

**THE MAD AND NOT-SO-MAD WOMEN IN VICTORIAN FICTION WITH  
REFERENCE TO CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S JANE EYRE AND OTHER  
ASSOCIATED FICTION**

Neeti Singh

Department of English, Faculty of Arts  
The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda  
Vadodara, Gujarat, India  
[sufiandtheswan@gmail.com](mailto:sufiandtheswan@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

*However creative and ahead of its times, all of art / literature does mirror and engage in varied measures with the time in which it is birthed. To a great extent the artist draws his/her models from large-and-small cameos of life as it is experienced consciously or subconsciously from all around. And so, keeping the collective horror of Victorian society towards 'madness' in the background and the nineteenth century English woman at the centre, my paper aims to closely examine the interaction between fact and fiction. Foucault in his work the History of Madness talks of the active contribution of social structures in the degeneracy of a potential patient. So does feminist discourse and women-centric literature in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. This paper, titled, "The Mad and not-so-Mad Women in Victorian Fiction with reference to Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre and other associated fiction", attempts to discourse with a selection of women's fiction with reference to their women characters, representations of madness, and conspiring social structures such as the context of marriage, state law and patriarchal norm in Victorian society. These would include for instance social structures that denied women even their right to education, independent will, family inheritance and property. In the name of protection and naturalised gender roles, the fairer sex was put under sweet and absolute patriarchal control which then determined the woman's self esteem, intelligence, self identity and destiny.*

*Madness in rare cases is genetic or pathological, very often its roots lie in repressive 'social structures'. Absolute control and curtailment of creative human expression in the guise of societal and gender norm are structures of repression that can damage mental wellbeing and push the gullible subject to the brink of depression, neurotic disorder and madness even. Within this thematic framework, my paper attempts to examine the theme of women and madness in late 19<sup>th</sup> century through three fictional texts: (1) Jane Eyre (1847) (2) The Yellow Wallpaper (1892) (3) Wild Sargasso Sea (1966). The first two narratives published in nineteenth century are seen in retrospect as expressing thoughts that are quite feminist. The*

*third work written in late twentieth century speaks back to the earlier two by offering yet another story - a prequel to the life and persona of Bertha Mason – Edward Rochester’s deranged wife from an arranged marriage – it opens up a fascinating, multipronged discourse on the status of patriarchy and its perceptions of women and madness in Victorian society.*

**Keywords:** Victorian women/ fiction, gender stereotype, women and madness, resting-cure.

Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy... she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her “inconstancy” and by identifying her with the “eternal types” they have themselves invented to possess her more thoroughly. Specifically, as we will try to show here, a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must “kill” the “angel in the house.” In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been “killed” into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel’s necessary opposite and double, the “monster” in the house whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity. (596, Gilbert & Gubar)

The line between the angel and the monster was thin, where one ended the other would begin. While nineteenth century narratives occupy themselves with constructing and celebrating the “angel” over the “monster”, twentieth century feminist discourse exposes underlying repressive tendencies of the angelic paradigm, it offers alternate narratives to reconfigure the angel/monster woman and thence offers to embrace and celebrate the “monster” - the angel’s shadow self - that humanises and completes the woman subject and in so doing empowers her. By writing a prequel to Bertha of *Jane Eyre*, and by projecting her in positive light, Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* liberates Bertha from the prison of Victorian branding and judgement. To quote Adrienne Rich here at the onset is to celebrate the “monster” woman and to unbind her. In ‘Planetarium’, (a poem dedicated to “Caroline Herschel (1750-1848), astronomer, sister of William; and others’), Adrienne Rich evokes:

A woman in the shape of a monster  
a monster in the shape of a woman  
the skies are full of them  
.....  
..... I am an instrument in the shape

of a woman trying to translate pulsations  
into images for the relief of the body  
and the reconstruction of the mind.  
(*poetryfoundation.org*)

## I

From being manipulated and compromised within their own homes and in society in the name of patriarchal norm, religion and state law; women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have come a long way both in fiction and in lived fact. Their journey from being objects to human subjects has been long and arduous and is still ongoing in several parts of the world. Women's fiction in nineteenth century England (also North America) we find teeming with narratives (both conscious and subconscious) of their multi-faceted struggles. The depressed writing wife in Gilman's, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), the mad wife (Bertha Mason) hidden away in the attic in Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and later the same Bertha as Antoinette the young Jamaican heiress in a prequel to *Jane Eyre - Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys, are examples of women in incompatible marriages where the woman has failed to transform into the ideal, self effacing but sweet and efficient, 'Angel' of the house. In times which denied a woman her right to basic humanity, education and inheritance, when women were seen only as angels or monsters and nothing in between, these fictional women characters are examples of unfortunate upper class Victorian ladies who for various reasons, failed to win their husband's heart, fell from angelic grace and eventually succumbed to death either through the route of illness/infirmity or through a descent into madness and in some cases to a life of whoredom – all these categories made monsters of women who were then alienated and exiled as being loathsome, unfit, immoral and sexual monsters.

Michael Foucault in his work *History of Madness*, maps humankind's evolving interactions and perceptions of madness across multiple levels pertaining to law, culture, family, state, society. The onus of these changes he attributes to the influence of specific social structures. Madness in the Middle Ages, he observes, was categorised with leprosy and other ailments. It was the family's responsibility to take care of its dimwits and lunatics and often when they could not tolerate each other, the mad person would turn vagrant and take to the streets. Then in the nineteenth century when madness was separated from other categories, mad people were removed from society and confined in specially walled asylums infamous for their cruelty and narratives of horror. The emergence of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century introduced alternate therapy and a layered approach to the treatment of mental illness; this fact triggered a general shift in perceptions and the era of the Great Confinement came to an end. Madness in most cases came to be seen as temporary and curable. The counterproductive

role of flawed medical treatment and unsympathetic social structures was recognised and altered. Thus the social history of madness had moved from perceptions of bewilderment and horror to an attitude of sympathy towards madness which then came to be regarded as mental disease that could be cured with therapy and be altered. Madness which had earlier been regarded with amazement or horror as a condition that was final - as being something that was either divine or diabolical, came to be perceived later as a condition that was pathological often a result of an imbalance of humours or the consequence of repressive social structures triggered by tragic circumstance.

## II

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' provides a microscopic overview of how the Victorian woman was objectified and psyched into believing she was physically delicate, intellectually inferior, overly emotional and prone to hysteria and therefore reduced to being a pretty showpiece – an angel of the house and a status symbol, whose task was to provide nurture, babies and sexual appeasement to her partner and generally to oversee domestic matters. 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is a brilliant piece of work – the first feminist text perhaps, for it takes all the florid notions and turns them on their head through the character of the Writing Wife who it is obvious to the reader is victim of her physician husband's inadequate treatment of her depression. All those notions of patriarchy, which prompt John to strip his wife of all source of life, pleasure and self esteem, to treat her like an imbecile and thereby stifle her very core and creative being [even in a prison the severest punishment involves cells of isolation] through inconsiderate and inhuman curbs and gender biases he drives an exceptionally creative and thinking woman into the chasm of madness. If only he would listen to her and not alienate her and dismiss her like one does an imbecile or a kid who (one thinks) does not know what is good for him or her. I quote:

Dear John! He loves me dearly and hates to see me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia. But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished. (21)

The madness of the writing-wife in Gilman's fiction is primarily a case of medical treatment messed up in the context of nineteenth century myopia regarding issues of mental health and illness; the line of treatment prescribed by the doctors involved a 'resting cure' which required a patient to undergo a long period of rest in total confinement, idle isolation, emotional sterility and social alienation with a diet of fresh air, sun, expensive meats and soups. (It is worth noting here that the severest form of imprisonment in jail, involves total

isolation). Such a method of treatment however kindly implemented by the good husband/doctor John, tended to erode self esteem, and triggered moral, emotional and social deprivation in the subject, which would further damage the patient's sense of selfhood and sanity and actually accelerate a degeneration of the mind. The unnamed subject – John's writing-wife – in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is a talented and sensitive woman whose depression arises from the fact that her physician husband (he reminds one of Mr Gradgrind in Dickens's *Hard Times*) is hostile towards her creative writerly mind; he tries to curb her imagination, bans her from writing - from taking care of her own infant child and puts her in solitary confinement in a room that she detests for it is utterly ugly, bare and has a repulsive yellow coloured wallpaper. In the name of treatment John monitors her actions, controls her daily routine and even her thoughts, thereby attempting to mould her into his idea of 'woman and wife'. The absolute power and control he wields over her in the guise of husbandly concern and medical science stripping her in the process of her status as wife and mistress of the house and mother to their baby boy, hastens her decline into full blown madness. Dr John seems to resonate here with the character of Aylmer in "The Birthmark" by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Referring to this same story Judith Fetterley states in *The Resisting Reader*, that the 'drama of power in... literatures is often disguised'. Considering the case of Aylmer, the protagonist in "The Birthmark" she says, "The fact of men's power over women and the full implications of that fact are the crux of the story. Aylmer [like Dr John], is free to experiment on Georgiana, to the point of death [madness], because she is both woman and wife."(xiv). Thus what on surface appears to be a case of poor husband saddled with an infirm/hysterical wife turns out in fact to be the misuse of power and privilege by Dr John who is totally out of step with the core of his sensitive wife who is a gifted creative writer – an aspect that he does his best to stifle and strangle. Power of the patriarch to control his wife and to change her and refashion her according to personal taste within the golden circle of marriage abets, in both the fictional and factual context, the narrative of desire, manipulation, dis-ease and madness – like a rising encore the archetype of insanity returns, again and again across Victorian romance and gothic fiction.

### III

While 'The Yellow Wallpaper' showcases an intelligent but sensitive and gullible woman's entrapment in a lonely marriage and her consequent alienation and descent into hallucination and madness; *Jane Eyre* explores the other side of madness – what are the repercussions of the metamorphosis and what happens to the mad subject thereafter. Madness in *Jane Eyre* is projected as an element of the gothic: Bertha Mason – the malicious and insane wife of Rochester is hidden from us for most of the narrative; we discover her gradually in the cover of night as a mysterious presence that is the source of strange guttural sounds, spine chilling

laughter, fire in the middle of the night in Edward Rochester's bed and more - including later in the novel, the frightful apparition that leans over half-asleep Jane and leaves behind a torn and soiled veil – an ominous sign for Jane on the eve of her wedding to a man she loves deeply but who unknown to her is already married. Bertha the wife, comes to us through a mesh of suspense, fear, and surmise, for that is how Rochester has arranged to keep hidden this dark lurking secret of Thornfield Hall and his own life. It is she whose presence constricts him and keeps him from living a full life. The depth of his love for Jane, his tragic despair is intense enough to bend the reader, as he entreats Jane to stay, he refers to his wife as 'the maniac upstairs' as some 'corpse in yonder churchyard.' (366).

Charlotte Bronte projects Bertha's madness as a condition that is pathological and genetically passed down three generations in the Mason family. Generations of readers of *Jane Eyre* have perceived Bertha as violent and villainous - as sole reason and roadblock in Jane and Rochester's love story. All our sympathies have been for the gruff, well meaning Edward Rochester who is cut out as the long suffering victim of his wife's madness and therefore all he says and all that Jane assumes in his favour is taken by us readers at face value. Bertha in the cast of madness has been for us an agency of tragic horror – an animal anti-feminine that keeps Rochester from living a peaceful life and later from marrying poor sweet Jane. Therefore when we hear of her death in the fire we readers (from a conventional stereotypical mindset), are inclined to regard her exit as timely and convenient, and even to see it as some kind of poetic justice.

Bertha in Bronte's *Jane Eyre* functions less as a human character and more as an aspect of the gothic - as deranged agency that provides contrast to simple level-headed Jane; and helps construct Rochester in the image of a man tragically wronged and long suffering – thereby drawing on the reader's and Jane's heart and sympathy. Another positive function that Bertha's presence performs in the love story of Rochester and Jane is to infuse drama and urgency along with an element of the romantic gothic; and put their love to test. While Rochester is prepared to commit the sin of bigamy and go against Christian edicts, Jane who loves him as deeply decides (on moral, Christian grounds,) to leave. Bertha's aesthetic role in the novel is to challenge the narrative and make it more intense and interesting.

Madness in *Jane Eyre*, we must note, is treated most unsympathetically (as was conventional in the nineteenth century) – this fact reflects in the way Bertha is confined to her attic apartment, and alienated and stripped of all trace of humanity. According to general misconceptions and fears regarding madness in the nineteenth century, a mentally unstable person was pushed into isolation and as the depression/hysteria deepened he/she was categorised 'mad' and unfit for human society. This perspective was in keeping with the great horror that surrounded madness and asylums in the era of the Great Confinement – where

madness was relegated to subhuman conditions in workhouses, poorhouses and mental asylums. Let us look at Jane's final encounter with Bertha which happens on the eve of her wedding to Rochester; the Bertha she sees is frightening:

'It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back. I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether a gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell.' 'Fearful and ghastly to me – oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! it was a discoloured face – it was a savage face, I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!' 'this sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; ...shall I tell you of what it reminded me of?' 'Of the foul German spectre – the vampire.'  
(328)

When Jane asks Rochester about the apparition that visited her in the night and ripped her wedding veil, Rochester resorts to gender stereotype and manipulates the truth, he ascribes it to the fact that she is a woman with a woman's hysterical, imaginative mind, he explains it as 'the creature of an over-stimulated brain' and says that henceforth he must be more careful for her as 'nerves like yours were not made for rough handling'. Rochester's evasion of the truth is propelled by his deep attachment for Jane and his fear of losing her whom he longs to have as wife and companion, even if it means committing the sin of bigamy. Nevertheless, how at this point is the lying Rochester any different from the men of his times - from their tendency to patronise and manipulate women?

#### IV

Responding a hundred and twenty years later to this apparition of horror and madness, Jean Rhys attempts to soften our perception and memory of insane Bertha by writing yet another novel where she is a central character; the novel offers a prequel to *Jane Eyre* and is called *Wide Sargasso Sea* – it attempts to transform our perception of Bertha Mason by writing a story that constructs for the charming heiress, a traumatic past where Rochester in fact is cast as a young man who lusts for both her youth and wealth but succumbs to suspicion regarding her moral character and sanity soon after marriage. What Jean Rhys has done through *Wide Sargasso Sea* is to question Victorian presumptions and stereotypes by subverting Brontë's (or Rochester's) projection of Bertha as a woman of 'pygmy intellect' with 'giant propensities', and thereby countering with an alternate narrative, the established premise of her mental illness/ trauma. Through an alternate fictional response Rhys not only critiques but also heals generations of fictional and actual women stereotyped as mentally weak, prone to nervousness, hysteria and madness. She provides the monster woman, branded in the past alternately as mad/ witch/ whore, with an alternate narrative and thereby humanises not just

the Bertha of *Jane Eyre* but all the mad women of Victorian (his)story; thereby releasing them from the bind of binary perceptions which kill and dehumanise a woman into being angel or monster. The same woman who possessed the potential of an angel could also be at times monster-like, for she was human with her own set of human needs and emotions and not a mere figment of (male) imagination – she was not an objectified concept living on the margins of life.

Thus, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, posits Bertha Mason as a tragic heroine and thereby provides a counterpoint to Bertha Mason of *Jane Eyre*, it also rewrites the narrative around Rochester's grief-tinged promiscuous character and fleshes out the story of Bertha as a sensitive little girl growing up in a lonely villa in Jamaica amidst racial tensions and difficult circumstances with a widowed mother and a brother who suffers from palsy of the brain. Bertha's marriage to Rochester with a fat dowry of 30,000 pounds soon runs into the swamp of distrust and non-love – thanks to the vengeance of a frustrated half brother who was left out of family-money by her long dead father. Half brother writes to Rochester a spiteful letter saying Bertha has a tendency for hysteria which is a genetic malaise and that he has been tricked into marriage. Rochester believes him and to spite Bertha gets into a fling with their servant Amelia which further aggravates matters. Heartbroken and alone in a loveless marriage, Bertha shifts with her husband to England to Thornfield Hall where she eventually becomes the 'mad woman in the attic'. Jean Rhys's account of Bertha interrogates Victorian notions of gender, madness and genetics by positing the role of hostile 'social structures' in a bad marriage. The novel rescues Bertha (nee Antoinette) from scandal and interrogates at the same time, the skewed gender dynamics and repressive patriarchal structures of Victorian society.

It can be said therefore that both *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1979) expose the grand Victorian narrative obsessed with gender stereotyping its women as pretty beings with a lot of heart but delicate brains or none at all. Thereby cornering the bewildered woman subject in a well meaning way, in a space of self doubt, self blame, depression, hysteria and finally the birth of suicidal tendencies that trigger disease, dementia, death.

## V

Madness which is a form of socio-psychological death becomes for the frightened victim, a mode of escape and an act of final protest. It is the ultimate act of subversion – this striking out for freedom by escaping the psychological trappings of normalcy, the unloved and discarded upper class women of the Victorian era who in the end must set the house ablaze and jump to death in its very flames. In Rochester we have the distraught, tragic husband - desperate and helpless in the face of his wife's raging wound and in the end can save himself (his conscience) only by attempting to save her and injuring himself in the process in the fatal



flames. Consequently he purges himself and earns forgiveness; his loss of vision and a crippled arm become his means of remorse and salvation – they symbolise his humanity and Christian pride. In a similar category is John the righteous physician-husband in Gilman's short story, the 'Yellow Wallpaper'. Shocked that his wife has succumbed to madness he in the end falls unconscious on the floor while his wife the product and subject of his 'resting cure'<sup>1</sup> – crawls about on all four limbs, completely deranged - beyond recovery and therefore, free.

To quote from Kathryn Hughe's research on attitudes towards gender in nineteenth-century Britain:

In earlier centuries it had been usual for women to work alongside husbands and brothers in the family business. Living 'over the shop' made it easy for women to help out by serving customers or keeping accounts while also attending to their domestic duties. As the 19th century progressed men increasingly commuted to their place of work – the factory, shop or office. Wives, daughters and sisters were left at home all day to oversee the domestic duties that were increasingly carried out by servants. From the 1830s, women started to adopt the crinoline, a huge bell-shaped skirt that made it virtually impossible to clean a grate or sweep the stairs without tumbling over.

The two sexes now inhabited what Victorians regarded as 'separate spheres', only coming together at breakfast and again at dinner. The ideology of Separate Spheres rested on a definition of the 'natural' characteristics of women and men. Women were considered physically weaker yet morally superior to men, which meant that they were best suited to the domestic sphere. Not only was it their job to counterbalance the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands laboured all day, they were also preparing the next generation to carry on this way of life. The fact that women had such great influence at home was used as an argument against giving them the vote...

In a society which saw women as infirm and fickle, where women were denied access to lawful inheritance or any other means of social or state protection except through and within the institution of marriage, the English woman, especially the upper class English woman, was totally dependent on the support and charity of her male companion (husband, father, brother) for as long as she lived. Mirroring the ground reality of its time, nineteenth century fiction by women clearly reflects the stifling context of Victorian patriarchy which created in the compromised woman-subject a death-wish - a desire to escape through self-sabotage through madness, illness and early death.

Plain looking middle class English women (orphans and those from poor families) who were unlikely to get married and who did not have the safety net of their father's finance, were sent to boarding schools to train as governesses. Charlotte Bronte herself and her biographical character Jane who is orphaned and soon abandoned by well-to-do relations, is intelligent and independent but plain-looking. In the novel located in 1847, *Jane Eyre* stands at the crossroads of financial poverty and educational privilege raising pertinent issues regarding gender equality, compatibility in marriage and a woman's right to financial independence. Hers is a character that is crafted in the margins of Victorian norm, normal societal structures of the upper middle classes do not touch her - years spent in the orphanage school studying and training to be a governess, followed by her struggle for survival – sculpt her in the image of the independent, new age woman – the feminist (of the first and second wave) who does not dream of a convenient marriage but believes in marrying for love and equal friendship.

Thus while Bertha Mason and the yellow-wallpaper woman, are the stereotypical upper class Victorian women, located within stifling norms of Victorian English society, Jane the 'blue stocking' of the rising middle classes, is the new age woman. Located in the noble category of governesses she belongs to the female 'surplus' (Brian Doyle), trained to educate the children of England and equipped in the process with a means to earning their own livelihood – she is a fledgling feminist, a woman who will marry because she is in love, not because she sees herself as needy and regards marriage as her ticket to financial and social security. Jane's character offers hope for the future woman.

According to Brian Doyle, in 'The hidden history of English studies', changes in the nineteenth century 'can be traced to a number of contributory forces, not least of which were the new attitudes towards marriage and the family which developed among the middle classes from early on in the new century. The eighteenth century conception of the 'blessing' which accompanied early marriage and a large family was, by the 1830s, being replaced by a concern among the middle classes for the achievement of a 'prudent' union. Marriage should be postponed until it could be afforded; and an 'imprudent' marriage in this sense was seen as both unwise and immoral. In fact by the middle of the century, with the tendency of middle-class men to marry late or not at all, and with the general demographic trends of the time, considerable worry over the surplus of women in society was being expressed. The census of 1851 revealed that this surplus included 876,290 women who were neither wives nor mothers, 24,770 of whom were employed as governesses.' (23)

As a result, Doyle says, the nation seemed to arrive at an organic perspective which extended the notion of woman as homemaker to the notion of women (governesses and teachers) as nation builders, where women 'were absorbed into a quasi-professional and at the same time

quasi-maternal composite function whereby women educated the children of the national 'corporate body... this necessitated the education of women into their new role'. Which fact then elicited the establishment of 'the Governesses's Benevolent Institution, Queens College, London, and of the multiplicity of schools and training colleges and other institutions of female instruction during the second half of the nineteenth century'. (23)

VI

As Gilman and Rhys's fiction indicates, the madness of many a married woman in the Victorian society could have been circumstantial, caused by the pressures of incompatible stifling marriages.

Even Jane (in *Jane Eyre*) intuitively affirms this fact when she refuses to enter a loveless marriage with her cousin St John, who is keen to marry her and take her with him to India on missionary work. To his insistence that, 'We must be married... there is no other way; and undoubtedly enough love will follow upon marriage to render the union right even in your eyes.' Jane says, 'I scorn your idea of love', 'I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer..' And later when he asks 'Once more, why this refusal?' Jane responds in a manner that resonates with the lady in 'The Yellow Wallpaper', 'Formerly, because you did not love me; now, I reply, because you almost hate me. You are killing me now.' John's coldness and silent disdain towards Jane after she refuses his marriage proposal, amount to an act of 'killing' in Jane's experience, for St. John in her own words, is "not a man to be lightly refused", he is incredulous at her refusal to marry him, he finds the response grossly unchristian, reckless and unfair, he then resorts to cold war tactics in the hope that he can compel Jane to succumb to his superior good sense and finally relent.

By degrees, he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind: his praise and notice were more restraining than his indifference. I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by, because a tiresomely importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him. ..../ He wanted to train me to an elevation I could never reach... The thing was as impossible as to mould my irregular features to his correct and classic pattern, to give to my changeable green eyes the sea-blue tint and solemn lustre of his own. (462-463)

St John's efforts to manipulate and mould Jane into submissiveness, to finally prevail on her to alter her decision and become the good Christian wife and companion he needs her to become if he is to fulfil his life purpose; triggers in him the desire to bend her to his will, so she may become his shadow and instrument, travelling with him to Hindustan for missionary work as his wife, ever attentive to his command and bidding. St. John's treatment of Jane is reminiscent of Dr. John's unimaginative treatment and approach (in 'The Yellow Wallpaper')

towards his wife whose free and creative spirit he can neither appreciate nor understand. Being husband in the conventional Victorian marriage, he wields unbridled power to do with his wife as he will; ironically, in his efforts to convert her and bend her to his will and ideal of lady/ wife, he breaks her. Dr John the conventional Victorian physician and husband who prescribes for his wife the 'resting cure'<sup>1</sup> treatment ironically becomes chiefly instrumental in driving her over the edge into complete madness.

St. John Jane's cousin and suitor in *Jane Eyre* and Dr. John physician husband in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' both bear the conventional and sterile persona of the Victorian husband who functions from the belief that he is in possession of superior intellect which therefore gives him the right to disregard the woman/wife and take her at hand as a project that needs firm handling, refashioning and pruning by the loving but righteous man and master. Both the Johns and (metaphorically speaking) both the Jane(s) here are extremely incompatible; while the women are imaginative and independent minded, and express themselves as free creative souls, the (St. and Dr.) Johns on the other hand operate from a very patriarchal mindset which makes them lean towards hierarchy, control, stereotype and ceremony in romance and relationship with the opposite sex. John's insistence in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' on curbing his upper middle class wife's creativity and selfhood, ends up driving the wife into derangement; while his namesake (St John) in *Jane Eyre* is unable to coax Jane into marrying him for reasons other than love and friendship. Unlike the typical petit and pretty Victorian lady, Bronte's Jane Eyre is an intelligent, plain looking orphan who has to fend for herself. She is, in Brian Doyle's words, a 'nation builder' - a new-age-woman who stands outside the trappings of Victorian upper class convention and blackmail. She is self-reliant and has a mind of her own, and professionally as governess is equipped to fend for herself.

Thus to conclude, the paper has attempted a reading of select Victorian fiction in the context of shared nineteenth century concerns and perceptions that marginalised and manipulated the Victorian woman; the paper has specifically examined the myopia that ailed nineteenth century understanding of madness, where the mad woman subject was doubly compromised as monster and social exile. Nineteenth century society where madness and women inhabited shared grounds of darkness, was also known as the era of the Great Confinement. The horror of madness ushered in a process of 'space transference' (Foucault), wherein the mad subject like lepers in previous centuries, was treated like an exile and excommunicated from human and social norm. So too were scores of talented and privileged women across Europe in the past especially if they were women who wrote, who were independent, intelligent, and talented or had wealth, they were targeted, socially exiled and eventually hunted as witches to be burnt publically at the stake.

In order to interrogate fictional and nonfictional narratives and representations of women and madness, I have undertaken in this paper to read select works of relevant fiction by Charlotte Bronte, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jean Rhys. When placed in a certain order, (Rhys-Gilman-Bronte) their works located across the distance of time, address, an unbroken line of discourse around issues of gender politics, social space, taboo and mental illness, and thereby fill gaps in our understanding of the overall women's narrative concerning marriage, stereotype, madness and identity in Victorian England. The constricted upper class women of Victorian society obsesses with its fragile, fashionable and angelic women, as against the new age educated Janes (governesses) of the rising middle classes, and in this context in flux, the theme of madness as wound and revenge too has been interrogated. I have endeavoured here to deconstruct the monstrous madness of Bertha Mason Rochester whom readers for centuries have remembered as the quintessential Victorian archetype of madness and villainy.

Victorian fiction is full of women psyched with misogynist tendencies into self doubt, low self esteem and a belief that to be woman was to be human pygmies, inferior in status and always in service of the male subject whom it was the woman's task to entertain and please. Was this not another form of a masked witch-hunt? A pogrom launched to disarm and sabotage the mad and not-so-mad women by an insecure and insidious patriarchy? And therefore my last query, whether Bertha Mason's madness is a clinical condition or a convenient recourse to stereotype – a convenient writerly strategy of Bronte's picked up from the reality around her, to morally justify and provide Rochester an escape so he could continue to be the hero in Jane's life and the novel could have a happy ending after all? To raise a 'whisper' in Bertha's stead, I quote Samantha Ellis from "Baddies in Books: Bertha Rochester, Madwoman in the Attic",

In many ways, Rochester is the villain of the piece, what with his lying, his bigamy and his brutality. Him or Jane's heartless Aunt Reed, or hypocritical Mr Brocklehurst who treats her so badly at school... Bertha's just misunderstood, demonised and rightly furious. And at the end of the novel, she becomes something else. She sets fire to Thornfield Hall, and stands on its battlements, her "black hair ... streaming against the flames". It was supposed to be her house, it became her prison, and now she's its blazing queen. She jumps to her death and it's a horrible, violent end, but it's also a radical leap of faith that sets her free. She liberates Jane too, allowing her to marry Mr Rochester. And she even gives him the chance to redeem himself – which he does, brilliantly, diving into the burning building to try and rescue her. By the end, Bertha's not a villain any more, and she's not a victim either. She might even (whisper it) be a heroine.

### End Note

1. Victorian understanding of depression, hysteria and other mental ailments was flawed and inadequate thus leading to a general mismanagement of patients afflicted with degrees of mental illhealth. The 'resting cure' was a popular line of treatment, which involved isolating patient of depression and putting them on a diet of complete rest, precious meats and isolation which in fact aggravated the patient's condition, the social distancing and emotional alienation proved counter-productive to the patient's self esteem and mental health.

### Works Cited:

- Brontte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*, 1847. Popular Illustrated Classics, 2004, p. 328, 366 & pp. 462-3.
- Doyle, Brian. "The Hidden History of English Studies", *Rereading English*, Ed. Peter Widdowson. Methuen; London, 1982, p. 23.
- Ellis, Samantha. 'Baddies in Books: Bertha Rochester, the Madwoman in the Attic', *The Guardian*. 6 January 2015.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/jan/06/baddies-in-books-bertha-rochester-charlotte-bronte-jane-eyre>. Downloaded on 3 March, 2020.
- Fetterly, Judith. "Introduction: On the Politics of Literature", *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature*. p. xiv.
- Foucault, Michael. *History of Madness*, 1961. Editor, Jean Khalfa. Trs. Jonathan Murphy & Jean Khalfa. Routledge, 2006.
- Gilbert, Susan & Susan Gubar. "Mad Woman in the Attic." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Julia Rivkin & Michael Ryan (Eds), Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. Indian Rpt. 2002.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 1892. Wilder Publications; Blacksburg, 2011.
- Hughes, Kathryn. 'Gender in the Nineteenth Century', *British Library: Discovering Literature*. <https://www.britishlibrary.cn/en/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century/>
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 1966. Penguin Classics; London, 1997. Indian Rpt, 2000.
- Rich, Adrienne. 'Planetarium', *Collected Poems 1950-2012*. W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2016.  
*PoetryFoundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46568/planetarium-56d2267df376c>