

THE MONSTER OF THE ATTIC LEAVES HER MARK

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ABSTRACT

The literary partition of women into “angels” and “monsters” which the male authors have generated for her is demonstrated in the works of several woman writers including Charlotte Bronte, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Kate Chopin. In factual life as well as in case of literary woman characters, their lives are a persistent, unwavering sequence of the balancing act between self-doubt and guilt. Their deeds are directed not just at becoming the “angels of the house” but also trying not to become the “monsters of the attic”. The real depth of a woman’s torment is when she realizes that all that is expected out of this angel-woman which she strives to be is selfless love, sacrifice and graciousness. The saint like figure, as Gilbert and Gubar points out in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* “dooms her both to death and heaven. For to be selfless is not only noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story...is really a life of death, a death-in-life.”

KEYWORDS: Literary Partition of Women into “Angels” and “Monsters, Gilbert and Gubar points, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*

INTRODUCTION

“Feminine” corresponds to nurture and on the other hand, “female” represents nature. “Femininity is a cultural construct: one isn’t born a woman, one becomes one, as Simone De Beauvoir puts it. Seen in this respect, patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for “femininity” are natural. Thus a woman who refuses to conform can be labelled both unfeminine and unnatural and any deviation from their roles gives birth to the literary character of the caged mad woman in the attic. It’s important to remember what the ventriloquism of patriarchy has forever done: men have constantly spoken for women, or in the name of women. It is in the patriarchal interest that these two terms (femininity and femaleness) stay thoroughly confused. Feminists, on the contrary, have to disentangle this confusion and must therefore always insist that though women undoubtedly are female, this in no way guarantees that they will be feminine. Not being feminine does not mean that binary opposites should spring up. Literature stresses the recurrent use of imagery of confinement and escape, disease and health, and the notion of fragmentation or wholeness. Representation of the angel or the monster, the sweet heroine and the raging madwoman are aspects of her degree of conformation to patriarchal models. This is equally true whether one defines femininity in the old patriarchal ways or in a new feminist way. That brings us to the concept of “female creativity”. Is it a natural, essential, inborn quality in all women? Is it “feminine creativity” in the sense of a creativity in compliance to certain social standards of female conduct, or it is a creativity typical of a feminine subject position in the psychoanalytical sense?

When heaps of social roles are bestowed upon a woman, her individuality crumbles until she is stripped off all her personal choices and preferences. She is expected to be the ideal wife or woman that came to be called “Angel of the House”; she was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive and powerless, incapable,

gentle, charming, poised, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all, pure, whose magnanimous grace, tenderness, simplicity and sacrifice made her the representative of noblest femininity. The phrase "Angel in the House" comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women. Believing that his wife was the perfect Victorian wife, he wrote "The Angel in the House" about her (originally published in 1854, revised through 1862). Though it did not receive much attention when it was first published in 1854, it became increasingly popular through the rest of the nineteenth century and continued to be influential into the twentieth century. Describing Honoria, his wife, he wrote:

"Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf...
...While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
With pardon in her pitying eyes;
And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers;
Or any eye to see her charms,
At any time, she's still his wife,
Dearly devoted to his arms;
She loves with love that cannot tire;"

For Virginia Woolf, the oppressive model of women represented by the Angel in the House was still so potent that she wrote, in 1931, "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer." Apart from being the "Angel" taking care of the "house", choosing a profession was not an option for women. The pent-up creative energy had no outlet to be directed at. The fervent soul of a creative woman found herself doing nothing but indulging in dreary daily household activities. Even if she took to writing, it was done in the common drawing room, never ceasing to be the caregiver and protector. Jane Austen's nephew wonders in his Memoir "How she was able to effect all this is surprising, for she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons beyond her own family party." (J.E Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*). Women were, right from their infancy, taught to keep their ardent ambitions under cover and unheard of. In many cases the writings remained unpublished or even it was published, it stayed anonymous or under a male pseudonym. As Virginia Woolf rightly puts it in *A Room of One's Own*, "Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman." She expressed this predicament of women with creative genius as a "torture that her gift had put her to."

J.S Mill in his *The Subjection of Women* examines how “The masters of women wanted more than simple obedience, and they turned the whole force of education to get what they wanted.” he could not have been more correct in his observation. Women who did publish their books directed them towards keeping alive the legacy of snatching away all means of self expression from the angels of the house. Hannah Woolley (1622-1675) published books on household management like *The Ladies Directory* and *The Gentlewoman’s Companion* with sections on “Of a Gentlewoman’s civil Behaviour to all sorts of people in all places” and “Of the gait or gesture”.

Alice Walker in her essay *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1972) writes about the condition of black slave women who owned not even their own bodies. Walker passionately juxtaposes a paragraph from Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* with her own hard hitting words: "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century [insert "eighteenth century," insert "black woman," insert "born or made a slave"] would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard [insert "Saint"], leered and mocked at. For it needs little skill and psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary instincts [add "chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one's body by someone else, submission to an alien religion" that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty." (p.404). She advances to portray the plight of women, saying that “grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality-which is the basis of Art-that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane.” By the end of the nineteenth century women were thought to be intrinsically mad by virtue of their femaleness, which made them vulnerable, and women outnumbered men in Victorian asylums almost two to one.

II

The woman is not supposed to give voice to her opinions and the hesitant, faltering voice that could articulate if given an opportunity remains stifled. She has no choice but to give preference to the needs and demands of her children and husband before her own, she does not get to pursue activities she is gifted at; her whole persona is dominated by the constraints put on her. As J.S Mill puts it, “After the primary necessities of food and raiment, freedom is the first and strongest want of human nature”, and that is precisely what was being denied to women. Any kind of self-expression was muffled and that reaches its height when in the nineteenth century any woman deviating from her niche was deemed insane. There were clearly demarcated positions as to where a woman should belong. The *angel* would belong to the *house*, though she is never likely to have a *room* of her own, whereas the madwoman would be put in the *attic* and if necessary in the *asylum*. "Attics are where wives who cannot be contained, who are over-sexualised and unruly are stored away," says writer and psychotherapist, Adam Phillips.

While docile Dickensian heroines nourish the patriarchal construct, "Bertha is the embodiment of the monstrous lunatic who requires restraint," says historian of madness, Catherine Arnold. The notion of a woman speaking for herself itself challenges the patriarchal construct of not treating the woman as human being. The woman is always the insufficient Other. The locus of speech and expression is always located in the man. The woman embodies the Otherness, and whenever she tries to smudge the lines guarding the locus, she is reminded of her role and any transgression lands her in an asylum, bringing back a state of helplessness that she had struggled to break out from and hopeless dependence on the doctor in charge. The powerlessness of the other sex is so discussed upon that the female sex itself is often associated with

maladies. Elaine Showalter writes in her book *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* about how the malady enters the female sphere: “In a society that not only perceived women as childlike, irrational, and sexually unstable but also render them legally powerless and economically marginal, it is not surprising that they should have formed the greater part of the residual categories of deviance from which doctors drew a lucrative practice and the asylums much of their population. Moreover, the medical belief that the instability of the female nervous and reproductive systems made women more vulnerable to derangement than men had extensive consequences for social policy. It was used as a reason to keep women out of the professions, to deny them political rights, and to keep them under male control in the family and the state. Thus medical and political policies were mutually reinforcing. As women’s demands became increasingly problematic for Victorian society as a whole, the achievements of the psychiatric profession in managing women’s minds would offer both a mirror of cultural attitudes and a model for other institutions.”

Thus denying them verbal, dynamic or artistic alleys to articulate themselves, medical policies took one further step seizing away her sexual freedom. Isaac Baker Brown in March 1866 wrote the book *On The Curability of Certain Forms of Insanity, Epilepsy, Catalepsy, and Hysteria in Females*, in which Brown proposed that all of the feminine weaknesses referred to in the title could be cured by the excision of the clitoris. “All unprejudiced men must adopt, more or less, the practice which I have carried out.” he wrote. One of his patients was only 10 years old and the ‘madness’ of several others consisted of their wish to take advantage of the new divorce act of 1857. Another young woman was brought to the clinic by her family because she had suffered ‘great irregularities of temper’, was too assertive in sending her visiting cards to men she liked and spent ‘much time in serious reading’. Showalter gives voice to the collective voices of all these “madwomen” saying that “while doctors blamed menstrual problems or sexual abnormality, women writers suggested that it was the lack of meaningful work, hope, or companionship that led to depression or breakdown.”

The woman was supposed to be the epitome of purity and an ideal wife and mother yet all medical and political practises were aimed at not granting the freedom to the woman as far as her choice of motherhood was concerned. This led the controversial control activist Margaret Sanger to pen down that “No woman can call herself free who does not control her own body.” (*A Parents’ Problem or Woman’s?*, March 1919) So with no freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action or to have a life of her own she tries to internalize the notion of herself as mere works of art rather than being the creators of art. Very often than not the women were driven to an unfeeling and bleeding lunacy by the springs of creativity and imagination in them for which there was no release.

While this might be termed as the last straw, but women often found themselves turning towards suicide in pursuance of breaking down the fetters that enslaved their lives and in trying to combat the strains of being their own sex. Sylvia Plath stirringly illustrates the universal state of women: “And there is the fallacy of existence: the idea that one would be happy forever and aye with a given situation or series of accomplishments. Why did Virginia Woolf commit suicide? Or Sara Teasdale -or the other brilliant women - neurotic? Was their writing sublimation (oh horrible word) of deep, basic desires? If only I knew. If only I knew how high I could set my goals, my requirements for my life! I am in the position of a blind girl playing with a slide-ruler of values. I am now at the nadir of my calculating powers. The future? God - will it get worse & worse? Will I never travel, never integrate my life, never have purpose, meaning? Never have time - long stretches, to investigate ideas, philosophy – to articulate the vague seething desires in me? Will I be a secretary - a self-rationalizing, uninspired housewife, secretly jealous of my husband's ability to grow intellectually & professionally while I am impeded - will I submerge my embarrassing desires & aspirations, refuse to face myself, and go either mad or

become neurotic?" (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil)

III

When coping up with the surplus creative energy becomes painful, the 'madwoman' decides to go one step further. Whether the act of suicide should be seen as a choice of the victim's free will or if it was identified with feebleness of mind depends on the degree of rebelliousness or protest against tyranny or immorality symbolized by it. Traditionally suicide would fall into the "masculine" domain. Margaret Higonnet notes "Classical instances of women's suicide are perceived as masculine: Antigone, Cleopatra, Hasdrubal's wife, and Arria, who stabbed herself to encourage her husband and said *Paete, non dolet*. Charlotte Corday, the self-appointed Girondiste martyr of the French Revolution, is one of the last of this tradition" (*Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide*, p.70). However, since the eighteenth century, suicide is no longer associated with heroic act of free will but with mental instability. Suicide was feminized into a passive act. Or, as Higonnet puts it, the portrayal of suicide swings focus from "function to motive." (71). By the nineteenth century, the literary pattern of madness and the ensuing suicide features principally women victims. Male writers found it easy to portray feminine role conflict. Lizbeth Goodman writes that "Anxiety about female 'irrationality' peaked in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Medical textbooks, advice manuals and novels of that period are full of images of young women mentally succumbing to the strains of their sex- fainting, giving way to uncontrollable weeping, breathlessness and phantom pains. In extreme cases it was thought hysteria could turn to mania, producing violent even murderous or suicidal rages. Many doctors recommended marriage as a cure. But they also spoke of the danger of motherhood leading o mental breakdown. A large number of the women in asylums in the nineteenth were suffering from what we would now call post-natal depression." (*Literature and Gender*, p.117)

"Pain is what the suicidal person is seeking to escape. In any close analysis, suicide is best understood as a combined moment towards cessation of consciousness and a moment away from intolerable emotion, unendurable pain, unacceptable anguish." writes Edwin Shneidman. . (Edwin Shneidman, *Definition of Suicide*, p.124). The deplorable torment at not being able to assert her place anywhere, through any means leaves the angel of the house with no other choice but to rebel against the norms set out whereby she lands up locked up in the attic or an asylum and finally decides to channelize all her creative resources into one big act of suicide. Woman writers like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton are inextricably associated with the unconscious creative drive towards suicide. Creative people in the artistic professions are more likely to have a mental illness than those in less artistic professions, writes Arnold M. Ludwig, in his book, "The Price of Greatness" (Guilford, 1995). Elaine Showalter notes down in *The Female Malady* that suicide is "a heroic act of defiant feeling". Usually the act of suicide is branded as an escape; but for these gifted women, it was the solitary means of discarding the meaningless existence expected out of them.

Roger Poole ends *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* by personifying the river into which she threw herself as a faithfully: "The water was her friend and had been her friend ever since she was a child in Cornwall. The water could be trusted. The water was peace. The water would receive her with the dignity that she left she needs, and indeed deserved." (Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*, 279). Nigel Nicolson adds that "To end her life at this point was like ending a book. It had a certain artistic integrity" and that "Virginia Woolf chose to die. It was not an insane or impulsive act, but premeditated. She died courageously on her own terms" (Letters 6: xvi-xvii). He consigns a novelistic approach to Woolf's act of suicide. Ironically, during her illness the artistic lady was advised a "rest cure" which was a prevalent way of therapy

during her time. She who knew well the cathartic effects of writing was deprived of all intellectual activity during this period. Regarding writing she wrote, "I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion." (Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p.81). As Showalter puts it "Virginia Woolf's treatment for her 'attack of madness': "Dr. Mitchell specialized in cures of neurotic women through a drastic treatment that reduced them "to a condition of infantile dependence on their physician."

The ingredients of the rest cure were isolation, immobility, prohibition of all intellectual activity, and overfeeding, accompanied in some cases by daily massage. ...Besides forcing a women to stifle the drives and emotions that had made her sick with frustration in the first place and depriving her of intellectual outlets for their expression, the rest cure was a sinister parody of idealized Victorian femininity: inertia, privatization, narcissism, dependency." (Elaine Showalter, *A Literature Of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë To Lessing* Chapter 10, Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny p. 274).

IV

In order to live, she must die. She must etch her niche through her artistic creativity in a way that the world remembers her. And the only act she can execute to assert her free will is carrying out her own death. To follow the psychic turn of events in the woman's mind, I would like to turn to Lacan. Lacan delivered a lecture on 12 May 1971, later published in 2007 as *On a Discourse that Might not be a Semblance*, in which he elucidates the meaning of "Lituraterre" and how it bridges the gap between psychoanalysis and literature. There are two distinct connotations associated with the word "Lituraterre"- the first is the combination of two Latin words *litura* (deletion or erasure) and *terre* (earth, ground or soil), the second being a spoonerismic rendition of *litterature* (literature). As Santanu Biswas puts it in *The Literary Lacan*, "Owing to this and other associations with literature, *lituraterre* stands for: [writing] deletion [on the] ground, or [writing] erasure [on] earth."

With this definition in mind, one may turn to Lacan's "literary demonstration" of *lituraterre* as described in *The Literary Lacan*: "...while flying back to Europe from Tokyo, at the end of his (Lacan's) second visit to Japan shortly before writing the essay, over the otherwise barren Siberian Plain, the only thing that he could see through the window of the aircraft-and from between the clouds-was rivers. He calls those solitary traces in view "streaming" (*ruissellement*) and writes: "The streaming is the bouquet of a first stroke (*trait*) and of what effaces it. I have said it: it is from their conjunction that the subject is made, but in that two times are marked there. It is necessary then that the erasure be distinguished there." Later, when the aeroplane swerved to sustain itself in isobars, Lacan saw traces of an embankment. That is where the literary demonstration ends, with Lacan's emphasis clearly placed on the first stroke and its effacement, and the embankment or the edge of the shore designating the effacement, as a form of *lituraterre*."

The "streaming" on the face of the earth is the act of suicide on the face of a life of her own that was denied to women with artistic genius. The barren Siberian Plain is the curbed and impeded life that the "angels" and "monsters" had to go through. Suicide is the articulation of the woman's need for self-actualization within the framework of marriage, motherhood, family and relationships. The unused and unwanted talent goes into the effacing of all the lives she is associated with. The "stroke" that the woman makes embodies within itself all the unemployed strains of creative energy and expresses all her frustrations. She erases herself from the social order that had dominated her throughout and through that act leaves her mark, incising life which she could not do with her art. Female literary creativity gets its place and unearths the real woman hidden behind the patriarchal textual facade.

Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* posits death as the ultimate object of desire, as Nirvana or the recapturing of the lost unity, the final healing of the subject. Whereas for Lacan, “The unconscious is structured like a language” and contains a vital insight into the nature of desire. In Lacan, desire behaves the same way that language does. It moves from object to object or from signifier to signifier, and will never find full and present satisfaction. When a woman is not able to put across her unconscious through language, all she has left is her desire of recapturing the lost unity of seeing herself as a complete individual brought about by her self-awareness. Yet through her intricate thoughts that she could never channelize, she devices a way to efface life with her presence but ironically, it has to be through her absence, presenting literature with a dangerous gift. Suicide thus could be associated with *lituraterre*. The “[writing] deletion [on the] ground, or [writing] erasure [on] earth” can clearly be suicide [deletion] acted upon life [earth]. It is an erasure that constitutes the whole of her being, without anybody interfering and at peace with her own work of art realizing in self-actualization. With this mission in mind the madwoman up in the attic leaves her mark.

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