping women behind the strip pattern of the yellow wallpaper is in the same position as "I", restricted by kinds of social norms in the patriarchal society. When she peels off all the wallpaper, the violent behavior sets the women behind the pattern free, thus she finds a way to break the confinement set by her husband, that is, the patriarchal norms. During the Victorian era (1837-1901), the patriarchal power had reached its peak in the English world and the society had formed its standard on female morality. The wife is considered as the "angel in the house". If women violets those moral values, they would be taken as being mad or hysteria.

### **2.4 Mary in *Long Day's Journey into Night***

The same criterion on women still exists in the United States in the 19th century. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg concludes that: [Nineteenth-century American society provided but one socially respectable, nondeviant role for women—that of loving wife and mother] (Smith-Rosenberg: 213) Eugene O'Neill portrays a distorted wife and mother Mary Cavan Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Mary has been addicted to morphine since the difficult birth of her youngest son Edmund. It seems that the doctor abusing painkiller in the treatment leads to her longtime addiction, but what really pushes her to morphine is the pressure and indifference in her family. Mary is isolated by her family and friends because of her indecent marriage and the unstable after-marriage life hinder her to establish connection with the outside world. Although Mary is plagued by her emotional solitude, her husband James wishes her to be a strong wife and her sons James and Edmund still crave maternal love from her. The male power in her life, the husband and sons ignores Mary's emotional needs and expect her to resume the responsibility of "loving wife and mother". Only in the self-delusion brought by the morphine can she return to her maiden time, when she does not have to shoulder the burden of family. Mary's madness in the delusion is her struggle to get rid of the tag of "wife and mother" in the patriarchal society.

## **3. Conclusions**

The feminist critics like Gilbert Sandra, Gubar Susan, Elaine Showalter and Carroll Simon-Rosenberg have already attached importance to the mad women images in male and female literature. In their researches, madness is a way out for women in a man-dominated society. From the "mad Ophelia" sympathized by male writer to the "mad Bertha" despised by the female writer, form the "mad Antoinette" rising against the male power in the female writer's fiction to the "mad Mary" resisting family burden in the male writer's drama, the mad women choose madness as their weapon to fight against the mainstream culture. Woman is "the other" to a patriarchy society while madness is "the other" to reason. The mad women in English literature could not simply be interpreted as victims of mental disease. The image of mad woman is the demonstration of rhetoric strategy in a patriarchal culture. In order to escape the restriction and expectation from the social norms, those women appear to be "the other" to the mainstream culture. Their madness is the passive revolt against the patriarchal norms, and their mad words reveal their true feeling deep down inside. With the emerging of

feminism, the mad women images not only appear in female writers' works, the male writers also realize the function of mad women in literature and apply those images in their writing.

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