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Silenced Spaces, Rebellious Voices: The Madwoman Trope In Global Feminist Literature

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Abstract

The concept of the "madwoman in the attic" is revisited in this article as a crucial metaphor for gendered resistance in postcolonial, Palestinian, and Western women's literature. The study examines how literary depictions of madness serve as intentional rejections of patriarchy, silence, and colonial epistemologies using feminist and postcolonial [1]frameworks, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's theory of narrative madness, Helen Cixou's concept of ecriture feminine, Gyatri Spivak's subaltern critique, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's dismantling of Western feminist universalism. The paper makes the case that madness is a symbolic form of ontological and political rebellion rather than psychological dysfunction by closely examining Sahar Khalifeh's Wild Thorns and the Inheritance, Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions, and Charlotte Perkin Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper. While narrative fragmentation and broken chronologies reflect the suppressed agency of women denied discursive authority, the home sphere—traditionally seen as a zone of containment—is reframed as both carceral and rebellious. The paper suggests a global feminist approach that reclaims madness as an expressive, resistant grammar, presenting the madwoman as a potent symbol of ideological and narrative disruption rather than a marginalized figure.

1. Introduction

One of the most powerful metaphors for women's rebellion, repression, and narrative resistance in literary history is the character of the "madwoman." Madwomen in literature are not just characters with mental instability; they are also representations of profound cultural and psychological tensions—women marginalized for defying the normal scripts of femininity and obedience—and are frequently ignored or suppressed within patriarchal systems. With the publication of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work, The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), the trope gained prominence in feminist literary criticism. The authors contended that nineteenth-century literature frequently positioned women as either passive "angels" or "monstrous "madwomen," restricting their representation within a rigid patriarchal binary.

Female insanity was reconstructed by Gilbert and Gubar as a symbolic revolt against a literary legacy that marginalized, silenced, and misrepresented women rather than as a sign of personal illness. They discovered how lunacy might be a radical critique of patriarchal tyranny through their reading of Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, which features Bertha Mason as the madwoman. Since then, feminist writers and scholars have utilized the madwoman as a potent literary icon to examine how women internalize, challenge, and ultimately challenge cultural conventions that deprive them of autonomy and voice.

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Although the madwoman was first examined in Western literary contexts, its significance cuts across national and cultural lines. Because of the interlocking forces of colonialism, patriarchy, religion, and war, women in postcolonial societies—especially in African and Palestinian literature—have also been depicted as being hushed, restricted, and mentally broken. In these stories, insanity is frequently a reaction to systemic violence—a form of protest when speech is restricted or dangerous. By using the madwoman archetype in a global feminist context, this work seeks to broaden the application of Gilbert and Gubar's theory.

It compares the Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions, and a few more writers like Susan Abdulhawa and Sahar Khalifeh. The study investigates how female lunacy might be recast as a place of resistance rather than weakness—a kind of rebellion against the colonial, cultural, and gendered oppression that still silences women worldwide—by putting these works in dialogue.

The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) provides a fundamental critique of the historical representation of women in literature. The fact that female characters have frequently been limited to one or two archetypes—the selfless "angel" or the transgressive "monster"—is at the heart of their argument. They contend that these polar extremes represent male-authored ideas and fears about femininity rather than actual women. "The 'angel' woman and the 'monster' woman are two extreme images of female characters which male authors have generated for their fictional women; as such, they are real images of male authors' own anxieties and ambivalence about women," Gilbert and Gubar write (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p.17).

The so-called "mad woman in the attic," Bertha Mason, is not only a plot device or a representation of insanity in their analysis of Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre; rather, she is Jane's double, a "avatar of rage" that represents the Victorian woman's repressed anger: "Bertha is Jane's truest and darkest double… the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self, Charlotte Bronte imagined in the midst of her own polite, ladylike self-control" (p 360).

Gilbert and Gubar's designation of Bertha as a "double" implies that in women's literature, craziness is not a sign of illness but rather a literary device used to express suppressed intellectual and emotional annoyances. The internal struggles that women writers faced as they negotiated a literary tradition that both praised and vilified the feminine, leaving little opportunity for genuine self-expression, are revealed by their analysis. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the "angel/monster" binary limited women's writing abilities in addition to determining the roles they could play in fiction. They observe: "The female writer must murder the female heroine in order to write if she is the heroine of the male plot" (p. 17). Understanding female madness in literature as an act of literary and psychological resistance—an escape from the confining scripts of conventional womanhood—rather than as a deviation or failure is made possible by this powerful metaphor of "killing the angel."

Even though the protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper (1892) is really imprisoned in a nursery room rather than an attic, it is one of the most potent literary representations of the madwoman in the attic metaphor. The story eloquently demonstrates how female insanity serves as a metaphor for defiance of patriarchal authority, particularly in the areas of medicine, marriage, and literature. Gilman's narrator starts out as the perfect housewife but is soon hushed, confined, and infantilized under the pretense of the "rest cure" that her doctor husband has given. This restriction is indicative of space: The narrator is confined in a room with barred windows, motionless furniture, and an unsettling yellow wall paper that serves as the backdrop for her mental breakdown, making her captivity spatially metaphorical. “The windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls” (Gilman, the Yellow Wallpaper).

This nursery area serves the same purpose as an attic in terms of psychological suppression and isolation, although not being an attic. It is an allegory for an attic—a secret

room reserved for awkward women. Gilman's narrator is confined away from the public view and denied the freedom to write, talk, or even think for herself, just like Bertha Mason. "John says thinking about my condition is the worst thing I can do." He detests it when I write anything. The situation Gilbert and Gubar outlined, in which women must either murder the "angel in the house" or go insane attempting to fit in, is reflected in this.

This story paints a terrifying picture of a woman's spiral into insanity while receiving "treatment". The story is a precise literary response to late nineteenth century medical discourses, especially the "rest-cure" therapy recommended for women diagnosed with "nervous disorders", even if it is frequently examined through the lens of feminist literary theory. Dr. S. Weir Mitchell administered this treatment to Gilman herself. The breakdown of fictive narrator also reflects what Gilman called a "mental suicide" brought on by forced inactivity. It is imperative to situate the story alongside Barbara Ehrenrich and Deidre English For their own Good (1978) in order to completely comprehend the power dynamics at play in it.

Ehrenreich and English show in this historical-feminist text how medical science replaced religion and tradition as a contemporary rationale for regulating women's roles, sexuality, and intelligence, so becoming a new patriarchal authority. According to Ehrenrich and English, the medical field operated as a contemporary patriarchy in the late nineteenth century, with skilled male physicians positioning themselves as the judges of women's mental health and using diagnoses like "hysteria" or "neurasthenia" to diagnose women even when they were merely exhibiting ambition or intellectual activity. This pathologizing of commonplace discontent or artistic motivation acted to repress individuality and compel household responsibilities. Physicians such as Dr. Mitchell believed that upper-middle-class, clever women posed a threat to social order: "There are various sorts of fools. However, no human being is more complete than a foolish woman who is weak and anxious in order to completely ruin a household.

Here, women's emotional expressiveness and creative energy were presented as harmful aberrations rather than as assets. Patriarchy was afraid that women who were independent, curious, or talented writers would question male authority in the home and in public. Ehrenrich and English describe how women were sequestered for months or years in order to "repair" them using the rest cure, a mainstay of late nineteenth-century gynecological treatment: "At first. I forbid the sufferer from sitting up, sewing, writing, or reading. I demand that the nurse feed the patient.

Neurasthenic ladies of "high culture and refinement were prime candidates—viewed as delicate and dangerous in their idleness"—were disproportionately subjected to this procedure. In one instance, Mitchell took care of a refined woman who had been bedridden and isolated for several years. The narrator's husband and doctor, John, in the Yellow Wallpaper, symbolizes the meeting point of patriarchal authority and medical power. In addition to denying his wife liberty and forcing her into social and physical isolation, he infantilizes her. Ehrenrich and English claim that this type of treatment was institutionalized rather than uncommon.

They contend that the medical community "diagnosed normal female behavior-passion, ambition, intellect- as symptoms of pathology" in the late nineteenth century (1978, p. 101). Mitchell created the rest treatment specifically for "over-educated," middle-class, upper-class white women, whom society believed were renouncing their roles as mothers and wives. The rest cure required women to abstain from all intellectual stimulation, including writing, reading, and socializing—exactly the activities that linked them to freedom, authorship, and thought. According to Ehrenrich and English, this recommendation stemmed from the idea that women's energies need to be focused within, toward domesticity and procreation, rather than outward, toward knowledge or creativity: "the scientific experts found an alternative to the stake: the medical couch, the asylum, and the tranquilizer" (1978, p. 105). In this way, obedience comes at the cost of insanity. The woman behind the yellow wallpaper is the object

of Gilman's narrator's resistance, which she projects onto her after internalizing this control to the extent that she must split herself: "the woman behind shakes it!" "I'm finally free... you can't take me back!" The inevitable conclusion of a system that deems female autonomy as disease is her disintegration. Gilman's critique is particularly potent since it shows that intentional erasure of the mind and will, rather than a failing of the intellect, is what leads to lunacy. The narrator's supposed disease is just her inability to fit into the roles that patriarchal science has prescribed for her. Ehrenrich and English emphasize that women were often treated for “hysteria” or “neurasthenic” simply for being unhappy or ambitious in ways that unsettled the domestic order. They write: “women’s unhappiness was pathologized, their resistance medicalized. What needed curing, it turned out, was not disease but dissent” (p.113). The nameless narrator's experience is exactly in line with this diagnosis: her despair is written off as oversensitivity, her desires are prohibited, and her intelligence is questioned. Her writing, which is her sole form of self-expression, is prohibited not because it hurts her but rather because it challenges male authority. As the narrative goes on, the narrator develops an obsession with the bizarre, disorganized patterns on the wallpaper. She starts to glimpse a woman attempting to escape from the wallpaper. Her subconscious is this twin or shadow-self—the madwoman coming forth. “The front pattern does move- and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it…I think that woman gets out in the daytime! And I’ll tell you why- privately- I’ve seen her!” Gilbert and Gubar call such doubles “the author’s secret self”- the part of her that rages, resists, and breaks social norms.

The woman in the wallpaper is the narrator's suppressed, concealed character, which is imprisoned behind both actual walls and the symbolic "wallpaper" of home ideology, much like Bertha Mason is Jane Eyre's evil counterpart. The narrator completely identifies with the woman in the wallpaper in the story's last scene. In a symbolic act of defiance, she crawls over her unconscious spouse and tears down the paper. Her insanity is no longer a disease; rather, it is a rejection of patriarchal notions of normality and a liberation via insanity. “I’ve got out at last… And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back”, she declares.

This instance strongly parallels Gilbert and Gubar's assertion that in order for women to become authors, they must demolish the "angel." Writing herself free, even if it means being labeled insane, is what Gilman's narrator does. The narrative is a biting indictment of medical misogyny posing as compassion, not just a chronicle of personal collapse. What Ehrenrich and English document—that the male-dominated medical field pathologized femininity, suppressed female agency, and turned care into control—is given voice by Gilman's account.

Through story form, The Yellow Wallpaper presents a feminist resistance. By employing form and voice to enact what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), described as doubling of identity—the socially acceptable self and the repressed, rebellious one—the author creates a narrative that reflects the psychological decline of the unnamed narrator. Through a disjointed, diary-style, first-person narrative, Gilman creates a textual representation of insanity that, ironically, turns into a place of empowerment and ownership. The "angel in the house" image that Gilbert and Gubar criticize is reflected in Gilman's narrator, who starts out submissive and controlled. Her tone is submissive and passive at first. “John is a physician, and perhaps… that is one reason I do not get well faster”. She uses borrowed authority, apologies, and moderated comments when speaking. However, as the story goes on, the sentences become more frenzied, poetic, and shorter—like bits of steam-of-consciousness. The breakdown of patriarchal logic, or John's logic, which had previously governed her world, is analogous to the breakdown of syntactic control. When Gilbert and Gubar state that nineteenth-century women writers had to develop "a deliberately oblique and elusive style, a distinctive literary discourse," they are referring to this breakdown of narrative "reason" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 73). The narrator's writing gets increasingly personal, direct, and authoritative as she spirals into insanity: “There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.” She starts to value her own opinion more than her husband's, and

as a result, her voice becomes independent. Thus, her "madness" turns into a way of seeing and talking that gets past the patriarchal filter. She even starts using declaratives and revelations in her speech: “I’ve got out at last… And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!”

Although this last moment is frequently interpreted as psychosis, it also reads as victory because she has asserted her right to tell her own story, even if it is in terms of insanity, and is no longer told by others—her husband, doctor, or society. This structural disarray—journal entries that become increasingly erratic, compulsive, and visceral—reflects what Gilbert and Gubar describe as the linguistic rebellion of female writers. They write: “to be a woman writer in the nineteenth century… was to be the madwoman in the attic, to be Jane Eyre’s Bertha, to be imprisoned in a room without access to her own story” (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 85).

The narrator in Gilman's story is actually imprisoned in a chamber. However, she simultaneously dismantles the language of male reason and scientific authority by writing, giving her access to a private text and a secret story—the story of the woman behind the wallpaper. Additionally, Gilman creates a sense of intimate immediacy by the use of present tense, first-person narration. External events are not presented to us in a filtered, logical manner. Because we are confined to the woman's thinking, the story's strength is derived from this feminine interiority, which was once thought to be pathological. Therefore, what seems to be psychological sinking in the story is actually narrative ascension.

The story's entire structure—fragmented, compulsive, and personal—enacts a revolt against the logic and reason that are established by men. Like Bertha Mason, Gilman's narrator starts off as a voiceless person who is constrained by others. She writes her way out, nevertheless, in contrast to Bertha. Madness thus becomes a reconfiguration of self, sanity, and authorship rather than a collapse. The narrator pulls down the walls of literary silence that have long silenced women's voices, just as she tears down the wallpaper. Her authorship is what drives her insane. "The Laugh of Medusa" by Helen Cixou has a comparable interpretation. According to Cixou, women's writing is emotive, non-linear, and disruptive of the tidy rationality that patriarchal systems value. The Yellow Wallpaper's narrative structure reflects this, with its disjointed journal entries, compulsive repetition, shifting pronouns, and plunge into bizarre logic. Even though she doesn't refer to it as such, Gilman's narrator directly engages in feminine ecriture by creating a chaotic, embodied, and unclassifiable textual environment.

2. From Attic to the Colony: Extending The madwoman Trope Through Postcolonial Feminist Theory

Gilbert and Gubar give a novel interpretation of literature from the 19th century by demonstrating how the madwoman, most famously embodied by Bertha Mason, serves as a metaphor for women's rage, creative suppression, and symbolic resistance. However, the symbolic potential of the "madwoman" transcends the Victorian attic into the historically oppressed and colonized places of the Global South. Female insanity frequently manifests in postcolonial nations as a reaction to both the twin burden of colonialism and patriarchy, a phenomenon Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to as "double colonization," in addition to gendered patriarchy.

Spivak criticizes colonial and Western feminist discourses for stifling women's voices in postcolonial situations in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988). In this perspective, the madwoman is not just a literary character; she is also "a subaltern," a woman who has been erased twice: once by the empire and again by patriarchal or nationalist myths. According to Spivak, Western feminism runs the risk of perpetuating the colonial gaze when it attempts to "rescue" or represent the colonized woman. She writes: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (Spivak, 1988, p. 306).

This violent "shuttling" is essential to comprehending how postcolonial female characters' lunacy or silence may be more than just suppression; in situations where communication is lethal or pointless, it may also be a means of resistance or survival. The female characters in books such as Woman at Point Zero and Nervous Conditions suffer from emotional and psychological disarray as a result of living under patriarchal-colonial structures that do not provide a valid place for female subjectivity.

In her essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1984), Chandra Talpade Mohanty expands on this criticism by criticizing Western feminist literature for creating a homogenous representation of the "Third World woman" as consistently oppressed, submissive, and mute. According to Mohanty, this construction disregards the resistances, cultural particularities, and local histories that postcolonial women must contend with. She writes: “what seems to constitute women as a group is a shared oppression. But there are no universal patriarchal structures; there is no universal female experience” (Mohanty, 2003, 0511). We may understand how madness in postcolonial women's literature—whether shown as silence, hysteria, hallucinations, or breakdown—is not universal but rather culturally and politically rooted by combining this framework with the mad woman archetype. It must be understood as a historically contextual kind of dissent—a sort of "speaking" when speech itself has been foreclosed—in addition to being a psychological disease.

Therefore, the insane lady carries a fresh set of historical burdens with her as she is moved from the Victorian attic to the postcolonial house, refugee camp, or prison cell. Madness becomes a coded language, a rejection of the dichotomies imposed by both indigenous patriarchies and Western liberalism. By arguing that the mad woman is a historically contextual figure whose madness is always political rather than a universal metaphor, postcolonial feminist theory decolonizes and expands upon Gilbert and Gubar's original definition.

Nyasha is a distinctive African version of the madwoman stereotype in Nervous Conditions. She is a cultural hybrid, weighed down by her father's authoritarianism and the internalized logic of colonial education, rather than just a disobedient daughter or a Westernized character. Similar to Bertha Mason, Nayasha's insanity is a symbolic protest rather than a medical condition. Gubar and Gilbert write: “The madwoman is usually in some sense the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage” (The Madwoman in the Attic, p 83). This is exactly what Nyasha represents: she is the reflection of Tambu's possible destiny—a girl ruined by opposing colonial and patriarchal ideas. Her anorexia is a resistance to be assimilated by any system, not vanity: “They’ve done it to me… they’ve made me so confused… I’m not one of them but I’m not one of you” (p 205). This is the core of postcolonial madness: not knowing where one belongs, and having no place to speak freely. Nyasha, Babamukuru’s daughter, returns from England burdened by conflicting expectations. She studies obsessively and pushes herself to exhaustion: “Nyasha grew weaker by the day. She weaved when she walked and every night was the same. … “I have to get it right,’ she would whisper with an apologetic smile” (p 200-201). Her academic overdrive serves as a metaphor for internalized patriarchal and colonial expectations—the need to succeed even if one knows one cannot. Her bulimia serves as a metaphor for how African women are shamed for consuming oppressive ideology as a result of colonial patriarchy. Nyasha uses her body to physically fight back: “She forced herself to eat… then ran to the barroom and vomited it all” (P 201-203). The narrator, Tambo, is frequently regarded as the "angel in the house" since she is appreciative, diligent, and submissive. She observes Nyasha with wonder, terror, and bewilderment: "She was too strong for them … She pounded her fists together. She retaliated” (203). However, Tambu also doesn't want to go insane: rather, she pulls away from it. Although Tambu's narration is serene, introspective, and even logical, it bears witness to Nayasha's agony, making her the author Gilbert and Gubar mention—“the one who crafts the madwoman's tale”. Tambu's decision to center the story on Nyasha's suffering is an ethical

witnessing act in and of itself; she writes what Nyasha is unable to express out loud. Nyasha is physically and figuratively imprisoned: “They’re killing us. They’re killing us. Don’t you see?” (204).

Her final hospitalization represents the colonial and patriarchal response to female resistance: silence it, pathologize it, and institutionalize it. "She forced herself to clean the plate… then went to the bathroom and vomited" frames Nyasha's developing anorexia as a direct defiance of patriarchal control. This action represents her refusal to accept the rules that her father—the embodiment of patriarchy—imposed. Nyasha publicly battles cultural estrangement throughout the book, saying, "I am not one of them but I am not one of you." (p 205). She describes how she is caught between colonizer norms and traditional patriarchy, neither totally English nor fully Shona. Nyasha lashes out in a time of tremendous trauma: “She rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth… jabbing the fragments viciously into her flesh” (p 201). Her rage is directed both at colonial textual authority and patriarchal mental imprisonment- a psychological revolt through bodily harm.

Even as Nyasha internally collapses, colonial medical structures dismiss her illness: “The psychiatrist insists that Africans don’t get anorexia, implying she is making a scene”. Nyasha eventually ends herself in the hospital, which is another way to restrict and silence her. Her story shows how physical disease and insanity may become manifestations of feminine resistance. Her self-harm and eating problem are symbolic "mad" acts of defiance—refusing to submit to patriarchal authority; cultural displacement, or not being here or there; and colonial hierarchies, both literally and culturally. Because of the threat posed by her disobedience, patriarchy silences, diagnoses, and imprisons her. Similar to the madwoman stereotype, Nyasha uses her breakdown to make her point about crazy as psychological and literary strength. Nyasha is a literary figure of resistance in addition to being a sad one. Her breakdown serves as a vehicle for revealing the brutality of patriarchal control and colonial schooling. She is put away because, like the madwoman in the attic, she is too dangerous to be given a voice. However, Tambu's story is conveyed through her narration. Even when the subaltern speaks, she is frequently ignored in western and nationalist discourses, according to Spivak's well-known essay; she writes, “The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious item… representation has not withered away” (p, 308).

Anorexia, bulimia, self-harm, and ultimately institutionalization are all manifestations of Nayasha's collapse, which her loved ones refuse to completely comprehend. Nyasha is a dangerous double because she conveys emotions like anguish, bewilderment, and a reluctance to fit in that are incompatible with patriarchal-colonial ideology. Her narrative asserts the unpresentable in a subaltern voice. Spivak cautions that Western academics frequently silence these views by overwriting them. She states: “The subaltern woman is doubly colonized. Between patriarchy and imperialism she is in a hopeless position. … In effect, when the subaltern woman speaks, her speech does not reach us. We can neither hear nor read her” (p 306). Echoing Spivak's appeal for critical listening and respect, Tambu's narration aims to observe rather than replace. Nyasha, a Zimbabwean with Western education, defies easy classification. Patriarchal authority, colonial education, gendered cultural standards, and her own diasporic identity are some of the oppressions that contribute to her disease. Mohanty would contend that rather than being a universal sickness, her "madness" is a complex, situational reaction.

Therefore, Nyasha's psychological resistance is a speech or speech that opposes colonial and patriarchal systems, making it a radical textual and corporeal declaration. Her "madness" is a collective refusal—a disintegration of silence in situations when silence is enforced—rather than an individual breakdown. Therefore, Nyasha's psychiatric breakdown in Nervous Conditions—which showed as disordered eating, anger, and eventual hospitalization—serves as a conscious rejection to internalize the intertwining oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy rather than as proof of personal weakness. Both literally and

figuratively, her embodied disobedience represents a rejection of the very ideals she is supposed to adopt. As she declares, “I’m not one of them but I’m not one of you”, Nyasha articulates a crisis of identity born of cultural dislocation and “epistemic violence”.

Spivak's concept of the subaltern's speech, in which insanity becomes a mode of expression in a system that does not allow for the expressing of alternative opinions, is consistent with this act of breakdown. Nyasha uses the language of bodily resistance—a scream in which stillness is required—instead of words that the colonial or patriarchal authority will understand. Mohanty criticizes Western feminist frameworks that universalize third country women as helpless victims, yet her experience defies this homogenizing perspective. Nyasha's insanity is an active, extreme rejection of forced narratives; she is not passive. In this way, Nyasha, like "the madwoman in the attic," becomes a character whose insanity is not a loss of identity but rather the only way to express it when all other avenues of agency and voice are shut down.

3. Rewriting the Veil: Islamic Feminism and the Madwoman Trope in Palestinian and Arab Women’s Literature

Islamic feminism and modern Palestinian and Arab women's writing reinterpret the "madwoman" motif, where the female body is not only governed by patriarchal religion and tradition but also caught in the crossfire of state violence, cultural nationalism, and colonial occupation. The section makes the case that the metaphor of madness and the veil symbol converge to form a "new feminist grammar" ("the Laugh of the Medusa" 1975, Cixous), where silence, trauma, and spiritual resistance redefine both religious meaning and literary form. It draws on the writings of Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El Saadawi, Sahar Khalifeh, and Susan Abdulhawa.

Islamic feminism sets itself apart from liberal feminist frameworks in the West by arguing that the Quran and other central texts of Islam do not necessarily advocate for the subjugation of women; rather, it is the male scholars' misogynistic interpretation of these texts that has historically denied women their agency. In the Veil and the Male Elite, Fatima Mernissi challenges the widespread belief that Islam oppresses women, stating: “the problem is not with the text of the Quran but with the manipulation of the text by male elites to justify their privilege” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 9). According to Mernissi, the veil—which is frequently seen as indication of female subordination—is a contentious symbol that has historically been employed by men to maintain social hierarchies and regulate public space. She argues that regaining interpretive authority is essential to women's freedom and dismantles Hadith traditions that limit women's visibility. Similarly, Egyptian author, doctor, and activist Nawal El Saadawi highlights that governmental and patriarchal structures must co-opt religion before it can be used as an instrument of oppression. In the Hidden Face of Eve, she writes: “Religious teachings and traditions have been used to justify control over women’s minds, bodies, and destinies- reducing religion to an instrument of repression” (El Saadawi, 1980, p 56).

By portraying those who resist as either wicked, insane, or westernized, both philosophers reveal how veiling and lunacy have served as twin tactics for marginalizing and Othering women. The mad woman is not elegantly symbolic nor restricted to an attic in Palestinian women's literature. She is a product of the very real trauma of cultural erasure, imprisonment, exile, and military occupation. In this context, madness becomes an embodied metaphor for the limits of language and the disintegration of identity under hierarchical oppressive regimes. Women are marginalized by patriarchal authority and nationalist struggle in Sahar Khalifeh's 1976 novel Wild Thorns. Women are supposed to preserve cultural traditions and home holiness while males battle against Israeli occupation. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, women's voices are heard—silent but powerful.

In Khalifeh’s The Inheritance, the protagonist Zayna, a Western- educated woman, returns to Palestine and faces both her family’s traditionalism and the trauma of war. Her

psychological instability is seen as a rebellion against belonging to no place and no ideology: “they called her mad. But her madness was only her refusal to wear their masks, speak their language, live their lives” (p. 214). In this case, crazy is resistance—a reluctance to fit in with either the superficiality of elite liberalism or the patriarchal norms of nationalism. The madwoman is a seer who exposes the paradoxes hidden in gendered and occupied space; she is neither an angel nor a demon. Amal, the main character of Susan Abduhawa's 2010 novel Mornings in Jenin, loses her mother, her house, and her kid on several occasions. Her mental breakdown is hereditary and historical rather than clinical. Her inability to speak and her silence are examples of what Gilbert and Gubar may refer to as "madness as metaphor," but in this case, they are combined with the actual experiences of loss and war: “I had grown tired of being silent. But I had also grown tired of speaking. It was as though nothing I said could hold the weight of my memories” (Abdulhawa, 2010, p. 273).

The tale of Palestine itself—the madwoman as a collective identity—is embodied in Amal's psychological suffering. Similar to the feminist claim that authorship is the cure to silencing, her healing process starts with publishing her narrative rather than forgetting. Similar to the attic in Gilbert and Gubar's thesis, the veil serves as a literal structure of confinement as well as a symbol of symbolic struggle in Arab women's literature. Women who wear masks of sadness, shame, or silence are not only concealed; they are purposefully ignored. Bertha Mason is "the ferocious secret self," according to Gilbert and Gubar (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 360). Similarly, Arab women who are veiled, mute, or insane are the unsaid conscience of their families and countries.

According to Mernissi and El Saadawi, the veil is not permanent and, depending on who controls the story, can be either freeing or repressive. Reworking the veil in this literature entails reworking the symbolic framework of resistance, insanity, and gender. The madwoman no longer cries alone; she now writes, testifies, and regains her rights. Therefore, in Palestinian and Arab women's literature, "rewriting the veil" refers to more than just revealing; it also entails rethinking religious identity, lunacy, and resistance in ways that challenge the dichotomies of angel/monster, oppressed/liberated, and silent/voiced. Islamic feminism is given literary life by writers like Susan Abdulhawa and Sahar Khalifeh, while the theoretical foundation for this change is provided by the writings of Mernissi and El Saadawi.

The "madwoman" is not defeated; rather, she is reborn—not in the attic, but in the mosques, the refugee camps, the ruins, and—above all—on the pages of her books. The "madwoman in the attic" cliché is echoed by Sahar Khalifeh's female characters in Wild Thorns, who are imprisoned not by bars but by the combined forces of social expectations, military occupation, and household patriarchy. One character's reflection on male privilege is a moving moment: “They’ve stuffed you full and made you greedy. I see no shame in their eyes” (87). The moral numbness that occupation—which is exacerbated by economic dependence—imposes on Palestinian society, particularly on male family-heads, is encapsulated in this statement. On the other hand, women are supposed to continue being domestic and selfless, ignoring their own desires. Khalifeh frequently depicts women with underrepresented voices. This aligns with the attic trope- women who resist are labeled betrayers, their rebellion unimaginable and threatening, so they are silenced or accused of treason.

In the Inheritance, Khalifeh further explores female erasure in patriarchal families: “I discovered … that my mother… became a ‘nobody’. I discovered, for the first time, that my mother… was a mere victim” (89). The mother's descent into quiet in this instance is reminiscent of the locked-away woman in the attic—present but unseen, and unsaid. These literary moments do two things: they reveal how women's internal resistance—such as anger, sorrow, and grief—is suppressed and how their rejection of roles that are imposed turns into a silent internal rebellion. These Palestinian women, like the "madwoman" concealed behind

wallpaper, are there but unheard, living in "internal exile," as Khalifeh's feminist critique of "double colonization" emphasizes.

Through a narrative framework that emphasizes what Palestinian women cannot express—what is suppressed by both patriarchal and governmental forces—and the psychological effects of that repression, Khalifeh's novels Wild Thorns and the Inheritance represent lived realities. Khalifeh frequently employs interrupted, disregarded, or emotionally restrained discourse in both books, particularly when male and female characters are speaking to one another. Female characters like as Usama's mother and cousin, for example, frequently appear in Wild Thorns solely as background characters or listeners, their complete viewpoints cut short or enmeshed in the nationalist conflict. Through masculine interpretation, their resistance, grief, or irritation is subtly filtered, exposing the narrative constraints placed on their subjectivity. Gilbert and Gubar's assertion is strongly supported by this suppression: “In order to escape the strictures and structures of male literary authority, the woman writer is forced to dramatize her own imprisonment” (85).

In a similar vein, Khalifeh's female characters dramatize their psychological confinement by indirect presence, repressed speech, and silent acts rather than through direct expression. This creates a narrative performance of being "mad in the attic," which is not physically insane but rather rendered insane by invisibility. By permitting the narrator Zayna to return to her native country in years spent in the United States, Khalifeh broadens the use of this cliché in The Inheritance. Her voice for a retrospective narrative consistently addresses the gaps in women's speech, including what her mother didn't say, what her aunts went through in silence, and how her own memory had become numb: “I discovered… that my mother…. Became a ‘nobody’. I discovered, for the first time, that my mother… was a mere victim”. This finding is a narrative excavation—a recognition that the silence around the lives of women was structural rather than coincidental. In spite of generations of female suppression, Zayna breaks this silence through her function as a narrator. The storytelling turns into a kind of delayed release, a way to unravel what Gilbert and Gubar define as the inner turmoil that results from being denied the opportunity to share one's own tale.

4. Narrative Multiplicity Vs. Female Absence

Although there are many voices in Khalifeh's novels, the conceptual space devoted to Amal political rhetoric frequently obscures the personal suffering of women, especially mothers, widows, and daughters. Women's suffering under occupation—loss, shortage, and trauma—is rarely given direct narrative space in Wild Thorns, despite the men's lengthy discussion of resistance and cooperation. The insanity they have to absorb is symbolized by their silence. Gubar and Gilbert observe: “To be denied language is to be denied self-definition; to be denied a narrative is to be denied existence” (69). This erasure of female subjectivity is particularly noticeable in Khalifeh's writings since the books' structure reflects the gendered silencing that takes place in Palestinian society, even in the face of revolutionary rhetoric.

But Khalifeh subverts quietness rather than just reproducing it. The narrative process itself turns into a feminist healing endeavor in the Inheritance. By revealing what her mother and grandmother had undergone in silence, Zayna's introspective, first-person story reclaims the vocabulary of sorrow. Khalifeh flips the attic metaphor here: the "madwoman" doesn't die alone; she comes back, talks, recalls, and regains. Sahar Khalifeh's novels are structured around the tension Gilbert and Gubar recognize in the female writer's predicament: how to express anger and grief that the prevailing narrative prohibits. This tension is achieved through the deliberate restriction and eventual recovery of voice. Even while not all of the female characters in Wild Thorns and the Inheritance talk freely, their omissions are critiques, their silence is story, and their eventual reclaiming of voice is resistance. For a postcolonial, Palestinian setting, where the attic represents not just patriarchy but also colonization, militarism, and the burden of national myth, Khalifeh's art therefore reanimates "the madwoman in the attic."

The domestic sphere frequently appears as a contradictory location in feminist and postcolonial literature, serving as both a place of imprisonment and a testing ground for resistance. Women's private areas—particularly kitchens, bedrooms, and family homes—are shown as highly symbolic settings where identity, power, and silence converge rather than just as actual places. Although the 'domestic' is traditionally framed by patriarchy as a woman's proper domain—one that is secure, moral, and private—female writers challenge this idea to expose the space's oppressive features and radical potential as a site of revolt. The domestic chamber is portrayed as a carceral place in Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper. The "rest-cure" confines the narrator to a nursery, where they are not allowed to write, think, or express their feelings; but as she rips off the wallpaper and assets narrative voice, her spiral into madness serves as an act of revolt. Originally designed as a healing space, the chamber ends up serving as a jail and a platform for psychological release. Similar to this, women's roles are determined and their agency is repressed in the home in Nervous Conditions. Nyasha is emotionally exiled in her father's dignified home, while Tambu's mother is exhausted from constant work and sorrow. However, Nyasha's body defies convention behind these confines; she rebels silently through compulsive food and emotional outbursts, making the private act as an act of rejection.

The home is a reflection of Palestinian women's dual colonization under patriarchy and occupation in Sahar Khalifeh's Wild Thorns and the Inheritance. Women are frequently left out of political conversation and silenced in family households. Women, however, start to reclaim the home as a site of political consciousness, knowledge, and remembering through narrative reflection and memory; they even develop a sense of togetherness and harbor illicit thoughts in the inner courtyard or kitchen. As a result, the domestic space—despite frequently being characterized by mental and physical confinement—becomes a subversive zone throughout these writings, a secret place where women internalize resistance, store unsaid histories, and eventually break silence. Once a means of control, the private sphere is now reframed as a site of feminist resistance. Language and narrative voice function as both a means of storytelling and as acts of resistance and survival in feminist and postcolonial literature. Women's suppressed aspirations and protests frequently reappear through fragmented language, disturbed narrative structures, and alternate ways of expression when their agency is denied in public life—whether through patriarchy, colonization, or cultural suppression.

These literary devices show how the storytelling form itself turns into a tool for regaining identity. Charlotte Gilman creates a first-person notebook in The Yellow Wallpaper that is full of vivid hallucinations and sluggish, repetitive words. The narrator's decline into insanity and her refusal to keep quiet are both reflected in this fragmented story. The narrator's covert writing turns into a rebellious act, a voice reclamation in a home setting intended to keep her quiet. Tsitsi Dangarembga offers two distinct female voices in Nervous Conditions: Nyasha's inquisitive silences and physical defiance, and Tambu's serene, introspective narrations. While Nyasha's breakdown conveys a language beyond words, a scream where communication is forbidden, Tambu's narration turns into a place where her suppressed awareness gradually comes to the surface.

The novel's multi-layered narrative structure demonstrates how resistance, contrast, and recollection may all contribute to the emergence of voice. The focus of Sahar Khalifeh's Wild Thorns and the Inheritance is on women whose voices are underrepresented in both politics and the family. Nonetheless, Khalifeh creates narrative forms that bring back suppressed or lost voices, particularly through the introspection of women. In the Inheritance, Zayna reminisces about her past and provides voice to women who were denied it in her day, such as her mother and her aunts. The narrative form is not neutral; rather, it is a political act, as seen by the fractured storytelling, shifting perspectives, and stress on memory. Thus, language turns into a battlefield where suppressed agency is exercised across these writings. Women regain their right to speak, to remember, and to identify themselves—on their own terms—through ruptures, silences, and alternative narrative styles.

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