

# Recalcitrant Resistance in The Yellow Wallpaper and Wide Sargasso Sea

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## Abstract

Female madness has often been interpreted as psychological pathology. Through a feminist reinterpretation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), this paper studies madness as a culturally produced response that resists patriarchal confinement and epistemic silencing. Feminist theories put forward by Elaine Showalter and Luce Irigaray conceptualise the study's interpretation of madness. It is presented as a counter-discursive mode that challenges patriarchal rationality and restores the silenced subjectivities. Gilman critiques the rest cure as a form of medical discourse that enforces domestic control by pathologising female resistance. In contrast, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* restores voice and psychological depth to the silenced madwoman in the attic. Through qualitative textual analysis and comparative interpretation, the study reveals that madness has not been a breakdown but a form of rebellion in which women's bodies and psyche have been active challenges to the patriarchal order. The female experience of madness is thus redefined through feminist literary discourse as a space for resistance, agency, and reclaiming one's narrative. This paper offers a comparative reading to examine how women's mental distress is medicalised and labelled as "madness" within patriarchal social and medical discourses.

**Keywords:** Feminist Epistemology, Resistance, Gynocriticism, Madness, Patriarchy, Spatial Confinement

## Introduction

Female madness has functioned as a disciplinary label given by the patriarchal system to regulate women's behaviour and also invalidate the ideologies of women. In the course of literary and medical histories, women who tried to subvert domestic authority or display higher levels of intellect, or conform to societal expectations, were commonly labelled as irrational or mentally unstable. Feminist critics argue that these labels on females are not the reflection of an innate psychological condition but are developed due to social anxiety surrounding female autonomy. A close reading of literature, especially by women writers, depicts madness as something constructed externally through silenced voices, restricted ideas, and prolonged confinement. For instance, Ophelia in *Hamlet*, as portrayed by Shakespeare and Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* show women's psychological downfall as a mere reflection of constraints imposed on them by society, family and the opposite gender. In these books, madness serves as a depiction of what can't be said without repercussion, becoming a language that takes form when socially conformed expression is no longer possible.

The *Yellow Wallpaper* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jean Rhys exemplify this very dynamic with a striking clarity.

The former text effectuates female submission in the name of diagnosis, rendering the female body as a locus of control and surveillance. The latter text is originally a feminist prequel to *Jane Eyre* by returning to the figure of the “madwoman in the attic”. It gives voice to Bertha, and restores an interior life denied in the earlier book, showcasing how deportation, racism, and marriage intersect to erode identity. There are several other instances in literature that highlight the ways in which sociocultural norms normalise women who transgress through medical discourse. This dynamic is evident in works like Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* or Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* itself.

In the light of feminist and gynocritical Theory, this paper studies madness as feminist resistance, a rebel of the female body and mind against hegemonic rationality. Madness emerges as an epistemological rupture rather than indicating a psychological fiasco, bringing to light the violence rooted in the dominant structures of knowledge and power. The focus of this study is not to view women’s mental health as an independent pathology but rather as a reformist challenge to socio-cultural structures that seek to suppress them.

**Thesis Statement:** The representation of women’s mental health in literature reveals madness not as individual pathology but as a socially produced response to patriarchal, colonial, and bodily confinement.

## Review of Literature

Feminist theory on *The Yellow Wallpaper* has congruently emphasised its critique of nineteenth-century medical patriarchy. The feminist critics during the early period viewed “rest cure” as a mechanism that contained women denying them their rights in the guise of treating them. They further viewed it as a disciplinary mechanism that infantilised women and denied them intellectual labour. Several studies on female entrapment stress the importance of how the treatment that claims to cure is the one that generates the problem. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, it can be observed how enforced domesticity converts the home into a psychological prison, adding fuel to the fire.

More recent gynocritical approaches interpret the

narrator’s madness as a protest against male-authored medical discourse. Many other similar studies on madwomen narratives in Gilman’s book posit how men perceive women’s resistance to diagnosis and their mental state as psychologically disturbed. Thus becomes, madness a counter-discourse that challenges masculine definitions of sanity.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* has been extensively analysed through postcolonial feminism and mental health studies. Critics highlight Antoinette Cosway’s psychological fragmentation as the outcome of racial ambiguity, colonial displacement, and marital domination. Feminist readings focus on Rhys’s reclamation of the silenced female voice erased in *Jane Eyre*, transforming Bertha Mason from a Gothic monster into a psychologically complex subject.

Recent studies on *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* collectively reframe madness and fragmentation as forms of resistance. Zhang and Hu (2025) argue that the fractured narrative voice in *The Yellow Wallpaper* functions as a gendered challenge to patriarchal medical authority. Similarly, Özsert (2023) reads Antoinette’s oppression through an ecofeminist lens, linking environmental exploitation with female subjugation, while Gogoi (2023) interprets her madness as socially constructed under colonial patriarchy. Altogether, these studies posit that psychological disintegration in both narratives operates not merely as victimhood but as a recalcitrant refusal of patriarchal control.

The comparative studies examining both texts emphasise spatial confinement and psychological entrapment, arguing that enclosed domestic spaces function as carceral structure intensifying female instability. However, few studies explicitly situate madness within feminist and gynocritical theories. This paper addresses this gap by framing madness as a feminist epistemology, a bodily and psychic rebellion against patriarchal orders. The limitation of the study is its comparative analysis of only two literary texts, recognising that the findings cannot fully represent the representation of women’s mental health in literature.

**Theoretical Framework:** Feminist and Gynocritical Theory

Elaine Showalter’s concept of gynocriticism calls for the examination of women’s writing

as a distinct literary tradition shaped by female experience, historical marginalisation, and cultural constraint rather than by male-dominated critical standards. Gynocriticism redirects critical attention from representations of women within patriarchal texts to women as producers of meaning, foregrounding themes such as bodily regulation, domestic confinement, silencing, and psychological fragmentation. As Showalter asserts, “the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature” (Showalter 131). Within this framework, madness emerges as a recurring narrative and symbolic strategy through which women articulate forms of repression that cannot be expressed within socially sanctioned modes of speech.

According to Showalter, female madness should not be biologically determined but rather recognised as an externally constructed condition of society. It is further shaped by restrictive gender roles and institutional power structures. She is explicit in her idea that, “madness is a female malady because it is linked to the social conditions of women’s lives.” In this way, madness becomes a culturally rooted response to systemic exclusion, functioning as both a symptom of oppression and a form of unconscious resistance. In women’s writing, mental breakdown is the exposure of violence forced by patriarchal gender norms. (Web)

Elaine Showalter’s gynocritical approach complements Luce Irigaray’s critique of phallogocentric discourse. It provides a philosophical framework to comprehend how female autonomy is extended as obscure within dominant systems of meaning. Irigaray argues that Western epistemology underpins patriarchal rationality and places women as an absence, lack, or deviation from the norm, asserting that “woman is traditionally defined as lack” (Irigaray 26). Women who resist such masculine epistemology are labelled as hysteric, mad or irrational. Madness, therefore, does not signify cognitive failure but rather the failure of the male-dominated ideologies to accommodate sexual difference.

Irigaray’s theory studies madness as a consequence of hermeneutic violence. Female madness occurs as a result of her experiences being

excluded and modes of exposure are distorted completely. When female characters in the novels exhibit anger, desire, or authority, which transgress prescribed patriarchal norms, freedom of speech is often denied. This denial is framed as the right thing to do by pathologising women, reinforcing the association between femininity and irrationality. Madness becomes a marker of resistance to symbolic confinement. It further exposes the limitations of patriarchal reason and highlights the necessity of remodelling the existing frameworks to accommodate female agency.

Together, Showalter and Irigaray provide a feminist theoretical framework that reinterprets madness as a historically and culturally produced condition rather than a medical anomaly. Madness functions as a ground, where there is an intersection of patriarchal power, gendered discipline, and female resistance. It operates as an unsettling force that challenges imposed identities on women. It also reveals the psychological consequences of silencing, and paves a way towards the reclamation of female interiority. The study illustrates how literary representations of madness function as a site where patriarchal authority and female resistance intersect through a comparative feminist framework.

### **Madness in *The Yellow Wallpaper* & *Wide Sargasso Sea***

Gilman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* exposes medical discourse as an extension of patriarchal authority. The narrator’s husband, a physician, dismisses her perspective, insisting that “there is really nothing the matter” with her except a “temporary nervous depression” (Gilman 7). The denial of her ideologies and subjective experience epitomises what Showalter states as the masculinisation of medical knowledge. In addition, the prohibition against the narrator’s writing can be viewed as a significant example of epistemic silencing. Despite this, the narrator admits, “I did write for a while in spite of them,” positioning writing as an act of resistance against enforced passivity (Gilman 9). As confinement is prolonged, the yellow wallpaper in the room becomes a symbol through which the narrator perceives her own entrapment. The woman trapped behind the wallpaper represents what Gilbert

and Gubar describe as the repressed female double. It is the self that patriarchal order seeks to contain. The narrator's final breakdown, resulting in the tearing of the wallpaper, is not surrender but rebellion. Her declaration, "I've got out at last... in spite of you," signals liberation through madness, a moment in which the body enacts what language has denied (Gilman 18).

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* reinterprets the silenced "madwoman in the attic" from *Jane Eyre*, restoring Antoinette's humanity and subjectivity. Antoinette Cosway's madness is socially produced and not biologically caused. It is a consequence of sustained invalidation racially, culturally, and in marriage. Her real identity is denied when her husband Rochester renames her "Bertha." Feminist critics argue that Antoinette's fragmentation is a reflection of what Irigaray terms the "specular economy" of patriarchy, where women exist like mirrors that only reflect male needs and desires, rather than having their own identity.

Antoinette's question, "Who am I and where do I belong?" articulates a crisis of subjectivity rooted in colonial and gendered displacement (Rhys 61). The attic at Thornfield functions not just as a physical prison but as a ground that denies her identity. Antoinette states, "There is no looking-glass here and I do not know what I am like now," symbolising the loss of self-recognition (Rhys 117). Her final act of burning Thornfield is an act of resistance through destruction, a feminist refusal to remain a silent object.

Madness is shown as the outcome of sustained patriarchal confinement in both *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Women are denied a voice and are socially immobilised. In the former text, the unnamed narrator is silenced in the guise of a diagnosis. Whenever her perceptions contradict those of her husband, she is silenced by both medical and marital authority. Likewise, Rhys's protagonist Antoinette is denied control over her own identity. It is evident when she confesses, "What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (Rhys 112). In both texts, madness emerges not as an inherent instability but as a response to forced silencing and confinement.

The crucial mechanism of psychological control functioning in both narratives is spatial confinement.

In Gilman's story, the narrator is confined to a room with a yellow wallpaper. It is this space that reduces her autonomy in the name of a cure. In Brontë's story, Antoinette is imprisoned in the attic at Thornfield, a site of absolute isolation, which eventually leads her to set a fire. Both spaces function as prisons, where obedience is demanded and dissent is medicalised or moralised. As the narrator studies the wallpaper, she reclaims epistemic power and refuses her husband's monopoly on truth. The room, meant to silence her, becomes the ground on which she unlearns patriarchal submission and regains her autonomy. Similarly, Antoinette's madness is not a spontaneous overflow. She is renamed, her history is erased, and she is displaced geographically and culturally. Her final acts of defiance arise from long-standing confinement. Crucially, madness in both texts destabilises patriarchal rationality rather than conforming to it.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that madness in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the *Wide Sargasso Sea* functions as feminist resistance rather than psychological pathology. Through a gynocritical lens, madness can be studied as a counterlanguage built by hermeneutic silencing and confinement. Gilman critiques medical authority as an extension of domestic control, while Rhys restores voice and interiority to silenced women. This research reframes madness as a rebellion rather than a condition. It further revises conventional interpretations of female mental illness and contributes to feminist literary discourse.

This research goes beyond literary analysis, offering a broader social contribution by questioning how dominant systems continue to view the understanding of women's psychological anguish. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, an extension of this critique is evident through colonial displacement, racial ambiguity, and cultural erasure, which doubly suppress women and make them vulnerable to psychological marginalisation. The madness depicted by Antoinette is not an innate instability; rather, it is a consequence of patriarchal domination and the denial of belonging. By reinterpreting madness as a culturally produced response to the silenced voices of women, this research advocates gender-

sensitive approaches to mental health, particularly for women whose voices are marginalised within institutional and colonial structures. The study emphasises the significance of comprehending the emotional needs of women. It also underlines the necessity of recognising women's psychological expressions as meaningful responses to oppression rather than symptoms to be disciplined or erased. The study contributes to the evolving discourse on mental health awareness, gender justice, and the ethical treatment of women. It further demonstrates how literary texts can expose and interrogate long-standing societal beliefs imposed on female autonomy, cultural identity, and psychological well-being. Future research may extend this comparative feminist perspective by examining a broader range of literary texts to further explore how representations of female madness intersect with cultural, historical, and social contexts.

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