Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 5 (October 2025)

9

Rethinking Madness: A Critical Analysis of Feminist Resistance in Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporary Counterparts

Sweekruti Panda[1] and Prasanta Kumar Padhi[2]

1) Research Scholar, Veer Surendra Sai University of Technology, Burla, Odisha, India, psweekruti@gmail.com
2) Assistant Professor, Veer Surendra Sai University of Technology, Burla, Odisha, India, zyitu100@gmail.com
Page No. 55-62

Received: 17/10/2025 **Reviewed: 20/10/2025** **Accepted:25/10/2025**

Abstract: *Historically, women's mental health has been pathologized within patriarchal frameworks, reducing complex emotional and psychological experiences to individual deficiencies rather than recognizing them as responses to systemic oppression. This study reinterprets female madness not as a mere pathological condition but as a form of feminist resistance to patriarchal oppression. Through an analysis of key texts such as Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar and its contemporary texts by famous women writers, the paper examines how literary representations of madness reflect the societal pressures and gendered expectations that constrain women's autonomy. Building on feminist frameworks, particularly Michel Foucault's critique of the medicalization of madness and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's portrayal of the "madwoman" as a symbol of resistance, this study demonstrates how these works critique the external forces shaping women's psychological distress. By analyzing symbolism, narrative structure, and character development, the paper reveals how these authors use madness as a critique of patriarchal norms, offering new perspectives on the emotional and psychological experiences of women. The study calls for a reevaluation of women's mental health narratives, framing them as acts of resistance to oppression rather than conditions to be cured, ultimately highlighting the power of women to reclaim agency and challenge societal inequalities.*

Keywords: *Women Madness, Feminism, Feminist Resistance, Social Constructivism.*

1 Introduction

The literary portrayal of female madness has long been shaped by societal, medical, and psychoanalytic frame-works that reduce complex psychological experiences to personal deficiencies (Gilman 38). These depictions reinforce patriarchal ideologies, framing women's mental health struggles as manifestations of emotional fragility or failure to conform to societal norms. This perspective obscures the broader systemic forces at play, presenting madness not as a rational response to external oppression but as an individual flaw (Showalter 15–19; Chesler 25–30; Brewster and Puar 59–77; Ussher 45–50; Gergen et al. 1). Consequently, female madness has often been used to marginalize women, pathologizing their suffering instead of acknowledging it as a reaction to restrictive cultural and gendered structures.

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 5 (October 2025)

These portrayals have evolved alongside cultural and intellectual shifts. In classical literature, such as Euripides' *Herakles* and Sophocles' *Ajax*, female madness is depicted as divine punishment, reinforcing views of women as inherently unstable (Showalter 12, 14, 16). By the early modern period, the framing shifted, with Ophelia's madness in Shake-speare's *Hamlet* reflecting the emotional toll of patriarchal expectations (McLuskie 305). With the rise of psychiatry in the 19th century, female madness became increasingly medicalized (Showalter 12, 13, 15). Feminist theorists like Gilbert and Gubar reinterpreted the madwoman as a symbol of resistance rather than pathology (Gilbert and Gubar 45–48). The upcoming sections will explore key theoretical frameworks, followed by a comparative analysis of selected texts, examining how madness is reframed as feminist resistance, ultimately challenging dominant narratives on women's mental health.

2 Literature Review

Feminist literary criticism has long interrogated the representation of female madness as a construct shaped by patriarchal ideologies. Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* reframed madness as a product of sociopolitical rationality rather than an absence of reason (Foucault 28–30). This perspective informs critiques of the 19th-century medicalization of women's distress, often pathologized as evidence of inherent biological or moral weakness. Gilbert and Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, argue that literary portrayals of madwomen symbolize the repression of female autonomy, with figures like Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre exemplifying resistance to both patriarchal and colonial domination (Gilbert and Gubar 360–62).

This reconceptualization continues in 20th-century literature, where writers like Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf frame madness as a response to gendered societal pressures. Plath's *The Bell Jar* critiques the domestic expectations placed on women (Plath 76–78), while Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* reveals the psychological toll of social conformity (Woolf 184–86). Intersectional frameworks, particularly Crenshaw's concept of intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw 1241–43; Morrison 88–90; Rhys 112–14), enrich readings of texts such as Beloved and Wide Sargasso Sea, where race, gender, and trauma intertwine. Symbolic imagery—like the wallpaper in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the sea in *The Awakening*—further emphasizes how madness reflects both entrapment and subversive agency (Gilman 40–42; Chopin 115–17; Bauer 25–27).

3 Methodology

This paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach to analyze the representation of female madness in literature, combining deconstruction, social constructivism, and intersectional feminism. Drawing from poststructuralist theories, it examines how works like Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* challenge dominant cultural constructs of women's mental health, revealing tensions between individual agency and systemic oppression (Plath 76–78; Woolf 184–86; Derrida 158–60; Eagleton 112–14). The study builds on Foucault's critique of the medicalization of madness, situating female mental health struggles within socio-historical contexts shaped by societal norms (Showalter 12, 13, 15; Foucault 28–30; Bourdieu 170–72).

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 5 (October 2025)

Table 1. A comparative analysis of key texts from different books

Book	Author	Character	Reasons of Madness	Feminist Resistance
The Bell Jar	Sylvia Plath	Esther Greenwood	Societal pressure to conform to traditional roles of wife, mother, and career woman.	Esther's madness critiques and resists gendered expectations.
Mrs. Dalloway	Virginia Woolf	Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Warren Smith	Clarissa's reflection on her life, Septimus's PTSD from war trauma.	Clarissa subtly resists societal roles through introspection, Septimus rejects stoic masculinity.
The Yellow Wallpaper	Charlotte Perkins Gilman	Unnamed narrator	Enforced isolation and the "rest cure" treatment imposed by her husband.	The narrator's madness is a form of resistance to patriarchal control.
A Streetcar Named Desire	Tennessee Williams	Blanche DuBois	Blanche's traumatic past and societal objectification of women.	Blanche's illusions resist objectification and offer an escape from reality.
The Awakening	Kate Chopin	Edna Pontellier	The constraints of her roles as wife and mother in a patriarchal society.	Edna's emotional unraveling is an act of rebellion against restrictive gender roles.

4 Analysis: The Representations of Female Madness

4.1 Gender and Identity in Female Literary Protagonists

In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath explores the psychological breakdown of Esther Greenwood as a direct response to the rigid gender roles imposed on women in the 1950s. Rather than viewing her deteriorating mental health as a personal failure or inherent weakness, Esther's collapse can be interpreted as a form of resistance to societal expectations. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of madness from *Madness and Civilization*, Esther's psycho-logical disintegration reflects her rejection of the dominant social order. Foucault argues that madness is not an inherent flaw but a social construct used to label those who deviate from societal norms (Foucault 28). In Es-ther's case, her refusal to conform to traditional female roles—such as marriage, motherhood, and domesticity—places her in direct opposition to a society that expects compliance. This conflict leads to her mental breakdown, underscoring the societal pressures that restrict women's autonomy and freedom. As a young woman with intel-lectual ambitions, Esther's internal turmoil arises from the clash between her desires and the expectations placed on women. Despite her aspiration to become a writer, she struggles to reconcile this ambition with the roles wom-en were supposed to fulfill, highlighting the

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 5 (October 2025)

limitations of pursuing personal desires outside traditional norms. The bell jar itself serves as a powerful metaphor for societal conformity, as Esther describes being trapped under it, "melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I had once been" (Plath 123). The fig tree metaphor similarly symbolizes Esther's existential struggle, torn between societal expectations and her own longing for in-tellectual and personal autonomy. Esther's mental illness thus becomes a critique of the limiting gender roles that breed frustration and alienation (Badia 45).

4.2 Feminist Resistance in Mental Health Narratives

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* addresses the destructive effects of societal pressures on mental health through the characters of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. Septimus, a war veteran suffering from PTSD, faces immense pressure to conform to societal expectations of masculinity, which dismiss his trauma. His emo-tional distress is ignored by Dr. Bradshaw, who treats his condition with a cold, mechanistic approach, focusing solely on physical treatment rather than considering the emotional and cultural dimensions of his suffering (Woolf 94). Septimus's tragic death critiques the societal norms that demand men suppress their vulnerability, leaving their trauma unaddressed. In contrast, Clarissa's response to societal roles is more subtle, expressed through her desire for control in a world that defines her by her relationships. Her obsession with hosting the perfect party symbolizes a desire for autonomy, while her declaration, "I will buy the flowers myself" (Woolf 3), represents a feminist act of independence, rejecting the expectation that a woman's life revolves around others' needs. Both characters expose the devastating effects of gendered societal norms on mental health, providing a feminist critique of how such expectations confine both men and women, leading to emotional and psychological distress. While Septimus's breakdown results in death, Clarissa's internal struggle points to the suffocating nature of societal expectations placed on women. These subtle acts of resistance, such as Clarissa's small act of buying flowers, echo the themes of female resistance found in other works like *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Awakening*, where women's psychological breakdowns serve as critiques of patriarchal control.

4.3 Feminist Resistance through Illusions and Identity

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams presents Blanche DuBois as a character who subtly resists patriarchal oppression by constructing illusions of femininity and aristocracy. Instead of direct rebellion, Blanche creates an idealized version of herself to protect against a world that objectifies and sexualizes women. Her focus on youth, beauty, and desirability functions as resistance to being reduced solely to her sexual value. Even as her life unravels, Blanche's fragile persona provides her with some semblance of control in a society that constantly threatens to strip her dignity. Her famous line, "I don't want realism. I want magic!" (Williams 117), captures her desire to escape reality and maintain autonomy in a restrictive world. Moreover, her strategic use of language, like the line "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (Williams 142), reveals how she manipulates societal gender roles to assert control, even if temporarily, in the face of overwhelming forces.

4.4 Spiritual and Cultural Coping Mechanisms

Female characters in literature often turn to cultural and spiritual coping mechanisms to navigate oppressive societal forces, gender roles, and mental illness. In *A Streetcar Named Desire,* Blanche DuBois exemplifies this reliance on illusions to protect her dignity and sense of control. Her obsession with her Southern aristocratic past, alongside values of beauty, love, and status, reflects her desperate attempts to preserve some form of identity amidst trauma and societal pressure. Blanche constructs an idealized version of herself to defend against a world

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 5 (October 2025)

that objectifies and sexualizes women. However, when Stanley exposes the painful truths of her past, these illusions collapse, triggering her mental breakdown. Unlike Blanche, Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* does not retreat into illusions of beauty or love but struggles with her identity amidst overwhelming societal and mental pressures. Esther's inability to find cultural or spiritual solace isolates her further, demonstrating the deep emo-tonal toll caused by societal limitations. Her struggle to reconcile personal desires with societal expectations results in profound alienation. Similarly, Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs. Dalloway* relies on fleeting social rituals, such as purchasing flowers for herself, to achieve temporary moments of peace. However, these acts fail to resolve her existential dissatisfaction, reflecting her struggle to create meaning in a world that defines her value through relationships and societal expectations.

In contrast, the protagonists of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Awakening* engage in moments of spiritual and cultural resistance that, though brief, provide them with autonomy. The narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* uses her obsession with the wallpaper as a form of resistance, symbolizing her attempt to reclaim control and freedom within a confining environment. She declares, "I've got out at last... in spite of you and Jane" (Gilman 42), marking her defiance against patriarchal forces that seek to control her. Similarly, in *The Awakening,* Edna Pontellier finds solace in the sea, a symbol of freedom and self-realization, reflecting her desire to escape the roles of wife and mother. However, despite these brief moments of resistance, both characters meet tragic ends. These narratives highlight the tension between personal desires for autonomy and the overwhelming societal roles that limit women's choices. Though their acts of resistance assert individuality, they remain insufficient to overcome the patriarchal structures that confine them. The tragic outcomes emphasize how, in a patriarchal society, the pursuit of personal freedom often comes at an unbearable cost.

Discussion

The literary representations of female madness examined in this study—from the creeping hallucinations of *The Yellow Wallpaper* to the poised melancholy of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the desperate illusions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the clinical suffocation of *The Bell Jar*, and the sensual awakening of *The Awakening*—reveal a consistent pattern: madness in women is rarely an isolated psychological event. Instead, it functions as a culturally mediated symptom, a moment when the contradictions of gendered existence become psychically unbearable. The unnamed narrator of Gilman's story does not simply "go mad"; she enacts a visceral protest against the medicalized confinement that strips her of language, agency, and even the right to name her own experience. Her final crawl around the room, trailing the shredded wallpaper like a liberated prisoner, is not defeat but a grotesque triumph: the only form of mobility left to her. Similarly, Clarissa Dalloway's meticulous orchestration of her party is not mere social ritual but a defiant assertion of connection in a world that offers women no authentic public voice. Her identification with Septimus Warren Smith's suicide— "she felt somehow very like him"—transforms private grief into a shared indictment of a society that demands emotional proportion while waging war on the soul.

Blanche DuBois' descent in *A Streetcar Named Desire* further illustrates this dynamic. Her reliance on "magic," alcohol, and the flickering kindness of strangers is not the weakness of a fragile woman but a survival strategy in a culture that commodifies female beauty and youth. When Stanley Kowalski shatters her illusions with rape, Blanche's retreat into delusion is not surrender but a refusal to inhabit the brutal reality he imposes. Her final line— "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers"—is less a plea than a tragic acknowledgment of the transactional nature of female existence, yet it also preserves her dignity in a world that offers

none. Esther Greenwood's breakdown in *The Bell Jar* operates on a similar logic: the fig tree metaphor, the electroshock therapy, the bell jar itself—all are not symptoms of personal failure but precise diagnoses of a culture that forces women to choose between brilliance and domesticity, ambition and motherhood. Plath's clinical precision refuses to separate individual despair from social prescription, making Esther's suicide attempt a rational response to an irrational system.

Edna Pontellier's trajectory in *The Awakening* completes this arc. Her swimming lesson in the Gulf—learning to move through water "like a little child"—is both literal and symbolic: a reclamation of bodily autonomy in a society that polices women's movements. Her affair, her refusal to receive callers, her move to the pigeon-house—all are acts of defiance that culminate in her final swim. Chopin does not frame Edna's suicide as madness but as a deliberate act of self-possession: the sea, once a source of terror, becomes the only space vast enough to contain her unscripted self. In each of these texts, madness is not the opposite of reason but its distorted mirror, reflecting back the violence of a society that demands women's silence, compliance, and self-erasure.

Michel Foucault's framework in *Madness and Civilization* provides critical leverage for this reading: madness is not a natural state but a category created by power to manage deviance. In these literary works, female madness is the moment when the deviant refuses to be managed. The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* tears the paper to free the woman behind it; Clarissa Dalloway throws her party as a defiant act of connection; Blanche DuBois clings to her illusions as a form of resistance; Esther Greenwood rejects the bell jar's distorted reality; Edna Pontellier walks into the sea rather than return to the cage of domesticity. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's concept of the madwoman as the author's double further illuminates this dynamic: she is the embodiment of rage and truth that cannot be contained within the "angel in the house." Madness, then, is not pathology but testimony—a language for what cannot be said within the confines of sanctioned femininity.

This reframing has significant implications for how we read both literature and lived experience. If female madness is a response to systemic oppression rather than individual weakness, then the task is not to "cure" the madwoman but to dismantle the structures that make her madness necessary. Literary analysis becomes a form of political intervention, restoring context and agency to narratives that have been aestheticized or pathologized. Moreover, this perspective opens pathways for resistance in contemporary culture. Just as these literary madwomen speak through fragmentation, contemporary women—whether through confessional poetry, performance art, or digital counter-narratives—can reclaim madness as a form of testimony. The goal is not to romanticize suffering but to recognize it as a diagnostic tool, exposing the cost of conformity and the possibility of rupture. In doing so, we transform the madwoman from a cautionary tale into a revolutionary figure, whose scream is not the end of the story but it's most radical beginning.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines female madness in literature, arguing that it is not merely a psychological breakdown but a form of resistance against systemic societal oppression. By analyzing works such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Bell Jar*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and *The Awakening*, the study highlights how female characters' mental crises are often a response to the rigid gender roles and societal expectations placed upon them. Using feminist frameworks, particularly those of Michel Foucault, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, the paper suggests that these portrayals of madness reflect a reaction to external pressures rather than individual psychological failure. The women's struggles emphasize the toll of living within

systems that demand conformity, specifically in relation to gender. Madness, rather than being a mere symptom of mental illness, emerges as a critique of patriarchal norms that restrict women's autonomy and agency. This perspective challenges traditional views that pathologize women's mental health struggles, framing these breakdowns instead as acts of resistance. Moreover, the paper discusses the symbolic representations of madness in literature—the bell jar, the wallpaper, and the sea—as expressions of internalized resistance and a longing for freedom. These symbols emphasize how female madness is often a response to oppressive forces, reflecting both the personal and societal dimensions of women's struggles for autonomy. The paper thus contributes to a broader feminist discourse by reframing female madness as an act of defiance against societal constraints.

Works Cited:

1) Badia, Janet. "Reading Women." *Google Books*, 1999, books.google.co.in/books?id=K9xsqLLOELIC. Accessed 1 Feb. 2025.
2) Bauer, Dale M., editor. *The Yellow Wallpaper: A Dual-Critical Edition*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998.
3) Beckett, Samuel. *The Unnamable*. Translated by Samuel Beckett, Grove Press, 1958.
4) Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Routledge, 1984.
5) Brewster, Anne, and Jasbir K. Puar. "The Medicalization of Women's Emotions: Intersectional Reflections on Gender, Race, and Mental Health." *Social Text*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2019, pp. 59–77.
6) Chesler, Phyllis. *Women and Madness*. Doubleday, 1972.
7) Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Edited by Margaret Culley, W.W. Norton, 1999.
8) Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–93.
9) Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–99.
10) Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
11) Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Blackwell, 2008.
12) Foley, Helene P. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton UP, 2001.
13) Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Translated by Richard Howard, Pantheon Books, 1965.
14) Gergen, Kenneth J., et al. "Psychological Science and Feminist Theory: The Case of Women's Emotional Disorder." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1985, p. 1.
15) Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale UP, 1979.
16) Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Edited by Dale M. Bauer, Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998.
17) McLuskie, Kathleen. "Shakespeare's Women and the Canon: The Case of Ophelia." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1987, pp. 300–11.
18) Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.
19) Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Harper & Row, 1971.
20) Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. W.W. Norton, 1966.
21) Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture*. Penguin Books, 1997.
22) Ussher, Jane M. *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience*. Routledge, 2011.

23) Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood." *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1966, pp. 151–74.
24) Williams, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. New Directions, 2004.
25) Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Harcourt Brace & World, 1925.