

The concept of female madness

Vanya Bardeja, Vinaya Kumari and Beulah Victor*

Abstract: Throughout history, women have been linked to madness, whether it be characters like Medea in Ancient Greece, the witch trials in Salem during the Middle Ages, or women labelled as “hysterical” in the Victorian era. Some female writers used the portrayal of a mad woman to illustrate the impact of a male-dominated society on women. This paper argues that the depiction of madness in both Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Fadia Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt* (1996) does not challenge authority but instead represents the oppression of “women by patriarchy and colonialism.” The article utilizes Marta Caminero Santangelo’s feminist criticism perspective, asserting that insanity does not equate to liberation and a mad woman is also unable to communicate, referencing Gayatri Spivak’s work “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

Keywords: feminism, madness of women, Orientalism, women’s writing

Some scholars might contend that due to differences in geography, culture, and historical context, a direct comparison between *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Pillars of Salt* (1996) is invalid. However, these works exhibit numerous parallels, particularly in their treatment of female madness. Despite Bertha’s minor role in *Jane Eyre*, her influence is profound, prompting extensive analysis from literary critics. By examining both *Jane Eyre* and *Pillars of Salt* and their treatment of the theme of madness in women, this paper aims to establish a dialectical connection between past and present, Western and Eastern perspectives (Wall & Jones 2007, 72).

In *Jane Eyre*, the narrative revolves around an orphan who endures significant hardship in her youth, including moments of apparent insanity as she resists the oppressive behaviour of her cousin, John

* Vanya Bardeja; Vinaya Kumari (✉)

Amity University, Noida, India

Beulah Victor

Dayananda Pai-P Satisha Pai Government First Grade College, Mangalore, India

e-mail: vanyabardeja@gmail.com (corresponding author)

Reed. Following a period of confinement, Jane secures employment as a governess in the household of Edward Rochester. Despite falling in love with Rochester, she cannot marry him due to his existing marriage. Rochester claims his Creole wife, Bertha, is mentally unstable and reveals that arranged marriage is based on her beauty and wealth. Bertha is locked in the attic of Rochester's estate in England, where she exhibits erratic behaviour, including ripping her wedding dress and ultimately setting the house ablaze before taking her own life. Rochester is left physically impaired by the fire but eventually weds Jane.

Pillars of Salt unfolds in Jordan during and after the British mandate, chronicling the lives of Um Saad and Maha. Um Saad faces severe restrictions on her education, marital choices, and freedom of movement. Compelled into a marriage with an abusive butcher, she rebels when her husband takes another wife, leading to her confinement in an asylum. Maha, a Bedouin woman, defies her oppressive brother, the British authorities, and the patriarchal norms of society, earning accusations of insanity. Daffash seizes her land and son, compelling her into a loveless marriage with a stranger. Both women find themselves confined together in the asylum, where they recount their narratives. While the novel incorporates an outsider's perspective to narrate Maha's tale and depict Jordan, Maha swiftly interjects with her account as a rebuttal. Despite never meeting, Maha dismisses the foreign narrator as a "drivelling liar." United in their confinement, both of them support each other against the abuses of the "English doctor, nurses, medication, and the triple oppression of patriarchy, misrepresentation of religion, and colonialism."

Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* follows a storyline reminiscent of *Jane Eyre*, featuring a woman who is marginalized and oppressed after being deemed mentally unstable. The influence of colonization on women's oppression is stark in both contexts, given Britain's colonial rule over both the West Indies and Jordan. Faqir draws parallels between the subtle and explicit structures of oppression within Arab families and states and the mechanisms of colonization (Moore 2011, 3). The narrative takes place during the British mandate in Transjordan from 1922 to 1946. Maha's husband, Harb, was defiant against the colonizers, a sentiment that his widow shares. Harb had enlightened his wife about the English occupation, their harsh treatment, and the demands for unpaid taxes (Faqir 1996, 68). As noted by Cooke (2000, 162), "To effectively govern the men, (the colonizers) had to maintain

control over the women within their segregated spaces". Maha, aware of the British's role in her husband's death, endeavours to resist them, posing a threat to their authority.

The depiction of mentally unstable women in literature has captivated critics and sparked debate over their subversive nature. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work, "The Madwoman in the Attic" (1979), explores madness and women's literary expression in the nineteenth century, interpreting madness as a subversive element in women's fiction. Madness is a narrative tool employed to articulate women's internal struggles with oppression and societal constraints.

In the 1970s, Western feminist critics viewed Bertha as the "other," interpreting her character through a narrow Western Orientalist feminist perspective. "While these early feminist critics acknowledged colonial oppression of women, it was only in the 1990s and 2000s, with the emergence of Arab and other non-Western feminist literature," that the issue gained significant attention alongside a growing interest in colonization, which enriched feminist critique. That may explain why early feminist critics like Gilbert and Gubar didn't delve deeply into the "othering" and dehumanization of Bertha, often idealizing female madness as a means of resistance against "patriarchal dominance."

Gilbert and Gubar (1979, 88) perceive Bertha as Charlotte Brontë's alter ego, "an embodiment of her own anxiety and fury". The concept of insanity is linked to protest against patriarchy, with anger serving as a symbol of defiance. However, they acknowledge that the novel's resolution fails to address the issue of patriarchy as the madwoman meets her demise. Nonetheless, if Bertha indeed mirrors Jane and acts on her behalf, why does Jane fail to empathize with her? Jane never recognizes her connection to the imprisoned and monstrous double, leading Showalter to assert that Brontë demonstrates no compassion for her deranged creation (Showalter 1985, 69). Jane's detachment from Bertha diminishes the effectiveness of subversion as a form of rebellion, as it is not Jane who rebels; she must conform to the societal norms of Victorian society. This study seeks to expand on Conwell's argument by utilizing Caminero-Santangelo's theory, which suggests that a madwoman's inability to articulate her thoughts demonstrates that madness is not inherently subversive in either *Jane Eyre* or *Pillars of Salt*.

This research article builds its argument upon Caminero-Santangelo's theory, which posits that "all forms of protest within (the

asylum's) walls are rendered socially meaningless" (Caminero-Santangelo 1998, 37). In her work "The Madwoman Can't Speak," Caminero-Santangelo challenges the notion that insanity serves as an apt metaphor for female resistance against suppression and male supremacy (Ibid, 9). She draws upon "de Lauretis's theory of technologies of gender, which suggests that gender, both as representation and self-representation," is shaped by various technologies including institutional discourses, everyday practices, and media such as cinema (Ibid, 2).

Caminero-Santangelo questions the notion that madness serves as a metaphor for resistance. She demonstrates that novelists often revert to prevailing models of madness found in literature, medicine, and other texts, effectively "challenging representation with representation" (Ibid, 11). Her analysis reveals that all the examined works indicate that women's madness is not subversive but rather signifies a capitulation to patriarchy. She observes that the texts are marked by their inability or struggle to create meaning—that is, to generate representations that are coherent within society. For example, "texts authored by American women during the World War II period depict insane women as silenced and possessing illusory power; they engage in self-destructive behaviour." They depict mad women as "murdering mothers," "manless women," individuals with "multiple personalities," and as "out-hurting the hurter" (Ibid, 125).

Balaa defines "subversive" as "the ability to express oneself, take action, and effect change in one's circumstances" (Balaa 2014, 483). In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha cannot advocate for herself, act freely, or challenge her circumstances. Similarly, in *Pillars of Salt*, Maha and Um Saad endeavour to assert themselves but encounter resistance, leading to their silencing and incorrect labelling as insane—a consequence of society's dismissal of the mentally unstable. Once imprisoned, Maha and Um Saad find themselves powerless to alter their situations, trapped in a realm devoid of agency.

During the Victorian era, Bertha's insanity was perceived as rendering her incapable of assimilating into society and thus posed a threat. Similarly, in the nineteenth-century Arab colonized world, individuals deemed insane were prohibited from residing with their families by law. In *Pillars of Salt*, Maha and Um Saad were deemed to have "unsound" minds, resulting in their exclusion from society and relationships. They were effectively marginalized from mainstream society. Unlike Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, where the extent of her insanity

remains ambiguous—merely Mr Rochester’s assessment after consulting a doctor—Maha and Um Saad are not inherently insane. If they were to succumb to madness, a likely outcome given the conditions of the asylum, it would be the consequence of their society’s marginalization, subjugation, manipulation, and imprisonment. While recent studies often interpret these texts as critiques of society, they frequently overlook the plight of the female protagonists. Women’s madness in both novels is portrayed within the framework of Western Orientalist and patriarchal stereotypes, carrying connotations of “stigma, otherness, witchcraft, illness, social control, denied agency, illusory power, unbridled sexuality, and resignation.”

In both narratives, madness assumes a role of alterity, rendering the afflicted women—Bertha, Um Saad, and Maha—as “other,” stripped of their humanity and autonomy. Patriarchal and imperialistic doctrines marginalize them, portraying them as bestial, witchlike, malevolent, femme fatales, excessively sexualized, and ensnared in uncontrollable lunacy. Blowers (1996, 79) underscores the dire ramifications of this categorization as “other,” highlighting the near-impossibility of shedding such a label. They face abandonment by their families and social circles as they are considered unfit for societal integration.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha’s portrayal underscores her alienation and incapacity for improvement. Rochester describes Bertha as embodying a nature that starkly contrasts with his own. She is unpleasant, lacks refinement, and is closed-minded, displaying an inability to evolve or broaden her perspective (Brontë, 1847/1966, 333). Jane, in her observations, likens Bertha to a wild animal, highlighting her primal, unpredictable behaviour. When Bertha attacks Rochester, she is depicted as a lunatic, further emphasizing her estrangement from rationality and humanity. This portrayal extends beyond mere personality clashes, representing a fundamental moral distinction, as Rochester comes to see Bertha as fundamentally non-human (Caminero-Santangelo 1998, 13).

Initially, Jane defends Bertha upon realizing her insanity, refuting Rochester’s blame by asserting that it is not Bertha’s fault. However, Jane eventually adopts an imperialist patriarchal viewpoint in describing Bertha, echoing Rochester’s dehumanizing perspective. She repeatedly characterizes Bertha as monstrous, vampiric, bestial, and insane, denying her any possibility of redemption or improvement (Brontë 1966, 311). This depiction reflects prevalent colonialist attitudes of the time, which viewed colonized peoples as inherently

inferior to their colonizers. For instance, nineteenth-century figure like Knox, an anatomist and ethnologist, propagated theories suggesting that certain races were incapable of full human development due to their physical characteristics (Knox 1862, 243–244). Such ideologies perpetuated the belief that individuals from colonized regions, including those from the West Indies, were innately inferior, attributing their perceived mental instability to genetic and environmental factors.

In *Pillars of Salt*, Maha and Um Saad are portrayed as marginalized and dehumanized and are even denied visitors by their closest relations. As Blowers asserts, those relegated to the wrong side of societal boundaries are often defined by negative attributes, such as irrationality, immorality, or illness (Blowers 1996, 79). The nurse, Kukash, treats Um Saad with shocking brutality, resembling the slaughter of a goat as he restrains her and forcibly cuts her hair (Faqr 1996, 222). Um Saad's distress is palpable as she vocalizes her understanding of this mistreatment as a method of control.

The female characters in both novels are depicted as malevolent figures akin to witches. Bertha is depicted by Jane as a “vampire” with red eyes, her appearance described as unsettling with swollen, dark lips and furrowed brow (Brontë 1966, 211). She is portrayed as a spectral or demonic presence, described as a mysterious entity inhabiting Thornfield Hall, resisting expulsion or subjugation by its owner. Similarly, in Arab cultural contexts, madness is often linked to notions of witchcraft and malevolence. Um Saad is characterized as sinister, resorting to witchcraft in her desire to harm her husband and his new spouse. Maha, viewed through the lens of a foreign storyteller, is likened to a demonic female entity, described as “evil” and capable of lethal acts (Faqr 1996, 27, 30, 33). Drawing a parallel with Bertha's mother, Maha's mother Maliha is also depicted as possessed by evil forces.

Despite Maha's narrative asserting itself throughout the text, the final chapter presents the storyteller's version, possibly suggesting the triumph of patriarchal and colonial discourse. Despite Maha narrating her story, Conwell (2011, 45) argues that she lacks control over her representation, as her narrative is distorted by a traditional patriarchal storyteller. For instance, he falsely attributes Maha's attempt to kill her brother to her desire for inheritance, despite her father giving her the land. Additionally, he portrays Maha in a sinister light, describing her as “evil, haunted, and capable of slaying a man” (Ibid, 33). While

readers may question the storyteller's perspective, it nonetheless reflects dominant patriarchal and colonial ideologies. For instance, when Maha faces infertility after six months of marriage, the society attributes it to possession by evil spirits rather than mental illness. As AlShammari (2014, 454) observes, this stigma is linked to gender and the notion of "purity," where being a "good woman equates to being healthy, sane, and able-bodied". Aunt Tamima, her mother-in-law, takes her to "Hajjeh Hulala, the village healer or sorceress," to free her from the perceived demonic influence.

Bertha and Maha are depicted using Orientalist tropes as sexually charged femme fatales. Rochester characterizes Bertha as a mad, enigmatic, bestial, and crafty seductress. He suggests that she "enticed, enchanted, or lured him" with her beauty:

I thought I loved her...Her relatives encouraged me; competitors piqued me; she allured me: a marriage was achieved almost before I knew where I was. Oh, I have no respect for myself when I think of that act! ... I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her (Brontë 1996, 332-333).

Madness has historically served as a label for those who deviate from societal norms of normalcy, acceptability, and desirability. In both novels, the female protagonists are branded as insane as a means of patriarchal and colonial control, serving to uphold the existing power structures. Caminero-Santangelo (1998, 17) astutely observes that madness functions as a category imposed on women as punishment for behaviours deemed unfeminine. Any deviation from prescribed "feminine" behaviour is met with punishment. Insanity in these narratives is depicted as a tool for social control, discipline, confinement, and silencing—an outcome of subjugation and manipulation perpetuated by patriarchy and colonialism. Insanity and confinement within asylums serve as reflections of the female experience, acting as penalties for being female, or for daring to reject societal norms (Chesler 1972, 16). It can be argued that such mechanisms of social control and imprisonment may ultimately pose threats to women's mental well-being. Even if Bertha did not initially exhibit signs of insanity, Rochester's mistreatment of her could have contributed to her eventual descent into madness.

Medicine and oppressive psychiatry have historically been wielded as tools for social normalization and control. In both narratives, medical interventions dictate the behaviour of women, relegating them to the margins of society. Additionally, Caminero-Santangelo (1998,

13) remarks that insanity and moral principles were viewed as contradictory - a notion implicit in Victorian portrayals of moral insanity. Consequently, any deviation from the patriarchal moral norms of Victorian England was met with the label of insanity. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester informs Jane that nobody forewarned him about Bertha's insanity when he wed her, citing her mother's insanity. This reflects Victorian beliefs surrounding psychiatry and the concept of the "daughter's disease," which attributed mental illness transmission to women due to their reproductive system, making them more prone to transmit it than fathers (Showalter 1985, 67). Rochester suggests that Bertha's mental state deteriorated over time but remains vague about her exact affliction. Bertha is depicted as an impediment to his union with Jane, motivating him to confine her and keep her hidden away.

There is no medical substantiation for the accusation of insanity against the two women depicted in *Pillars of Salt*. Maha faces allegations of madness due to her defiance against patriarchy and the English oppressors, expressing her resentment by labelling them as "Foreign killers, all of you" (Faqr 1996, 172). Similarly, Um Saad is deemed mad for voicing her discontent over her husband's mistreatment upon marrying a younger wife. Both women endure restraint, drug injections, electroshock therapy, and torture. Maha recounts an instance where Kukash, the nurse, forcefully immobilizes Um Saad on the bed, binding her limbs to the iron bedposts before administering a drug (Ibid, 7). The medical practitioners condone the patriarchal oppression and perpetuate further abuse against the victims.

Um Saad's life is marked by early imprisonment and physical abuse inflicted first by her family and later by her husband. She confides in Maha that there were instances when she was beaten without any apparent cause. Additionally, when she falls in love with a Circassian youth, her family confines her to their home, denying her freedom of movement. This restriction stems from her father's prejudiced beliefs regarding the Circassian ethnicity, viewing them as inferior due to their historical exile by the Russians in the nineteenth century. Um Saad faces punishment and is unjustly labelled as insane simply for experiencing love. Her participation in social events is severely restricted, limited to her wedding ceremony. Moreover, when she dares to gaze out of her window, she faces physical abuse from her father, who strikes her with a leather belt. Furthermore, her husband subjects her to physical violence and sexual assault on their wedding night. Similar to Bertha, Um Saad finds herself initially confined within the

confines of her family home and subsequently her marital residence, enduring oppression reminiscent of the conditions.

Blowers (1996) suggests that according to Foucault's analysis, it's not intrinsic behavioural traits that lead individuals to be marginalized; rather, it's the societal, institutional, and psychiatric interpretations of those traits. However, despite their acts of rebellion, they ultimately face silence, marginalization, and societal isolation.

Insanity is depicted as a condition afflicting women in these narratives, reinforcing the patriarchal notion that women are more prone to emotional instability and require control. Only female characters, such as Bertha and her mother in *Jane Eyre*, are portrayed as insane, while no male characters in *Pillars of Salt* are shown to be institutionalized. Although the storyteller in the text exhibits signs of instability, he remains free. Ironically, Maha and her mother are labelled as insane by the storyteller himself. Showalter (1985, 3) argues that throughout history, madness has been gendered as a female affliction, and previous associations between madness and femininity are noted by Ussher (1991, 167). As Klambauer (2019) highlights, in the nineteenth century, the connection between mental illness and aspects of the female reproductive system led to the perception of madness as exclusively female. This period saw madness linked to women through medical theories involving the uterus and the treatment of hysteria, which often involved an orgasmic cure. During the Victorian era, prevailing beliefs attributed women's perceived emotional volatility and irrationality to physiological factors such as their reproductive organs, menstruation, menopause, and childbirth.

In an interview, Faqir discussed the patriarchal structure prevalent in Arab families, where the father assumes authority over significant decisions, leading men to perceive themselves as superior to women (Moore 2011, 3). Both female protagonists in *Pillars of Salt* defy conventional gender roles imposed on them. Maha refuses to accept her husband taking another wife, a common practice in the Arab world and rejects the role of a traditional housewife responsible for household chores, including those for the additional wife. She also declines to marry a man she does not love, challenging societal expectations. Consequently, insanity in this narrative is portrayed as a form of punishment rather than a romantic pathway to freedom. In 1920s Jordan, societal norms dictated that women should primarily fulfil domestic roles, particularly among Bedouin communities. Many girls, like Maha, lacked access to education and were confined to

household duties. Additionally, women faced constraints on mobility; for instance, Um Saad, despite residing in a city, was confined to her parents' home and not permitted to venture outside.

In both narratives, female madness is depicted as an untreatable illness. Lerner (1989) contends that during the Victorian era, madness was often perceived as incurable, akin to chronic drunkenness or as an insurmountable class divide, especially within the context of marriage. He suggests that madness, similar to the role of minor characters, served as a narrative tool to evade addressing certain societal issues. Consequently, by terming Bertha as insane and beyond remedy, Rochester endeavours to justify his deception of Jane regarding his previous marriage. Although Bertha is not institutionalized, Rochester informs Jane that "the medical men pronounced her mad" (Brontë 1966, 335), implying an irreversible condition. Similarly, in *Pillars of Salt*, the two women are falsely "accused of insanity and treated as if their purported madness is incurable, evidenced by the gradual escalation of their medication dosage." Um Saad laments, "They brought me to Fuhais where Christians live and where mad people go (Faqir 1996, 19), portraying the hospital as a stifling environment—a narrow hospital room with no air at all" (Ibid, 51).

Spivak posits that the subaltern faces exacerbated marginalization when also categorized as insane. The combined forces of patriarchy and colonialism have effectively muted these three female protagonists. Bertha, in particular, is deprived of the opportunity to articulate herself, reduced to making sounds reminiscent of animals. Her marginalization is intensified by her gender, ethnicity, and mental state. Spivak (1995, 271) interprets Bertha's role in the novel as aiming to blur the distinction between human and animal, thus undermining her rights under the law, both in essence and practice.

While Um Saad and Maha confide in each other instead of the colonizers or their patriarchal oppressors, they are still unable to express themselves. Men dismiss their narratives, citing stereotypes about Islamic women being irrational and having lower intellectual capacity. Sinno observes that Faqir's characters spend much of their time in the asylum engaged in introspection and self-expression (Sinno 2011, 89). They communicate with each other, although it is undeniable that they are under the control of doctors and nurses. The women are constantly monitored, penalized, and demanded to refrain from speaking and laughing, resulting in their physical and mental selves being under scrutiny. Sinno (2011, 91-92) acknowledges that

the asylum poses the greatest threat to their sanity. While they may endure, the question remains: for how long? The two protagonists struggle to prove their sanity. Yousef's commentary on the text connects it to Spivak's notion: "The subaltern cannot speak because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence the silence of the female in the novel is not the result of her lack of articulation but the outcome of the refusal of society to listen to her and interpret her words appropriately" (Yousef 2016, 382). Even if readers perceive them as innocent, their societies regard them differently, perpetuating their marginalized status quo. They are ostracized from mainstream society for offences they did not commit. They are deprived of their fundamental rights to live freely among their families and children. Their sustenance is inadequate, their hair is forcibly cut short, and kerosene is poured into their hair despite the absence of lice. Additionally, the English doctor disregards Muslim customs by removing Um Saad's veil, an act that undermines her religious identity as a Hajjah, as it is expected to cover her hair in the presence of men. These incidents underscore the systemic silencing of these subaltern women.

In both novels, the depiction of mentally ill women can symbolize the "colonized land stripped of its autonomy." Bertha in *Jane Eyre* can be seen as emblematic of the British desire to dominate the West Indies and exploit its resources. Similarly, in Arabic literature, women's bodies serve as battlegrounds for political struggles; imprisoned women symbolize confiscated territories. Here, Harb and Maha represent the Bedouin way of life, while Daffash symbolizes British colonialists and modern urbanization, posing a threat to Bedouin traditions and customs. Maha's brother collaborates with the English to exploit their father's land, whereas Maha strives to preserve it. Daffash aims to modernize the farm, sell the herd, construct a villa, and employ Indian labourers (Faqr 1996, 83). Maha's imprisonment symbolizes the Bedouin's relinquishment of control over their land and heritage. Daffash attempts to coerce his sister into signing a document renouncing her claim to their family's land. When she declines to sign, he warns that he will shoot her with his gun aimed at her head. Maha flees with Nasra, seeking refuge in a cave. However, her son and land are taken by him, prompting her to return home and confront him. Despite her resistance, Daffash brutally assaults Maha and escorts her to the asylum by authorities.

Bertha experiences complete silence, while Maha and Um Saad share their stories only with each other, with no one else lending an ear apart from the reader. Madness, as McDaniel (2011) suggests, is a reflection of female subjugation and manipulation. Unlike in *Jane Eyre*, where Bertha's sanity is unquestioned, *Pillars of Salt* may challenge the sanity of its female protagonists, but their societies do not. Over time, the isolation and harsh treatment in the asylum will likely drive Maha and Um Saad to madness. Insanity, as described by Caminero-Santangelo, is not characterized by rage or hate but by hopelessness—a complete surrender to constraining representations. Critics who perceive madness as rebellious ought to distinguish between the author and the characters. The author's voice can be discerned, while the characters' voices are ultimately muted by patriarchal and colonial authorities. These powers send them to the asylum not for treatment but for disposal, ensuring they never return home. Hysteria, as Showalter notes, “lacks the power to effect cultural change; it is safer for the patriarchal order to permit discontented women to express their grievances through psychosomatic illness.” Women must unite with one another to defend their rights, and critics must avoid romanticizing women's madness or viewing it as a symbol of resistance. Such perceptions only perpetuate stereotypes that have historically oppressed women.

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