



A Silent Scream of the Silenced: Madness as a Reflection of Female Suffering in *15 Park Avenue* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract

The cultural standards of patriarchal society have long sanctioned the labeling of disruptive or emotionally expressive women as “mad,” reducing their inner turmoil to a gendered pathology. Madness, in this context, is not merely a psychological diagnosis but a symbolic construct, one that disproportionately and historically targets women. The term “madwoman” has been so naturalized that it ceases to be seen as a condition affecting the human subject and instead becomes a feminized identity boxed and othered within the civilization of men. As Michel Foucault argues in *Madness and Civilization*, madness is a social construct, much like gender. However, in the case of women, this construction is more visceral, tied to experiences of trauma, marginalization, and epistemic silencing. Madness emerges not from innate instability but because of male domination, the panoptic gaze, and repeated acts of emotional violence. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, similarly argues that madness is born from systemic oppression a reaction to the violence of colonial and patriarchal regimes. This paper examines how these theoretical perspectives manifest in the characters of Blanche DuBois from Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Meethi from Aparna Sen’s *15 Park Avenue*. Both women embody a form of silenced resistance, where madness becomes their only remaining language. While Blanche is crushed under the weight of societal expectations and sexual trauma, Meethi’s schizophrenia reflects a retreat from political and familial violence. Drawing from Hélène Cixous’s call in “The Laugh of the Medusa” for women to reclaim their voice through poetic subversion and supported by the feminist critiques of Shoma Chatterji and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, this paper argues that female madness must be reread not as a medical failure, but as a poetic and political revolt. Madness becomes the final scream in a world that refuses to listen.

Keywords: Madness, trauma, patriarchal, violence, political revolt.

Introduction

The meaning of Mad according to the Oxford dictionary is *having mind that does not work normally; mentally ill*. The consumption of this meaning has lingered on men to carry out woman outside the place by controlling without normal mind. This connection of abnormal with normal had been simpler as the human behavior changes according to the period disturbances of situation or weather. However, the transition between the cultural lenses of madness and pathological sketch has disarranged the stigma. Micheal Foucault explains in the chapter The Insane from the book *Madness and Civilization* (1961), that during 17th and 18th Century the madness was confined, silenced, and morally judged. The insanity was seen as the opposite of rationality, not as a medical condition that could help the patient to get cured but were locked to reinforce order and morality in the already existing insanity. In 17th Century, Europe witnessed massive confinements to clean the population of middle-class insanity as they were looked down upon due to their less paid jobs and uneducated treats like vagabonds, prostitutes, criminals all were housed together. Even after the age of enlightenment this division was no less as difference elevated by the sharpness of being undefined sane, moral, civilized, and rational.

The wave turned and madness became a threat to social order rather being a condition to be treated. Until the late 20th century or sometimes in the contemporary epoch can be seen that the families don't care about the treatment as medications or given therapies but are still treated as moral failing condition or sinful people coming from the door of devil. The plight cries with the fact that the insane is treated much like criminals, corrected, contained and many a times silenced. The definition of Madman was different in the medieval times as described in the plays of Shakespeare they were the bearers of truth and sometimes the more liberal was categorized as mad as Kalidas, Socrates, and many great philosophers.

In the later years psychiatry was replaced by patriarchy controlling madness of the woman or making woman mad at the attic. The insanity is not timeless or natural but socially constructed. Therefore, the history of madness is really a history of how societies police boundaries between normality and deviance.

Woman and Madness (1972) by Phyllis Chesler has been a phenomenal text by offering a framework explaining madness as both oppression and resistance. Female madness is less a clinical reality than a cultural construction, shaped by Patriarchal psychiatry to discipline women's disobedience. By reframing madness as a rational response to oppressive gender roles, she inaugurates a feminist re-reading of psychological suffering that continues to shape contemporary world.

The behaviors that are considered normal for men (ambition, aggression, sexual desire) are often seen differently (madness) in the case of woman. For woman they defined as "Frailty thy name is woman" (*Hamlet*). Submissiveness and passivity are culturally forced words for woman making a sign of weakness. Women were disproportionately subjected to institutionalization, electroshock therapy and over-medication. Female psychological suffering has always been the part of irrational expectations placed on women by society that needs to be subverted by rational response.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the text *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) described woman trapped in two forms 'angel and monster', angel would always be seen as submissive, domestic, self-sacrificing. Whereas the monster has features like rebellious, sexual, passionate that threatens the male order. Women are often casted as mad or monstrous as they reject being the docile colored woman who just sticks in the house to clean and make food. They crafted madwoman with the character Bertha Mason sketched by Jane Austen to

showcase the suppressed anger, passion, and creativity. The mad characters were created to picturize their suppressed self like Emily Bronte, Mary Shelley, Emily Dickinson. Male creativity was presented as sane and mindful while female's creativity was highly insane or hysteric. "Madness" is both a cultural label used to silence women and a literary metaphor through which women voiced their anger, sexuality, and creativity. The madwoman embodies female authors' double consciousness that is torn between conformity (angel) and rebellion (monster). Rather than dismissing her, Gilbert and Gubar reclaim the madwoman as powerful symbol of feminist defiance and artistic energy. Even the strong writings like *Ecriture feminine* by Helene Cixous offers an insight into the broken, sensual, and destabilized narratives that worships mad characters. She argues that due to the historically repressed and fragmented women's body and voice has non-linear ways. Thus, Meethi's speech is childlike broken, and reconstruction of life resonates with Cixous's claim that women "write themselves in and through their bodies", even when their voices are incoherent.

The argument continues with Elaine Showalter's *The female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980* (1985), explores the how madness has been gendered historically as female's mental illness was constructed and females were susceptible, and men were seen as rational. It was both cultural myth and tool for social construction. The madness of woman is disproportionately measured and thus, femineity becomes instable at times. "To be woman was to be half insane". To oppose the facts male doctors, use to portray women in the more vulnerable light spreading the noise of nervous breakdown due to biology of womb and hormones. If a woman started her rebellious journey by bringing up her choices on the brim, she was named hysterical whose rebellion was interpreted as 'illness'. Showalter termed as "domestication of madness". The gender divided when men diagnosed with shell shock

in world war I were treated with sympathy and rehabilitation while women with breakdowns were still considered hysterical. Madness has emerged in modern period with a shield of resisting restrictive gender norms.

R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self* further changes the perception by suggesting that madness can be a rational response to a hostile world. He argues that often the mind finds out some coping mechanism to defend the scenario to retreat the interpersonal relationship. This can be seen with the Meethi trying to create an alternative family at 15 Park Avenue, similarly, Blanche's reliance on fantasy. In both narratives, madness functions as an existential defense rather than a flaw.

Thomas Szasz, in the text *The Myth of Mental Illness*, expresses a little fact that psychiatric diagnoses often turn the medical categories into social control. It shows that the societal convenience is more significant than the protagonist's well-being.

It's been drastic change in the understanding of psychological trauma and can be understood with the enigmatic text *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman. He argues that the trauma builds not solely through violent event but by ignoring the victim or by not acknowledging their destruction. Without the support, the victim experiences a 'second wound', that extends the original trauma. Meethi's rape was never emotionally recognized by her family and Blanche's assault by Stanley is entirely dismissed by her sister Stella. Judith Butler's theory of performativity also applies: Blanche performs femininity through clothes, speech, and flirtation to secure protection but once she fails that performance society discards her. Meethi, conversely, rejects performative femininity entirely after her trauma takes the shape of childlike. Both women's relationship to gender performance becomes central to their social treatment.

The Indian Cinema is critically explored by Shoma Chatterji and Jasbir Jain states that

mental illness is often tied to gender oppression. They contend that mostly the mental character is often played by a woman embodying the impact of gender trauma.

Blanche also takes up her character towards the post-traumatic stress by engaging herself in constant bathing, avoiding bright lights with similar characteristics of Meethi who relives hers through dissociative delusions.

The historical construction of madness in women has been elevated by patriarchy shown deviated from normal to a failure of manifestation of emotional excess. Both in movie and the play the wound of patriarchy is so green that the psycho-social scream is unheard for longest hour. Both the characters Meethi and Blanche are thrown into the fragmented psychological world as they are not allowed to enter the legitimate space to process their trauma of sexual violence. The characters come from different social backgrounds but still carries the same pain of invalidated suffering which is worsening the condition due to the denial of the family. Thus, labelling them 'mad' so that the truth remains undercover. The psychological implosion due to the gang rape of Meethi that happened in the politically chaotic environment, turning her body into a battlefield for men's power. Aparna Sen avoids the rape visually and rather focuses on the after-silence of the disoriented and distorted soul of Meethi. This one incident crushes her sense to respond in the same world, her continuity towards 'self', creates her own world of safety with a perfect address "15 Park Avenue".

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the character Blanche is portrayed bold in the male circled society where this strong gender doesn't exist therefore, she was silenced by rape as she was seen as threat. This unbearable psychic wound was intense to pierce the soul. Trauma takes the shape of chronic disease if it remains unacknowledged. Meethi's sister intellectualizes her condition rather connecting emotionally to her violation. Doctors treat her as cluster of

symptoms not someone hurt by men. Blanche's sister on the other hand abandons the truth and denies the rape to save her marriage. Both the characters are raped again by the invisibility of the society and by erasing their testimony calling her "paranoid".

A shell is created by both the characters one creates a trauma-free area with safest place in Park Avenue. This helps to repair her shattered world. Similarly, Blanche manages to be in dim lights, elegant clothing, flirtation and stays in fantasy world. By deceiving the reality, they are somehow managing to survive. Both women speak through madness because society listens only when the woman is silent, or incoherent or institutionalized.

Meethi's and Blanche's madness is easy to handle than their truthful scream of "I was raped, terrified and now I need you". If they remain mad, then again, the patriarchy wins as those males and Stanley remains innocent and asylum become the tool for patriarchy cleansing.

Whoever you are-I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (107), this realistic statement showcases the erasure of their own relatives. She had to leave because her truth cannot be taken forward. In the similar way Meethi disappears in search of her comfort home with secured family of one husband and two children. She dissolves into her imagination because reality never offers her space to exist.

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