

A Breakdown or a Breakthrough?: “Madness” in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Doris Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen,” and Khairiya Saqqaf’s “In a Contemporary House”⁽¹⁾

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Abstract

This paper looks into the lives of the female protagonists in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Doris Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen,” and Khairiya Saqqaf’s “In a Contemporary House” in an attempt to reach a better understanding of women’s “madness.” To that end, this paper investigates the possibility of madness not being entirely a breakdown, but also a breakthrough, by analyzing the lives and experiences of the “mad” protagonists, as represented in the selected literary works, in light of R. D. Laing’s theories on the divided self and the politics of individual experiences. Despite the difference in time, place, and cultural contexts, all three women share the same experience of home confinement and domestication for different reasons that stem from patriarchal and social constraints. Such circumstances eventually lead these women to embrace forms of “madness” in ending a suffocating existence that does not allow them to connect with their inner-selves.

Keywords: women’s madness, female malady, R. D. Laing, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Doris Lessing, Khairiya Saqqaf, feminist literature, comparative literature

“People behave in such ways [different forms of behaviors that are regarded socially deviant] because their experience of themselves is different. . . [an experience which] goes beyond the horizons of our common, that is, our communal sense.” (Laing, 1967, p. 108-109)

Long before their notorious confinement to attics and imprisonment in asylums and mental institutions in the nineteenth century, women have always been associated with madness more than men ever were. From the medieval religious “insane” figure Joan of Arc all the way to twentieth century and contemporary female writers and activists, the symptoms of “madness” have been associated with women’s tendency to defy patriarchy by willingly rejecting the tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood⁽²⁾ and overlooking their socially accepted roles as obedient wives, mothers, and homemakers. Studying this phenomenon, feminist social theorists such as Phyllis Chesler, Elaine Showalter, and Jane Usher explain “the female malady”⁽³⁾ as a product of patriarchy’s construction of madness as a “disease,” an “abnormality” that manifests itself in women’s rejection of set gender roles and “ideal femininity.” Adopting a socio-psychological approach, feminist critics provide a reading that naturally borders on the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of women’s lives. Relying on psychological studies that highlight madness as an experience produced and impacted by the individual’s social and cultural contexts, what patriarchy perceives and defines as “madness” is to be explicated as a form of women’s activism against the stultifying roles and subordinate status they are forced to struggle against on a daily basis. In this sense, “madness” is a way of speaking back to society; it is women’s way of making sense of their lives, making new cultural meanings, and trying to assert their sanity in an insane world insisting on denying them the rights to self-cultivation and self-realization apart from set gender roles and cultural ideals.

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Reading into the lives of the women dubbed “mad,” it becomes clear to the reader that this so-called “disease” is more of a “dis-ease” resulting from the oppressive constraints and boundaries imposed upon women in a male-dominated society; it is a state of anguish and turmoil that changes women’s lived experiences in ways that can be harmful or eventually liberating in some ways. Without belittling or romanticizing the pain and restlessness their female protagonists experience due to social and cultural pressures, Gilman, Lessing and Saqqaf choose to present “madness” as an illuminating stage; a “breakthrough” that gives women the chance to embark on a journey of self-discovery and self-fulfillment.

Despite the difference in time, place, and cultural contexts, the three female protagonists depicted in Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1891), Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen” (1963), and Saqqaf’s “In a Contemporary House” (1981) all share the same experience of home confinement and domestication for different reasons that stem from patriarchal domination and imposed constructions of ideal femininity. Entrapment between a modern life, on the one hand, and confining, unfulfilling traditional gender roles on the other weighs heavily on the protagonists’ attempts at pursuing their dreams and realizing their potentials rather than being charming, selfless, helpless Angels in the House. In rejection of these ideals, Gilman’s narrator, Lessing’s Susan, and Saqqaf’s unnamed protagonist embrace “madness” in ending a suffocating existence that does not allow them to connect with their inner selves. Although Saqqaf’s “In a Contemporary House” focuses on the protagonist’s epiphany, Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen” allow readers to live the private experiences of smothered domesticated women as they accompany Susan and Gilman’s narrator through their journeys of descent into “madness,” witnessing the defiance of the New Woman and her questioning of the traditional beliefs of women’s “insanity.” All three domesticated women experience feelings of alienation from a socially constructed self, molded to fit a prescribed gender role, and a need to excavate a more satisfying, authentic self, grounded in their needs and desires, apart from the norm, the “reasonable,” and the “rational.”

Calling for a literature that breaks from the nineteenth century tradition of presenting women “merely as innocent ingénoues, angelic wives and mothers, or shameful fallen women,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman endows her female protagonists with a complexity grounded in “a realistic variety of ways,” presenting New Women freeing themselves from the hovering Angel of the True woman (Quawas, “New Woman’s Journey,” 2006, p. 38). Stemming from her own experience with Mitchell’s rest cure as a treatment for neurasthenia, now known as postpartum depression, Gilman writes “The Yellow Wallpaper” to protest against the sexist medical methods that are nothing but “violent process[es] of feminization” (Ammons, 1992, p. 35) which enforce female dependency, infantilization, as well as social and political subordination. In response to physicians’ negative reception of the story as one that “was enough to drive anyone mad to read it,” Gilman writes “Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*?” in which she explains that her story “was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy” (1913, p. 271). As authorship and creativity were considered major causal factors in cases of female neurasthenia and hysteria, Gilman, using what was left of her creativity after being told to live “as domestic a life as possible” and never touch a “pen, brush, or pencil again,” depicts real madness in domesticating women and severing them from the intellectual and political world deemed suitable only for men (Gilman, “Why I Wrote,” 1913, p. 271). It is not that Gilman presents madness as the solution to patriarchal oppression, nor that she wants women to find their freedom in and through insanity, but she uses madness to sound a siren to provoke social change, depicting it as the eventual outcome of severe female oppression that denies women the right to voice their needs, thoughts, and creativity, binding them to a life of servitude and self-sacrifice that hinders their evolvment into whole human beings and individuals.

Denied the right to express her thoughts and met by heavy “opposition” if she does (Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper,” p. 42), the narrator keeps a secret diary in which she writes things she “would not say to a living soul” (p. 41). Her husband, as a nineteenth century physician who believes intellectual stimulation wears her mind and nerves, “hates to have [her] write a word” (p. 43), and his sister Jennie, who has internalized patriarchal ideologies, thinks it is writing that has made the narrator sick in the first place (p. 47). However, the narrator explains that what tires her is not the act of writing itself, which she needs to do, as much as having to be “sly about it” (p. 42) to avoid being met with heavy opposition: “I *must* say what I feel and think in some way – it is such a relief!” (p. 49). Questioning the medical practices of her time, the unnamed narrator complains in her secret diary about her treatment methods and proclaims that she has no choice but to abide by the orders of her husband and brother, the “physician[s] of high standing” (p. 41): “[. . .] I am absolutely forbidden to ‘work’ until I am well again. Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?” (p. 42).

The narrator continues to complain about the recovery plans she is to follow and the effects her domestication and isolation from other people have on her, making her feel “dreadfully depress[ed]” (p. 44), “dreadfully fretful and querulous” (p. 48), “awfully lazy” (p. 49), mostly tired (p. 47), and bringing her to tears for no specific reason (p. 48). She fears being sent to Weir Mitchell, the physician who developed the rest cure, as she refers to a friend who has been under his supervision, which is pretty much like John’s and her brother’s, “only more so” (p. 48). Yearning for a change, she pleads with her husband more than once to allow her to socialize with other people like her cousin Henry and Julia, but John forbids her from visiting or having them over as part of her recovery plan, according to which she is only to rest, eat, sleep, and refrain from any intellectually or socially stimulating activities.

The negative influence of isolating her from others and prohibiting her from writing is paired with a frustration resulting from her having to tolerate the “horrid” (p. 45), irritating yellow wallpaper of the room with barred windows in which her husband forces her to stay in order for her health to improve. Pleading with him more than once to stay in a beautiful room downstairs rather than the nursery he chooses, away from the paper’s “vicious influence” (p. 46), John turns down the narrator’s request, discarding it as a “whim” (p. 45). The fact that he chooses the nursery at the top of a colonial mansion reflects his complete domination over his wife’s existence and his infantilization of her, alluded to in his calling her a “little girl” (p. 50) and a “blessed little goose” (p. 44).

John’s domineering attitude mirrors conventional power relations in a typical marriage around the 1890s, and is revealed in imposing his wishes and beliefs on his wife, taking little to no concern about what she feels or wants, whether it is about the room she wishes to stay at, her desire to work and socialize, or her own feelings about her “condition.” The fact that the narrator is unnamed reflects her lack of an individual identity as a married woman living by the patriarchal and social codes of her time. Her diary entries detail the experiences of a middle-class Victorian female writer/ artist whose creativity is obstructed and deterred by patriarchal domination and constructed social ideals that all aim to limit her existence to a perfect wife and selfless mother. An example can be seen in John’s reaction to his wife suggesting she might not be feeling well, mentally rather than physically. Giving her a “reproachful look,” John stresses the importance of the narrator’s recovery for him as a husband who needs her to fulfill her duties as a wife and a mother by asking her not to think about that “foolish fancy” for “[his] sake” first and above all, followed by “[their] child’s sake,” and last as well as least, “[her] own [sake]” (p. 51). Another example lies in his attitude towards her imaginative creativity as a writer, “caution[ing]” her about the dangerous impacts her “imaginative power and habit of story-making” would leave on her weakened nerves, telling her to use her “will and good sense to check that tendency” (p. 46).

Although she continues to write in secret against their wishes, the narrator’s writings reveal an unconscious internalization of her husband’s thoughts as she documents her reaction to his instructions and beliefs regarding her condition. According to her diary, she “take[s] pain to control [her]self — before him, at least” when she gets “unreasonably” (p. 43) angry with him, and as any sensible Victorian lady would, she blames such unreasonable anger on her “nervous condition” which she believes is hindering her ability to “think straight” (p. 49). Unaware yet of the real reason behind her anger at this point, the narrator describes a nervousness that takes over her whenever she thinks about her baby (p. 44), an irritation she feels for not being able to carry out her role as a mother and a wife, and becoming a “burden” rather than the “help” and comfort she is supposed to be to her husband (p. 44): “It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way!” (p. 44). Although she blames her sickness for failing to meet her duties and live up to her ideally constructed role and image, the narrator comes to recognize that these roles and her husband’s domineering attitude are the reasons behind her sickness, a realization she arrives at after discovering and identifying with the figure of a woman trapped in the patterns of the hideous wallpaper in the nursery she is occupying.

As much as she hates it, the narrator’s enforced isolation gives her a chance to contemplate her condition, not as a sick “hysterical” woman, but as an oppressed writer who is being forced to discard her real-self for what patriarchy and society expect of her. The atrocious yellow wallpaper she keeps staring at functions as a mirror in which and through which the narrator comes to identify with herself, the reflection of her trapped alter-ego getting easier to see day after day. Making her think of “old, foul, bad yellow things” (p. 54), the color symbolizes her sickness and “hysterical” tendencies as viewed by her husband and society at large, and foreshadows the revelation or the discovery of something within her that is to be seen by society as “bad” and “foul.” The flamboyant patterns, “committing every artistic sin” (p. 43) is associated with the narrator’s “sin” as a female writer/ artist daring to cross patriarchal and cultural boundaries of the time, the punishment of which is the “hysteria” label and enforced domestication.

The more time she spends in this room, studying the patterns of the wallpaper, she realizes “[t]here are things in that paper that nobody knows but [her], or ever will . . . It is always the same shape, only very numerous,” the shape of “a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern” (p. 50).

This woman, “subdued” by daylight (p. 52), is brought to life by moonlight, “shak[ing] the pattern as if she wanted to get out” (p. 50). The contrast between daylight and moonlight, according to which the pattern looks different (p. 51), reflects the narrator’s conflicting feelings and behaviors in the presence of John and Jennie, who are the embodiments of patriarchal and social rules, and in the presence of the creeping woman in the pattern, the embodiment of madness, which points to the narrator developing a split or a schizoid personality. At this point, having become aware of John and Jennie watching her, seeing them having “inexplicable looks” and being “very queer” around her, the narrator’s anxiety increases as she confesses “getting a little afraid of John” (p. 52). In his “Escaping the Jaundiced Eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” John Bak likens the narrator’s experience, imprisoned in the nursery, to the experience of Foucault’s Panopticism,⁽⁴⁾ in which shriveling the prisoner/patient in the supposedly better environment of the Panopticon proves to be more harmful than the “unhealthy or unappealing environment of the prison or mental ward” they would inhabit (1994, p. 42), creating a fear and a paranoia that affect their psychological stability. The numerous “absurd unblinking eyes [that] are everywhere” in the pattern (“Yellow Wallpaper,” p. 46), watching the narrator and staring at her, stand for society making sure she checks her behavior as defined by the cult of true womanhood; the “two bulbous eyes” (p. 46), however, stand for John’s as he monitors her every move, not letting her “stir without special direction” (p. 43). Bak explains that:

Under the unerring scrutiny of the “two bulbous eyes” in the yellow wallpaper, the narrator passes through stages from concern to paranoia and, finally, to madness. During the entire journey, we are reminded of Foucault’s description of panopticism’s “faceless gaze” with “thousands of eyes posted everywhere” (214). By placing her in this room, John, the narrator’s husband, resembles the penal officers of the eighteenth-century psychiatric wards or penitentiaries, whose credo Foucault describes [sic]: “project the subtle segmentations of discipline onto the confused space of internment, combine it with the methods of analytical distribution proper to power, [and] individualize the excluded . . . ([Foucault] 199).” (Bak, 1994, p. 42)

Finally being able to “see through [John]” (p. 56), asking her all sorts of questions while “pretend[ing] to be very loving and kind” (p. 56), the narrator becomes aware of the patriarchal oppression John represents as a husband and a medical practitioner. Consequently, she starts completely identifying with the imprisoned woman behind the bars of the sickening yellow existence of the wallpaper, crawling around the room when no one is looking, just like the trapped woman does, and focusing her energy on freeing that woman from the narrow patterns she is confined to: “As soon as it was moonlight and the poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had pulled yards of that paper” (p. 56). In her last diary entry, looking out her window, the narrator mentions seeing “so many of those creeping women” and exclaims: “I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as *I* did?” (emphasis added, p. 58). Freeing her trapped self from the shackles of patriarchy and the bondage of marriage, the narrator, creeping around the room, confronts her surprised husband saying: “I’ve got out at last . . . in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (p. 58), ending her narrative with “creep[ing] over him” (p. 58) as he faints across her path by the wall.

Discussing the ending, Cathrine Golden describes it as one that “defies a reductive explanation, no doubt as Gilman intended. Opinions range along a spectrum marked by extremes: liberation versus entrapment, triumph versus defeat” (1992, p. 15-16). The fact that the narrator’s name is only revealed in her last lines indicates a success in identifying with her socially constructed self (Jane) as an ‘other,’ having developed a new identity apart from and in revolt against John’s domination. The narrator’s “madness” in this case, resulting from an imprisonment that forces her to go back and forth between what she needs and believes to be the solution to her condition on the one hand, and her husband’s domineering attitude and enforced methods and ideologies on the other, can be explained in light of R.D. Laing’s theories on the divided self and the politics of individual experiences.

Redefining the “schizophrenic”⁽⁵⁾ experience in his *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*, Laing points out that “*disturbed*” (1967, p. 93) individuals usually become so due to being caught in a “network of extremely disturbed and disturbing patterns of communication” (1967, p. 94) that mainly operate in “often very *disturbing*” families (1967, p. 93) in which husbands are the prime suspects in cases of disturbed unhappy married women.

To this end, the patient's "schizophrenic" behavior becomes a "reflection of and a reaction to the disturbed and disturbing patterns" of his/her family (1967, p. 95), and by analogy of society at large, a "special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation" (1967, p. 95). The narrator's obsession with the wallpaper, and the woman imprisoned behind its bars, mirrors an "immersion in inner space" that is usually regarded as "anti-social withdrawal, a deviancy, invalid, [and] pathological *per se*" (1967, p. 103). However, according to Laing, this journey into inner space, often labelled "madness," is not necessarily "all breakdown": "It may also be breakthrough. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death" (1967, p. 110). It is in her "breakdown" that the narrator "breaks through" with a realization and a rejection of her imprisonment and social constructions, a step in her spiritual quest to the "superior sanity" which Laing continuously refers to in all his works.

Although his theories are not exclusive to women, Laing's work has been popular among feminist social critics due to its focus on the social context of madness, the factors that drive people insane, and on the process of labeling "different" individual experiences and behaviors as forms of pathological illnesses. These theories are adopted in explaining the relationship between women and madness, highlighting the impact of sexual politics, patriarchal oppression, and social conditioning on the psychological stability of women. Influenced by Laing, or sharing similar views in terms of the nature of madness and the conflict between public and private consciousness, Doris Lessing, in most of her works, depicts the psychological damage women are afflicted with due to domestication and imposed gender roles, featuring women's inner struggles and attempts to break-free from the image of the Angel in the House. The protagonists of *The Children of Violence* series (1952-69), *The Golden Notebook* (1962), and *The Summer Before Dark* (1973), all battle against patriarchal oppression and struggle for self-realization, self-fulfillment, and phases of madness; however, it is in *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and "To Room Nineteen" (1963) that Lessing goes to the length of using "the figure of a mad woman – to suggest that the middle-class housewife is socially constructed so as to prefer self-destructive behavior to change – even to the point of willing her own death" (Hunter, 1987, p. 91).

Reflecting a feminist social dilemma of the time, Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" depicts the emptiness, restlessness, sadness, and dismay shadowing the life of a middle-class housewife who, in "practical intelligence" ("Room Nineteen," p. 2543), gives up her career for the sake of having a "proper" family, which as it turns out, can never be "a centre of life and a reason for being" (p. 2543). 1963, the year in which "To Room Nineteen" was published, witnessed the first systematic reaction to the cult of domesticity reestablished in post-World War II American and British cultures, as voiced by Betty Friedan in her *The Feminine Mystique*, a book that is said to have marked the beginning of the second wave of the feminist movement. After interviewing former college classmates and discovering a shared growing discontent of a domesticated existence, Friedan sets to deconstruct the image of the happy housewife who finds satisfaction and fulfillment in her socially constructed "feminine" role of mother and wife, and discusses the misery housewives eventually face and cannot quite explain, referring to it as the "problem that has no name" (2002, p. 9).

The deep psychological turmoil Susan finds herself struggling with after ten years of marriage, during which the "essential Susan were in abeyance, as if she were in a cold storage" ("Room Nineteen," p. 2546), is an embodiment of Friedan's nameless problem of the "dissatisfied voice within" (Friedan, 2002, p. 13). Despite their marriage being one "grounded in intelligence" (p. 2542), the Rawlings belief in their "foresight," and "sense for what was probable" fails them in anticipating Susan's eventual despair over a self she miserably tries to reconnect with, and her ultimate decision to commit suicide in a cheap dingy hotel room as her only way out. Abiding by the "popular wisdom" of her time (p. 2543), the talented Susan is impelled to give up commercial drawing when she becomes pregnant, move to a big beautiful house with a garden, and have a "balanced and sensible family" (p. 2543). However, she eventually discovers that this life, despite it being what "everyone would wish for" (p. 2543), does not provide her with the fulfillment and happiness society promises, as it only alienates her from her real self and leaves her restless, irritated, and angry. Adding to it her husband's infidelity, Susan starts feeling like she is "living out a prison sentence" (p. 2550), "bound" to a stranger of a husband who she comes to see as "a person that shields all delight from [her]" (p. 2550).

Annoyed, bad-tempered, and hurt, Susan tries to suppress and control the pain Mathew's unfaithfulness has caused her since "intelligence" forbids quarrelling, accusations, and tears (p. 2546). Continuously trying to rationalize her situation, finding it in the "nature of things" for a married woman and a mother to be denied an adventurous delightful life (p. 2543), Susan tries to comfort herself with the hope that "in another decade, she would turn herself back into being a woman with a life of her own" (p. 2546) when her youngest children are off to school.

However, she disappointingly discovers that the “seven blissful hours of freedom” (p. 2547) she has been looking forward to for years would never be free and would never be hers, as her mind always drifts back to thoughts of school clothes, sewing, cooking, the kids’ dentist appointments, and Mrs. Parkes’ non-stop questions and comments. As the duties of the good wife, selfless mother, and practical mistress of the house continue to weigh on her, Susan’s restlessness is intensified by her conflicting emotions as she thinks of her distress as “irrational” and “utterly ridiculous” (p. 2549); something she despises and tries to discard but yet feels “so strongly she c[an] not shake off” (p. 2548). Something inside her continues to “[howl] with impatience, with rage” (p. 2551), her children’s hugs feel like a “human cage of loving limbs” (p. 2551), and she starts seeing a demon in her garden, waiting to “get into [her] and to take [her] over” (p. 2552). For all she knows, Susan thinks she has become an “irrational person” (p. 2551) who is somehow sick and should probably “see a doctor” (p. 2548). Blaming herself for having these feelings, Susan continuously thinks “there *must be something wrong with me*” (emphasis added, p. 2551) and eventually shares it with Mathew. Susan’s guilt over these feelings, blaming herself instead of trying to understand her distress as caused by something happening around her, is part of the social conditioning of women, which not only constructs the ideals of true womanhood, but also shames women for the slightest doubt or rejection of their set gender roles by presenting such tendencies as anything but feminine or normal. In this sense, Susan’s ugly demon, whose features she is reminded of while looking at herself in the mirror as she brushes her hair, is an embodiment of society’s image of the monstrous unfeminine woman Susan believes herself to have become.

In her “Madness in Doris Lessing’s ‘To Room Nineteen,’” Eva Hunter refers to the recurring motifs of the snake, the demon, and the mirror as Lessing’s way of “symboliz[ing] the vigour of the irrational aspects of the human psyche and the danger of suppressing emotional energy” (1987, p. 93). The mirror forces Susan to see the “evil” side of her that she tries so hard to suppress, as the features of her candid pleasant face and healthy black hair become nothing but a “reflection of a madwoman,” very much as if it is “the gingery green-eyed demon with his meager smile” that looks back at her (“Room Nineteen,” p. 2555). Becoming aware of the nature of her true feelings and how they are to be interpreted by the world as “madness” and “irrationality,” Susan is finally able to see and acknowledge the split between what she represents to those around her and what she feels inside, coming to accept the “evilness” and the “darkness.” Brushing her hair in front of the mirror, Susan’s repeated strokes cause “fine black clouds” to lift in a “small hiss of electricity” that she enjoys listening to (p. 2555). The significance of the hissing here is related to the first snake image that appears in the text, used in a description of the Rawlings’ marriage as a snake biting its tail.

While the snake could signify “wholeness, inclusiveness, and perpetual renewal” (Hunter, 1987, p. 99), for the Rawlings it signifies the complete opposite: routine, boredom, and entrapment. The demon Susan sees in her garden seems to be prodding an unhealthy-looking snake-like creature that twists and turns in protest to the demon’s intrusive stick. Susan reacts to the presence of this demon, the enemy, in her house in the same way. As the snake in the second image is associated with Susan herself, being prodded by the demon to stop the unhealthiness her marriage is causing, Susan’s willingness to break free from her bondage is established in her enjoying the hissing sound of electricity resulting from brushing her hair in her first scene in front of the mirror. In the second scene, after her steady visits to room nineteen, the snake image is developed, not only with an increase of “hissing,” but also in Susan becoming “absorbed” in watching her hair making shapes against the blue wall behind her in what evokes a Medusa image (p. 2559): The snake(s) become a part of Susan who is ready to shed her old self in the same way a snake sheds its own skin in growth and renewal. As the mirror reflects both Susan’s true feelings and how she sees herself as well as how society sees her, her self-renewal is to be seen by her husband as a transformation into a Medusa figure, a “cold,” “indifferent” (p. 2555) woman who is to walk out on her unfaithful husband, demanding children, and big white house, trampling over the forgiving, loving, and selfless Angel in the House. This transformation, Susan’s acceptance of her “evil” and “mad” side, is explained by Laing as the end result of trying to suppress a part of the individual’s being (the bad) at the expense of the other (the good):

It has always been recognized that if you split Being down the middle, if you insist on grabbing *this* without *that*, if you cling to the good without the bad, denying the one for the other, what happens is that the dissociated evil impulse, now evil in a double sense, return to permeate and possess the good and turn it into itself.⁽⁶⁾

Torn between her duties, her need to maintain the aura of “intelligence” and “rationality” she is known for, her continuous attempts at behaving with a “controlled decency that nearly drove her crazy”

("Room Nineteen," p. 2547), and her inability to shake off her dreadful emptiness and irritation, Susan starts questioning her whole existence and longs for a solitude that would bring about an "emancipation away from the role of the-hub-of-the family into woman-with-her-own-life" (p. 2546). Her restlessness, suppressed anger, tremendous need for being completely alone and free of all her responsibilities as Mrs. Rawlings, seeking anonymity and solitude away from her home and family, all form a part of Susan's process of "metanoia." According to the theories of Carl Jung⁽⁷⁾, metanoia is explained as a form of a potentially positive and productive process of self-healing that is initiated spontaneously by a split or a damaged psyche under unbearable pressure resulting from a conflict of needs and emotions, causing the damaged psyche to melt down in order to be reborn in a more adaptive form. In this sense, what is perceived as psychotic episodes, or signs of "madness," are in Jung's views manifestations of existential crises with which the psyche tries to deal and eventually resolve on its own.

Influenced by Jung's theories on the nature of psychotic breakdowns, Laing gives his famous conclusion of madness not being necessarily all breakdown but also possibly a breakthrough (1967, p. 110). Characterized by a radical change of perspective that alters one's view of one's self and the world, metanoia or ego transcendence, as explained by Laing, is achieved in Susan's case through meditation and complete solitude which would enable her to connect with her real authentic self away from the influences of social, cultural, and political contexts. The transcendence of the ego entails dissolution from the socially constructed ego, the presence of which creates and causes the individual's inner conflicts, towards an autonomous, more authentic and balanced self. Susan's quest for solitude starts at home, as she continuously tries to find a place where she can be "really alone, with no one near" ("Room Nineteen," p. 2548), locking herself in the bathroom, going to the very end of the garden, retiring to the spare empty room upstairs, all to no avail. Even when she takes a vacation and tries to enjoy the "Welsh emptiness" (p. 2555), Mrs. Parkes' calls make her feel like "the telephone wire [is] holding her to her duty like a leash" (p. 2554). It is not until she seeks solitude in the privacy of a hotel room far away from home, realizing "[s]he was alone. She was alone. She was alone" (p. 2553), that Susan finally "feel[s] pressures lift off her" for the first time in years (p. 2553).

This experience marks Susan's first step of dissolution from her constructed ego, a spiritual withdrawal from her domestic sphere, and the beginning of a journey towards her inner self and space. Susan's attempt at self-rediscovery and simultaneous identity deconstruction and reconstruction, appears to answer to Lessing's "testing the angst of identity or what might happen in the new feminist era to a woman of the old dispensation" who is not only caught up in the socially constructed image of ideal Womanhood, but has also accepted this image and its entailed responsibilities in the form of motherhood and wifehood, and with her husband's infidelity, the role of the betrayed wife (Quawas, "Lessing's," 2007, p. 110).

In her "Lessing's 'To Room Nineteen': Susan's Voyage into the Inner Space of 'Elsewhere,'" Rula Quawas analyzes Susan's decision and will to free herself from the restraints of her socially constructed self as an act of initiation enabling her to enter "the 'elsewhere' of consciousness" (2007, p. 112). This 'elsewhere' is defined as "the primary place of identity and enunciation of female experience and subjectivity [away from the socially produced ego]," a psychological state that is rather a "mode of consciousness that helps women to enter an imaginable, yet inhabitable, universe where they can review their lives and seek self-knowledge" in a way that helps them understand the "wider world" and their place in it (2007, p. 112). Room nineteen at Fred's hotel provides Susan with a solitude that allows her to sink into herself, not as "Susan Rawlings, mother of four, wife of Mathew, employer of Mrs. Parkes and Sophie Traub," but as the anonymous Mrs. Jones with "no past and no future" ("Room Nineteen," p. 2558). In changing her name, Susan gives up her old identity and opens up to the possibility of having a new one that is more in tune with her own needs as an intelligent woman determined to redefine her existence. It is in her daily visits to this empty room that Susan starts embracing, rather than repressing, her need to set herself free from the "bondage" of marriage (p. 2550) and the responsibilities she finds herself stuck within.

The narrator describes Susan's reexamination of her life and her self-rediscovery as acts of "wool gather[ing]," "brood[ing], wander[ing], simply [going] dark" (p. 2558). Her experience of "wool-gathering" happens to "represent the 'elsewhere' of female experience" Quawas refers to, the "feelings which are not accounted for or recognized by masculine culture, which are often forbidden, and this takes up a shadowy residence in the unconscious" ("Lessing's," 2007, p. 118). Although the whole process of reconnecting with herself eventually makes her feel like an "imposter" (p. 2558) in her own house, Susan finally embraces her rejection of her ascribed roles and everything that comes with them.

This is accompanied by her seeing the world differently for the first time in years, symbolized in her looking through her hotel room window happily, “loving” all the anonymous people who pass by, the buildings, the streets, and the sky she feels like she has never seen before. Seeing the world with a new perspective shows this experience to be an eye-opener for Susan, helping her to finally see her current place in the world, and offering her other possibilities of being, somewhere beyond the suffocating domestic sphere.

Wool-gathering in the solitude and anonymity that room nineteen provides her becomes Susan’s home, her safe place that allows her to become the independent free person she aspires to become. It becomes a part of her new world, a room of her own that she insists on living her new experience in, ready to wait for it if it is occupied rather than just take another supposedly similar room. However, when this room, this new world and its privacy, are invaded by Mathew’s intrusive presence, Susan loses the sense of shelter and peace the room has given her, and feels like a “snail pecked out of its shell and trying to squirm back” (“Room Nineteen,” p. 2560). With her solitude, freedom, and transcendence obstructed by a husband who has her followed, suspecting her to have a lover, Susan’s journey and her connection with her inner space is disrupted before she is able to “close the gap once and for all between Susan the wife and mother and the Other Susan” (Quawas, “Lessing,” 2007, p. 119). Coming back to the room several times after her husband interrupts her process of self-growth and recreation, Susan tries to “look for herself there, but instead she found the unnamed spirit of restlessness, a prickling fevered hunger for movement, an irritable self-consciousness that made her brain feel as if it had coloured lights going on and off inside it” (“Room Nineteen,” p. 2560). The room is not the same anymore as Susan’s anonymity vanishes and her past, presented in her old identity as Mathew’s wife, comes to haunt her and remind her of her suffocating present and future:

Instead of the soft dark that had been the room’s air, were now waiting for her demons that made her dash blindly about, muttering words of hatred; she was impelling herself from point to point like a moth dashing itself against a windowpane, sliding to the bottom, fluttering off on broken wings, then crashing into the invisible barrier again. And again and again. (“Room Nineteen,” p. 2560)

Incapable of moving forward and cultivating her new self in her own room anymore, Susan is left with no choice but to go back. Going back to the big white house in the middle of a weekday, Susan stands outside and watches how life in that house is being carried out without her: Mrs. Parkes cooking in Susan’s overall and Sophie taking care of Susan’s sick daughter, whose listless face “hurt[s] Susan” (p. 2560) and urges her to go in and hug the little girl. Looking at them from the outside, Susan realizes how “remote” and “shut off from them” she has become (p. 2560). She realizes how irrelevant her presence is in that house with other women filling in for her motherly duties, and more importantly, how impossible it is for her to relive the roles she has enjoyed willfully breaking free from for over a year now: “all this had nothing to do with her: she was already out of it” (p. 2561). Already in the process of forging a new, free, rebellious identity that does not acknowledge the validity of the socially constructed Angel nor accepts motherhood, marriage, and ideal femininity as the ultimate purpose in life, Susan eventually chooses to save this new self by experiencing physical death in the same room where she experiences psychological rebirth. For Susan, it all starts and ends in room nineteen of Fred’s hotel near Paddington:

[W]ith hardly a break in her consciousness, she got up . . . put two shillings in the meter and turned the gas on . . . quite content lying there listening to the faint soft hiss of the gas that poured into the room, into her lungs, into her brain, as she drifted off into the dark river. (p. 2564)

While some critics, such as Lynda Scott, consider Susan’s suicide a defeat, a “complete loss of self-identity to the patriarchal collective in spite of her disillusionment with its ideals,” and a “submission to the collective” (1998, n. pag.), the actual defeat for Susan lies in going back to her family. Going back to her old life means betraying her newly found self by reclaiming the roles she no longer identifies with, adding to them the role of the adulterous wife in order to be able to maintain an access to the solitude she acquires in room nineteen. Her willful self-annihilation is the only way Susan is capable of remaining true to her new self, physical death being a protection of her new identity from the trapping and limiting powers of the patriarchal and cultural ideologies of womanhood and wifehood that are bound to get to her eventually one way or another. The domestication of women and the psychological distress, emptiness, depression, and agitation it causes are constant feminist issues for women all over the world, regardless of time, place, or culture. Khairiya Saqqaf, a Saudi feminist author, dedicates most of her short fiction, collected in *An Tubbir Nabwa al-Abad* (Taking Off into the Distance), to several social and feminist concerns that Saudi women have to deal with on a daily basis. In her fiction, she voices women’s feelings on universal issues like domestication, female subordination as the inferior sex, patriarchal domination, and preordained gender roles, among others.

Featured in her collection, “In a Contemporary House” is one story in which Saqqaf presents yet another domesticated woman entrapped by the patriarchal familial and social systems of a 1980s Arab culture, systems that hinder women’s ability to develop a necessary sense of selfhood and individuality and prevent them from enjoying any sort of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical freedom.

While Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen” depict two women’s struggles against the ideals of the cult of true womanhood and power relations in a marriage, Saqqaf’s unnamed protagonist stands for the majority of Saudi women of her time, married or not, who are domesticated as part of tradition-related restrictions and “traditional norms of honor . . . that require women to protect their virtue by staying at home” (Alsuwaigh, 1989, p. 69). With its gender policies and laws, the Saudi state has played a significant part in the isolation and domestication of women in Saudi Arabia. An example can be seen in the legal requirement of the segregation of the sexes outside the home, which has deprived women from the right to education up till the 1960s when girls-only schools were first established. With no to little education, women had no chances of employment outside their homes, which was regarded unnecessary anyway since women’s main work had always been socially defined in relation to the domestic sphere and household chores.⁽⁸⁾ The state has also imposed legal restrictions on women’s mobility, forbidding them from driving,⁽⁹⁾ walking the streets or going shopping alone without a male *mahram*,⁽¹⁰⁾ or leaving the country alone without a written approval from a male relative (Silvey, 2004, p. 255). The state’s Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Hai’at Al-Amr Bi Al-Ma’ruf Wa Al-Nahi ‘An Al-Munkar) have the moral police (the *mutawaa’in*) supervise women’s behavior outside their homes, seeking out and ‘disciplining’ women who seem to be breaking the ground rules for maintaining virtue, such as those not wearing the hijab, or those dining in restaurants with men they are not married to or non-mahram men (Silvey, 2004, p. 255).

Having no name, no identity of her own, Saqqaf’s protagonist is presented to the reader without a past or any indication to her marital status, age, or physical features. Her individuality emerges in the present moment being depicted in the story as she decides to break free from the typification of the collective image of the silent, obedient, domesticated woman, protesting to her confinement in the symbolic act of “impatiently” opening the tight shut windows of her room (“Contemporary House,” p. 90). Identifying with the rumbles of the air conditioner “protesting about continuous suffering” (p. 90), the protagonist complains of a chill down her veins, an overwhelming weight on her chest and throat, a fatigue paralyzing her body, and a depression that blurs her sense of time. Describing the protagonist, an omniscient narrator remarks: “In such an environment, she is unable to define clearly the time in which she now breathes . . . incapable even of knowing its secret . . . she becomes depressed” (p. 90). Relying on different research results looking into the reasons behind women’s depression, Jane Ussher points out that the family and the domestic sphere have been “for too long the seat of women’s oppression and depression” (*Women’s Madness*, 1992, p. 299). Women’s roles as mothers and housewives usually cause an isolation from the outside world that creates feelings of powerlessness and subordination, especially in relation to economic dependency (Ussher, *Women’s Madness*, 1992, p. 299), which forces a lot of women to tolerate unbearable living conditions or domination for the sake of having their material needs met, such as having a place to live, as well as the main necessities like food and clothes.

While Saqqaf does not clarify her protagonist’s role in the family, it seems she belongs to the upper or upper middle class, as the room is described as having velvety walls and is furnished with “crystal, glass, and gold” (“Contemporary House,” p. 90). By the time the story was published (1981), middle-class Saudi women were granted better chances at education and joining the public labor force, though still limited to professions associated strictly with women, such as teaching, social work, nursing, and to some extent writing newspaper articles or reviews (Alsuwaigh, 1989, p. 70-76). However, with a culture that tries to maintain the subordination of women and social norms that resist a change in the status of women, along with a “lack of economic incentive for [female] work” in the upper and middle classes (Alsuwaigh, 1989, p. 77), not so many women were allowed the opportunity to experience putting their knowledge and intelligence at work and joining the public sphere. Staying home usually entailed carrying out household responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of the needs of other family members, especially men and children or younger siblings, all of which can be suffocating and depressing for a lot of women who aspire to grow as individuals and have different life experiences. Studying the conditions and social practices regulating women’s lives and attributing to their distress, depression, restlessness, and emptiness, Ussher explains how these feelings, the “pain and despair,” eventually drive women to “desperate measures” in which “madness” in its variant forms becomes their only means of expression (*Women’s Madness*, 1992, p. 283).

Agitated by the dreadful silence around her, the nausea and pain “convuls[ing] her intestines” (“Contemporary House,” p. 90), the boredom taking over her and paralyzing her body, the protagonist goes into what would be typically considered a hysteric fit, a bout of “madness,” in which she suddenly starts smashing, breaking, and tearing everything around her: “She tore the curtains ... she threw the crystals on the floor ... with haste she took the glasses, one by one and threw them on the floor, and they broke, were shattered ... around her, everything was nothing, inspiring murder” (p. 90). Provoked by the affinity between her and the “bright things” that “cannot move” around her, the protagonist revolts against her current existence as a beautiful, immobile, fragile, decorative object, breaking her silence and the silence around her, and opening the closed windows that separate her from the warmth and life of the outside world. By having her protagonist muster the courage to open the windows on her own and to stop the “protesting rumbles” of the air conditioner with her own hands, Saqqaf is encouraging her female readers to stand up against their oppression and fight to free themselves from the subordination and imprisonment they may face one way or another as women in male-dominated societies.

Unlike Gilman’s narrator who eventually goes “mad” in her yellow wallpapered room, and Lessing’s Susan who commits suicide in her room nineteen, Saqqaf’s depressed protagonist is yet to discover her way out of her forced domestication as she “c[o]me[s] forward violently shaking her head to get rid of the vestiges of darkness” (p. 91). Gathering her strength to defy the social conventions trapping her in her richly furnished house, the protagonist’s breakdown, depression and ‘hysterical fit’ lead her into a break-through-“darkness” as the sun appears at the corner of her window and life starts “coming in” her room: a glimpse of hope and a promise of change and renewal to accompany her revolt and defiance as she goes down the same path Jane and Susan go in search of authentic selfhood and personal growth.

Notes

- 1- This paper is a revised chapter of Amro’s doctoral dissertation entitled *How “Sane” Is “Insane”?: (Re)Presentations of “Insane” Women in Modern Feminist Fiction*.
- 2- The cult of true womanhood and domesticity is a nineteenth century value system that stresses the importance of women’s domesticity, purity, piety, and submissiveness. For more on this see Bertha Welter (1966) “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly*. 18, 151-74.
- 3- Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980* (1985) and Phyllis Chesler’s *Women and Madness* (1972) are two of the most fundamental feminist accounts that unravel the connections made between women and madness, clarifying patriarchy’s role in the construction of madness as a “female malady” throughout centuries. Jane Ussher contributes to this scholarship with *Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (1992) and *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience* (2011).
- 4- In his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault discusses Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, a building which is wheel-like in structure, with a tower at the center that makes surveilling each room or cell in the building possible. The individuals in each room are to be watched by warders or prisoners with whom they cannot communicate, being aware they are being watched without knowing when exactly or by whom. As this experience cultivates fear and paranoia, the Panopticon becomes a social disciplinary mechanism that facilitates powerful groups’ control over people and guarantees maintaining power relations within a society (Foucault, p. 195-228).
- 5- In his *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*, Laing distinguishes his use of the term “schizophrenia” from the traditional medical definition of the word as a “label that some people pin on other people under certain social circumstances” (p. 86), rather than a physical or mental condition or illness as it is generally perceived and commonly used in relation to brain dysfunctions in some cases. For further explanation on schizophrenia as a label and as a voyage into inner space, as well as a deeper analysis of the dynamics of madness as a multilayered experience that reflects the impacts of chaotic and divided social systems and structures on the formation and destruction of one’s ego, see *The Politics of Experience* chapter 5: “The Schizophrenic Experience,” and chapter 6: “Transcendental Experience.”
- 6- *The Politics of Experience* (1970). p. 75, quoted in Maryon Vlastos’ “Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy” (PMLA, 19.2, Mar. 1976, p. 247) in analyzing the madness of Lessing’s Anna Wulf’s from *The Golden Notebook*. Eva Hunter in “Madness in Doris Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen”” quotes Vlastos’s argument in relation to the division or split in Susan Rawlings’ psyche.
- 7- Carl Jung developed William James’ use of metanoia as a term that was used in reference to radical changes in an individual’s view of themselves and the world to a process through which the psyche attempts to heal itself.

For more on Jung's metanoia, which he discusses in several books, see Jung's *The Undiscovered Self: The Dilemma of The Individual in Modern Societies* (2006), Jung's *The Practice of Psychotherapy* (1954), and Petrushka Clarkson's *On Psychotherapy* (1993).

- 8- For more on the social conditions of women in Saudi Arabia between the 1960s and the 1980s, especially in terms of education, employment, family, and marriage, see Siham A. Alsuwaigh's "Women in Transition: The Case of Saudi Arabia" (1989).
- 9- Saudi women are now allowed to drive (as of June 2018).
- 10- A woman's *mabram* according to Islamic laws is a man she cannot marry or have any sexual relations with, such as her father, brother, uncle, or nephew. Although women's mobility in Saudi Arabia is usually restricted to the company of a *mabram*, a big group of women can replace the presence of a *mabram* in running some of their necessary errands outside the home.

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