



Out of the Attic: An Analysis of the Evolution of the “Madwoman” Image in Anglo-American Literature

Xiaohan Li*, Nan Zhao*

School of Foreign Studies, Hebei University, Baoding, China

Email: xiaohanliaria@163.com, #15127907862@163.com

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Abstract

The image of the “madwoman” has gone through a series of changes in English and American literature. The “madness” of women in literature not only refers to pathological mental breakdowns but also reflects the social oppression suffered by women. The “madwoman” in British and American literature has gone through a series of changes from the image of “madness” under patriarchal oppression to the image of awakening and “madness” resistance, and to the image of various ethnic groups of women resisting multiple oppressions in the later period. The change in the image of the “madwoman” from silence to awakening to break through the shackles of the “attic” reflects the change in the status of women in society, and also greatly reflects the awakening and growth of women’s self-consciousness. The emergence of the image of the “madwomen” is of great significance, and their voices help to awaken the self-consciousness of the relevant groups in society, which deserves the attention and research of society and academia. The paper selects typical images of the “madwoman” in different periods of English and American literature, explores the manifestations and causes of their “madness”, and analyzes the changes of spiritual connotations behind them, in order to provide favorable perspectives for understanding the changes of women’s social status and self-consciousness.

Subject Areas

Literature

*Xiaohan Li is studying for a Master’s degree at Hebei University, China. Her research interests cover literature and linguistics.

Nan Zhao is studying for Master’s degree at Hebei University, China. Her research interests cover literature and translation.

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1. Introduction

Since the publication of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, literary criticism has increasingly focused on Bertha Mason, Rochester’s first wife in *Jane Eyre*—a “madwoman” locked in the attic. According to Gilbert and Gubar, Bertha serves as *Jane Eyre*’s alter ego, reflecting the repressed side of her psyche [1]. Bertha’s repeated escapes from the attic and her acts of arson serve as a powerful metaphor for her ongoing defiance against patriarchal oppression. Depictions of the “madwoman” figure abound throughout Anglo-American literature. These figures often represent the extreme manifestation of repressed and marginalized women; their “madness” signifies the oppression endured by women in a patriarchal society, as well as their suppressed desires, emotions, and selfhood. The construction of the “madwoman” figure predates Bertha Mason. Spanning the literary landscapes of the 19th and 20th centuries and continuing into the 21st century, both the characterization and the ultimate fates of these “madwomen” have varied significantly. Adopting a diachronic perspective, this paper examines representative “madwoman” figures in Anglo-American literature to analyze the evolution of their representation and underlying significance. In doing so, it seeks to further explore the evolving trajectory of the awakening of female consciousness reflected through these transformations.

The selection of texts and characters in this paper is guided by two criteria. First, each selected character must be explicitly coded as “mad” within her respective narrative—whether through authorial depiction, other characters’ perceptions, or institutional diagnosis—so that the label itself becomes a subject of analysis. Second, the corpus spans four historical phases: pre-nineteenth-century male-authored figures (Lady Macbeth, Ophelia, Margarete), nineteenth-century female-authored figures (Bertha Mason), early-to-mid-twentieth-century figures of conscious rebellion (Esther Greenwood, Antoinette Cosway), and late-twentieth-century figures confronting intersecting oppressions of race, ethnicity, and gender (Pecola, *Sula*, Sethe, and the women of *The Woman Warrior*).

2. Literary Interpretations of “Madness”

The concept of “madness” embedded in the “madwoman” figure can be interpreted from multiple perspectives. From a pathological standpoint, “madness” falls under the category of “mental disorders,” encompassing symptoms such as delirium, mania, and paranoia. However, within philosophical and cultural dimensions, “madness” is ascribed an alternative interpretation. Foucault posits that madness is not a disease, but rather a sense of alienation within a rational society [2]. He emphasizes that reason, acting as the dominant discourse, suppresses and

marginalizes the discourse of madness, ultimately reducing it to a state of voicelessness. Evaluated through either interpretation, those deemed “mad” are universally relegated to the status of the “Other” due to their failure to conform to societal norms.

Within society, the “mad” are categorized as “abnormal” by the rational world; they are marginalized and fundamentally misunderstood. To a certain extent, this social positioning parallels that of marginalized female groups. Consequently, it is not difficult to comprehend why “women” are frequently associated with “madness.” Building upon this premise, the “madness” of the literary “madwoman” can be plausibly explicated through both pathological and philosophical lenses. Although the madness of these characters often encompasses elements of clinical mental illness, it cannot be reductively defined merely as medical “insanity”; rather, it typically conceals profound underlying metaphors. Their “madness” manifests as a pathological consequence of oppressive hegemonic discourse, which may subsequently evolve into hysterical expressions of rage against violation. Furthermore, for some women, this “madness” can be delineated as a form of self-construction under patriarchal oppression. Moreover, there is no shortage of instances where a woman’s “madness” signifies a desperate resistance against unjust circumstances, enacted while she remains in a completely lucid mental state. Accordingly, this paper posits that the “madness” of the literary “madwoman” can be broadly divided into two categories. The first is “psychological insanity.” This category comprises women who genuinely suffer from mental disorders, whose psychiatric symptoms serve as a direct reflection of the social oppression they endure. The second category is “behavioral madness.” The awakening of their female identity and self-consciousness leads to the alienation of their behaviors; they rebel against injustice through extreme actions and are consequently relegated by society to the category of the “mad.” In literary works, there are also female characters who concurrently exhibit both “psychological insanity” and “behavioral madness.” By rebelling against the disciplining constraints of traditional rational discourse within a patriarchal society, these women are perceived as the “Other” and are subsequently stigmatized with the label of “madness.” However, when re-evaluated through the lens of contemporary societal values, their “mad” behaviors are revealed to harbor courageous resistance and progressive ideologies.

Virginia Woolf asserted that although madness is inherently irrational, a rational comprehension of it is always both possible and necessary [3]. “Madness” is engendered by hegemony and functions as an extreme form of resistance. The emergence of the “mad” figure not only exposes underlying social pathologies but also contributes to the subversion of hegemony; through the evolution of this figure, one can trace the progressive trajectory of human society. Accordingly, the manifestation of the “madwoman” figure in literature specifically reflects the arduous plight of women in society and their acts of rebellion. It operates as a dual metaphor: signifying both the patriarchal oppression inflicted upon women and women’s active resistance against the patriarchal system. “Madness” emerges not

only as a symbol of the identity of the victim, but also as a survival strategy within an oppressive and despairing environment. The literary articulation of the “madwoman” mirrors social reality. Consequently, investigating the evolution of this figure holds substantial significance for comprehending the shifts in women’s social status and female consciousness. Premised upon this understanding, this paper takes the literary figure of the “madwoman” as its point of departure to explore the manifestations and underlying causes of her “madness.” Ultimately, this study aims to offer a valuable perspective for understanding the dynamic transformations in women’s social status and self-consciousness.

3. Confined to the Attic: The Repressed “Madwoman”

Before Bertha, Anglo-American literature was already replete with representations of the “madwoman” figure. Before the 19th century, these “madwomen” were predominantly the creations of male authors. In the literary works of this period, female characters largely existed to serve men. Within the selected texts of this period, these characters exhibit limited self-consciousness relative to their nineteenth- and twentieth-century counterparts; they are driven to “madness,” enduring lives of anguish and repression under the psychological subjugation imposed by male domination. During this period, the female psyche as represented in these works was largely dictated by men, and an awareness of autonomy and equality had yet to distinctly manifest within the female characters examined.

Although the female characters penned by William Shakespeare—a quintessential figure of the Renaissance—often embody the progressive spirit of their era, his oeuvre still contains women who are unable to escape the destiny of subordination to men. While many of his heroines are courageous and charismatic, extreme archetypes also exist. For instance, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* is constructed as a “mad” figure who instigates her husband to commit regicide. Her “madness” can be demarcated into two distinct phases, bisected by the realization of her husband’s royal ambitions: behavioral madness and psychological insanity. Upon receiving the witches’ prophecy, she goads her husband into assassinating the king to seize power, an act that serves as the genesis of Macbeth’s subsequent series of atrocities. As she declares in the play, “I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat” [4]. Such a character is frequently perceived as mad and cold-blooded. However, Macbeth’s ambition was already deeply rooted within him; his wife’s incitement merely serves as the catalyst that prompts him to raise the blade. In essence, the “mad” Lady Macbeth is a sacrificial victim and scapegoat of love. Throughout the play, Lady Macbeth’s actions are driven, to a large extent, by a desire to fulfill her husband’s ambitions. Recognizing the beast lurking within her husband’s heart, and despite her own inability to withstand the psychological trauma, she unlocks the cage confining this beast, which ultimately imprisons her in remorse. In the latter half of the play, Lady Macbeth is tormented by nightmares. This reveals a deep-seated revulsion toward slaughter within her psyche, suggesting that her “madness” stems predominantly from her devotion to her hus-

band. Tragically, as Macbeth transitions to brutality, he exhibits a growing apathy toward his wife. Having acquired everything he desired, he confines his wife. The torment of her guilt, compounded by her husband's coldness, ultimately drives her into full-blown insanity, leading to her death. This bedchamber functions precisely as the "attic" of Lady Macbeth. Despite her ambition, she lacks a genuine spirit of rebellion; the essence of her actions remains confined to serving the male figure. By depending entirely on her husband, she ultimately died within this "attic." The "mad" Lady Macbeth meets a tragic end. While her "madness" is not born of an awakening of self-consciousness, it poignantly reflects the unequal status of women in romantic relationships and their fate as sacrificial victims of their time.

Lady Macbeth is by no means an isolated victim of the patriarchal order. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia descends into madness, driven by Hamlet's sudden shift in attitude and his cruel mockery; in *Faust*, Margarete is driven to insanity in her prison cell, overwhelmed by the series of tragedies resulting from her tragic liaison with Faust. Before the 19th century, "madwoman" figures were predominantly crafted by male authors. Within the scope of these works, female characters who subordinate themselves to men tend to lose their sense of self under patriarchal domination, forfeiting their subjectivity. Their sanity is contingent upon the emotional whims of men; manipulated by male discourse and attitudes, they descend into "madness" in silence, and through this "madness," they ultimately march toward their own destruction. Relegated to the role of mere supporters behind men, women of this era, as represented in these texts, are incarcerated within the cages of morality and power, opting for silence in the face of male hegemony. Female consciousness as portrayed in these pre-nineteenth-century works has not yet widely awakened, nor have these characters realized the imperative of pursuing their own selfhood. Obscured under the overarching shadow of male power and confined within the "attic," they dare not imagine—and perhaps have never even conceived of—rebellious against patriarchal society.

4. Awakening in the Attic: The Gradual Emergence of the Conscious "Madwoman"

In the 19th century, molded by male preferences and constraints, embodying the ideal of the "lady" became the ultimate creed for the vast majority of women. Virginia Woolf famously referred to the submissive women confined to the domestic sphere during this era as "The Angel in the House" [5]. This "angelic" archetype functioned as a romanticized strategy of control deployed by patriarchal domination. Certain male authors deliberately crafted these beautiful, benevolent, pure, and selfless characters in their literature, and such representations exerted a potent, normative moral influence on women in reality. Once a woman transgressed these "norms," she was immediately branded a "monster," "witch," or "siren," and a lexicon of terms such as "madness" and "hysteria" was weaponized against her. Subjected to the influence of such discursive symbols, some women were further

disciplined; they tended to internalize their unequal status, which subsequently enfeebled their consciousness of resistance. Concurrently, however, the 19th century was also an era that witnessed the gradual awakening of female consciousness. Female authors began to construct “madwoman” figures in their works—characters that stood in stark opposition to the “angel” archetype. Distinct from the “madwomen” portrayed by male writers, these female-authored “mad” figures undoubtedly epitomized a fierce rebellion against patriarchal oppression. The advent of the “madwoman” figure served as a clarion call for women in the real world, shattering their self-identification as the “Angel in the House” and empowering them to pursue their authentic selfhood.

Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* remains one of the most extensively examined texts in feminist literary criticism. However, while critics have predominantly focused on the rebellious spirit embodied by Jane, Bertha Mason—Mr. Rochester’s first wife, confined to the attic, traditionally received scant attention. It was not until the publication of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* that the academic community began to re-examine this “madwoman” through a novel theoretical lens. Gilbert and Gubar influentially argue that Bertha serves as Jane’s “truest and darkest double”, embodying the rage that Jane must repress [1]. Compared to Jane, this “madwoman”—who makes a mere six appearances throughout the entire novel—arguably serves, in this reading, as a more profound reflection of the oppression endured by women of that era, and her actions manifest a far more audacious and fearless resistance. Constrained by the patriarchal hegemony of the 19th century, some scholars argue that Brontë was compelled to fabricate a “happy ending” wherein Jane returns to Mr. Rochester—a narrative resolution that, in this view, risks betraying Jane’s sustained rebellion against patriarchy. For critics following Gilbert and Gubar’s interpretive framework, it is the actions of the “madwoman” Bertha, rather than Jane, that more accurately encapsulate what they read as the author’s subversive feminist impulses. In this interpretation, Bertha’s rebellion is markedly more direct and courageous than Jane’s, and her “madness” can be read as laced with lucidity and rationality; her actions follow a distinct pattern and possess clear intentionality. Bertha repeatedly escapes and commits acts of arson until she ultimately burns the mansion to the ground. Such targeted, “vengeful” actions provide traceable roots for her “insanity”, suggesting it stems not merely from hereditary factors, but more likely from her husband’s profound degradation of her. For this seemingly deranged character to repeatedly escape the attic is tantamount to breaking free from the male authority that binds her. This interpretation has been influential but has also been contested; postcolonial critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have challenged readings that appropriate Bertha’s Creole identity as a mere projection of Jane’s psyche, arguing instead that such critical moves risk reinscribing the imperialist assumptions embedded in Brontë’s narrative [6]. Brontë’s narrative strategy biases the reader toward sympathizing with Rochester, thereby potentially obscuring the true causes of Bertha’s “madness” and her motives for arson. Yet, this hidden char-

acter may constitute, as Gilbert and Gubar contend, a more precise articulation of the author's own internalized spirit of female rebellion. The majority within a rational society marginalizes nonconforming "mad" individuals, institutionalizing them in asylums. Within these isolated spaces, the "mad" are stripped of their discursive power. Similarly, the "madwoman" locked in the attic is forced to accept society's judgment in utter silence, bereft of any opportunity to defend herself. Viewed from this paradigm, Bertha's repeated ability to step out of the attic and ignite fires is in itself an act of immense courage and a significant breakthrough. Her actions, to a certain extent, mirror the awakening of female consciousness. However, just as Bertha ultimately perishes in the flames, women of that era had not truly stepped "out of the attic," and their consciousness of resistance remained largely inchoate.

It is noteworthy that during the late Victorian era, mental illnesses such as hysteria and neurasthenia emerged as pervasive diagnoses applied to middle- and upper-class women. The term "hysteria," derived from the Greek "hystera" (uterus), had historically pathologized female emotional distress as a gynecological disorder. By the late nineteenth century, the "Rest Cure" developed by Mitchell became a standard prescribed regimen mandating that these women "rest at home," abstain from intellectual work, and submit to total bed rest [7]. The concept is applied to literary criticism [8]. Prominent female authors of this period, notably Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, were documented to have suffered from varying degrees of psychiatric distress. Gilman herself underwent Mitchell's Rest Cure and later wrote a scathing account of the experience in *Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper* [9]. Such medical interventions, which egregiously failed to probe the fundamental etiology of women's psychological distress, actually exacerbated their mental deterioration to a certain extent [8]. Furthermore, as Showalter argues in *The Female Malady*, these diagnoses furnished patriarchal society with a medicalized pretext to exercise control over women by framing social discontent as biological pathology. It is important to distinguish between hysteria and neurasthenia as historical diagnoses rooted in Victorian medical discourse and the paper's interpretive use of "madness" as a critical category. Where nineteenth-century physicians used these diagnostic labels to pathologize nonconforming women, this paper employs "madness" as a literary-theoretical lens through which to analyze female characters' marginalization and resistance. Consequently, this grim social reality was profoundly mirrored in the literary works produced by women during this epoch.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* stands as a seminal work of women's literature in the late 19th century. Unlike Brontë, Gilman positions the "madwoman" figure as both the protagonist and the first-person narrator of the narrative. Bertha Mason's madness, though laced with lucidity and rationality, is mediated through the gaze of a conventional woman (Jane Eyre). Gilman, however, empowers the "madwoman" to articulate her own story, thereby eliciting a more profound empathetic resonance from the reader [10]. Incorporating auto-

biographical elements into the fiction, Gilman directly chronicles the protagonist's descent into mental collapse under the subjugation of her husband. Suffering from postpartum depression, the protagonist is relocated to an ancestral mansion by her husband to undergo the then-popular "Rest Cure", despite her own conviction that she requires stimulating work. When she expresses skepticism regarding the suspiciously low rent of the estate, she is met with her husband's habitual, patronizing scoff; when she notes the uncanny atmosphere of the house, he dismisses it as a mere hallucination and refuses her request to move to a more pleasantly furnished room. The protagonist's absolute obedience to her husband's dictates obliquely reflects the subservient status and the deprivation of discursive power experienced by women in Victorian marriages. Thus, her psychological breakdown is the inevitable consequence of the prolonged suppression of her individuality within a patriarchal framework. The room, plastered with yellow wallpaper, functions as the metaphorical "attic" that entraps her. Deprived of intellectual stimulation and forbidden to write or engage in any preferred activities, she is left with nothing to do but stare at the decaying wallpaper and its sprawling, barred patterns. Gradually, she perceives that there are "a great many women behind" the pattern who are "all the time trying to climb through" but nobody could [11]. Under such suffocating repression and psychological torment, the protagonist ultimately shatters into a genuine "madwoman". The woman behind the wallpaper serves as a projection of the entrapped protagonist, a representation of the author herself, and, by extension, a symbol of all oppressed women of that era. The protagonist's nascent skepticism regarding her own existential condition allows her to "see" the woman behind the wallpaper; her growing doubt concerning her husband's domination marks the awakening of her female consciousness. At the novella's conclusion, the protagonist's act of tearing down the wallpaper articulates a visceral rebellion against the patriarchal order. The iconic image of her creeping over her fainted husband's body symbolizes a monumental triumph in the struggle against male authority: an act that is arduous and agonizing, yet infinitely powerful. The namelessness of the protagonist in *The Yellow Wallpaper* suggests that her descent into "madness" operates as the collective confession of countless women of her time. Before this, figures like Lady Macbeth and Bertha Mason were relegated to supporting roles, with the majority of "madwomen" concealed behind the scenes. However, in the late 19th century, the "madwoman" gradually stepped from the "backstage" to "center stage." By becoming the protagonists, they presented their "madness" directly to the reader. To a significant extent, this paradigm shift symbolizes women's transition from a state of social "voicelessness" to one of vocal, articulated resistance.

The "madwoman" figure in nineteenth-century literature serves as a direct subversion of the traditional "Angel in the House" archetype. By weaponizing their "madness," these women manifest their profound discontent with patriarchal oppression. Awakening within the confines of the "attic," they "hysterically" murder the "Angel in the House" in a desperate bid to tear apart the cages that imprison

them. This mode of literary articulation, deeply invested in the destiny of women, catalyzed a profound reflection on female societal status among numerous authors, particularly women writers. Ultimately, the nineteenth-century “madwoman” signifies the awakening of female consciousness. Refusing to remain numbly docile, they channel their rage through the conduit of “insanity.” Admittedly, neither Bertha nor the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* ultimately managed to step out of the “attics” that entrapped them. Nevertheless, their voices proved so profoundly resonant that their echoes persisted into the twentieth century, inspiring successive generations of women to continue their mad outcry.

5. Dismantling the Attic: The Rebellious “Madwoman”

In stark contrast to the psychological collapse characteristic of 19th-century “madwomen,” their 20th-century counterparts began to exhibit a form of behavioral “madness” that was underscored by rationality. Rather than succumbing to pathological emotional breakdowns induced purely by psychological subjugation, these women increasingly mobilized their “mad” actions as a deliberate means to articulate their quest for selfhood and subjectivity.

In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath employs the narrative of the “madwoman” protagonist, Esther, to mount a rebellion against a patriarchally dominated society [12]. Exceptionally intelligent and profoundly gifted, Esther simultaneously confronts immense multidimensional societal pressures, finding herself trapped within an invisible, inescapable enclosure. In the novel, what repels Esther is not merely the men who monopolize discursive power, but also the surrounding women who have been disciplined by the patriarchal order. These women have completely internalized patriarchal dictates and continuously impose traditional feminine standards upon Esther. In her pursuit of self-actualization, entrenched societal expectations, gendered restrictions, and various systemic pressures act as shackles binding her. Her spirit of independence directly transgresses the archetype of the “good woman” long mandated by patriarchal culture. Besieged by these constraining forces, Esther gradually loses her sense of identity and self-worth, teetering on the precipice of psychological collapse. She begins to hallucinate, experiences profound alienation and terror toward her surroundings, and even attempts suicide to escape this relentless agony, ultimately resulting in her institutionalization in an asylum. Esther’s “madness” transcends the conventional medical paradigm of insanity; it is by no means a mere personal psychological affliction. Rather, it is the pernicious consequence of a social environment laden with restrictive expectations for women, signifying a fierce rebellion against patriarchal oppression. The figure of Esther serves as the quintessential embodiment of the modern woman grappling with psychological predicaments and an identity crisis within a complex societal milieu. The “bell jar” she inhabits is precisely the metaphorical “attic” that entraps her; her madness is, in reality, a desperate, extreme modality of resistance against the patriarchy on her path to awakening, acting as a mute indictment of oppressive social norms and rigidly defined gender roles. This profoundly under-

scores the realization that beneath the veneer of a purportedly civilized and progressive society, myriad systemic impediments to female advancement remain concealed. By deploying the literary articulation of “madness” as a distinct counter-hegemonic strategy for contemporary women, Plath lays bare the immense oppression inflicted upon similarly gifted and ambitious women of her time. Diverging from preceding “madwoman” archetypes, Esther possesses a far more lucid cognitive awareness of her own aspirations. This marks a monumental stride in the trajectory of female resistance. At the novel’s conclusion, Esther discharges from the institution and steps toward a new life. Her emergence from the confining “bell jar” is a leap in the awakening of female consciousness. Nevertheless, the underlying societal pathologies persist. Esther’s psyche remains shadowed by apprehensions regarding an uncertain future; although she has ostensibly emancipated herself from the “bell jar,” there is no guarantee that she will not be ensnared by this invisible cage once again.

Published during this same epoch, *The Madwoman in the Attic* saw Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar redirect critical attention toward the “madwoman” in *Jane Eyre*. By juxtaposing her with characters penned by authors such as Mary Shelley, they propelled this historically marginalized literary figure into the forefront of critical and scholarly discourse. Similarly rooted in the textual universe of *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* functions as a prequel to Brontë’s masterpiece [13]. By adopting Antoinette’s perspective, Rhys compels readers to critically reflect upon the tragic trajectory of the “madwoman”. From being married off to a foreign husband to being ultimately incarcerated in the attic due to her mother’s psychiatric history and her own ethnic identity, Antoinette’s destiny serves as a stark microcosm of the marital subjugation experienced by women of that era. In this light, her act of arson undeniably constitutes a courageous rebellion. Rhys’s literary intervention marks a monumental progression in the awakening of female consciousness. By endowing the “madwoman” with discursive power, she enables women to discern the profound social etiologies underlying “madness,” thereby catalyzing their reflection on their own existential status and implicitly mobilizing them toward active resistance. Concurrently, the intersectional impacts of colonialism and ethnicity upon the social status of specific, marginalized female cohorts have begun to garner critical recognition and scholarly interrogation.

Female authors of the 19th and 20th centuries perpetually grappled with the conflict between their creative impulses and restrictive societal dictates. Their marginalized domestic and social standing posed formidable impediments to their literary endeavors. For instance, the Brontë sisters were compelled to adopt male pseudonyms to publish their works, while Virginia Woolf famously articulated the necessity for a female writer to possess “a room of one’s own.” Consequently, the lived experiences of these female authors rendered the emergence of the “madwoman” figure in their literature an absolute inevitability. In tandem with societal transformations and the evolution of authorial consciousness, these “madwomen”

gradually metamorphosed from voiceless victims of oppression into courageous figures of resistance. In their relentless endeavor to shatter the confines of the “attic,” women transitioned from the backstage to the public sphere, and from peripheral characters to central protagonists. They have assumed increasingly prominent positions within literary narratives, thereby provoking widespread critical attention and profound scholarly reflection.

6. Multiple Attics: The “Madwoman” Confronting Intersectional Oppressions

In the latter half of the 20th century, women’s literature broadened its thematic scope, transitioning from an exclusive focus on the predicaments of white women to encompassing the profound struggles faced by ethnic minority women. By integrating systemic issues such as racial discrimination into the critical discourse on women’s social standing, literary representations of the “madwoman” became increasingly heterogeneous and pluralistic. When juxtaposed with white women navigating mainstream Anglo-American society, these hyper-marginalized cohorts occupy the position of the “Other” within the “Other.” Consequently, the systemic forces operating behind these “madwomen” extend far beyond conventional patriarchal subjugation, revealing vastly more intricate social labyrinths. Their “madness,” therefore, conceals a deeply intersectional and multilayered significance.

When compared to the Creole Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the racial subjugation endured by Black women is markedly more pronounced. During the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist movement garnered unprecedented momentum; female self-consciousness awakened, and women’s voices increasingly permeated the public sphere. However, as observed in Bakerman’s interview with Morrison, within prevailing discourses, when discussions turn to Black people, the focus is disproportionately on Black men; when discussions turn to women, the focus centers predominantly on white women [14]. Entrapped by the intersecting dual oppressions of race and gender, Black women are effectively relegated to the status of “the slaves of slaves.” Consequently, compared to their white counterparts, Black women occupy an exponentially more marginalized position at the absolute periphery of society. It was during this pivotal era that a vanguard of Black female authors emerged within the literary landscape, producing a proliferation of epochal feminist texts. Toni Morrison stands as one of the most profoundly influential literary figures of this period. Directing her narrative lens specifically toward the distinct cohort of Black women, Morrison interrogated the compounding systemic pressures they endure beyond conventional patriarchal subjugation. In doing so, she masterfully crafted a series of Black “madwoman” archetypes.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison creates Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl who longs for blue eyes under the influence of white mainstream culture [15]. In ethnic literature, “blue eyes” have become a common metaphor for minority groups striving to assimilate into a white-dominated society. Blue eyes symbolize whiteness,

and the pursuit of them reflects minority communities' search for identity. Pecola is a girl obsessed with obtaining "blue eyes"; after being subjected to widespread disrespect from those around her, she descends into a mental breakdown. The deranged Pecola believes she has finally acquired "blue eyes." Her madness results partly from the pressures of white societal discrimination and Black community indifference. Pecola's "madness" reflects the oppression faced by women—especially Black women—in that society. Yet instead of resisting, she retreats into self-blame and psychological torment, making her a victim of what Hooks describes as the intersecting dehumanization of racism and sexism [16]. *Sula* Peace, the titular character of Morrison's second novel *Sula*, offers a stark contrast to Pecola [17]. Where Pecola internalizes her oppression, *Sula* externalizes hers through deliberate, transgressive behavior that her community labels as "mad" or evil. *Sula* rejects marriage, motherhood, and conventional respectability—the very institutions that define Black women's social value. She sleeps with her best friend's husband, places her grandmother in a nursing home, and lives entirely on her own terms. Her community brands her a pariah, yet her "madness" is not a psychological breakdown but a conscious refusal of the roles available to Black women in early- to mid-twentieth-century America. As Collins argues, controlling images of Black womanhood—the mammy, the matriarch, the Jezebel—have historically been used to justify Black women's oppression [18]. *Sula's* rebellion lies in her refusal to be contained by any of them. Her "madness" functions as a willful assertion of selfhood, making her the prototype of the conscious "madwoman" in Morrison's oeuvre. Sethe, the central figure of Morrison's *Beloved*, embodies a third mode of "madness" yet: the traumatic aftermath of slavery [19]. Sethe is a former slave who escaped from Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky to Cincinnati, Ohio, in the years leading up to the Civil War. The novel is primarily set in 1873, during the Reconstruction era. Sethe's "madness" manifests in her violent act of killing her newborn daughter—an act she commits to protect the child from being returned to the horrors of slavery. In *Beloved*, Black women are portrayed as tools for white male desire and machines for reproduction under the slave system. Sethe uses violent destruction of life to preserve her dignity. This is an extreme act of resistance against both racism and patriarchal authority. Her "mad" actions represent a desperate effort to assert maternal agency within a system that denies Black women ownership of their own children. Undoubtedly, Sethe is a courageous and remarkable Black woman who bravely fights against injustice. Yet, facing *Beloved's* relentless demands, Sethe ultimately yields, revealing the profound spiritual despair experienced by Black women even after their struggles, as they find no clear path forward.

In Morrison's works, female "madness" is not merely an outcry for women's status; rather, it encompasses a profound resentment against the racial prejudice they endure, alongside an intrinsic demand for the reconstruction of their culture and identity. The three "mad" Black female characters undergo a profound trajectory from passive subjugation to fierce resistance. Ranging from Pecola, who is

driven to insanity by oppression, to *Sula*'s "mad" rebellion, and ultimately to Sethe's extreme "mad" violence of infanticide, Black women gradually awaken to the significance of the self. Consequently, they launch a vehement counterstrike against the racial prejudice and patriarchal structures that suppress their will. The evolution of these characters not only reflects the author's rebellious consciousness but also mirrors the cognitive transformation of Black women in 20th-century society. Ultimately, Morrison's characterization of the "madwoman" marks a monumental stride in the establishment of Black women's subjectivity and self-awareness.

Chinese American women share parallel experiences with their African American counterparts in Anglo-American societies. This shared marginalization is articulated by Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston in her seminal work, *The Woman Warrior* [20]. Although "madwomen" do not occupy the protagonist roles in *The Woman Warrior*, the narrative is replete with depictions of such figures. For example, "No-Name Woman," ostracized by her community for adultery, suffers a mental breakdown and, in profound agony and despair, drowns herself and her newborn in a well. The aunt, Moon Orchid, abandoned by her husband and unable to navigate independent survival in the United States, lacks the courage to resist and ultimately descends into madness. In contrast to the former two, the narrator "I" bears a resemblance to *Sula*: she is labeled a "madwoman" for defying traditional Chinese behavioral norms. Caught in the dual oppression of both Chinese and Western cultures, the narrator endures immense psychological distress. Akin to Black women, Chinese American women are driven to "madness" under the dual subjugation of patriarchy and the hegemonic mainstream culture of American society. However, the "madness" portrayed by Kingston is, to a certain extent, less overt than that of Morrison's Black female characters. Driven mad by societal pressures, these Chinese American women largely resort to compliance. While they may relatively lack a spirit of overt rebellion, their experiences remain profoundly significant for the awakening of Chinese female consciousness. Both African American and Chinese American writers illuminate the alternative dilemmas of the "attic" that women confront beyond patriarchal oppression. Through the process of their conscious awakening, these "madwomen" engage in multidimensional struggles, thereby rendering their literary figures more multifaceted and monumental.

7. Conclusions

The portrayal of the "madwoman" by British and American writers has undergone a profound evolution. It has transitioned from early depictions of "madness" induced by patriarchal oppression, to narratives capturing the initial awakening of female consciousness and "mad" rebellion, and ultimately to a broader concern for diverse groups of women confronting intersecting forms of oppression. As women's voices grow more resonant, the figure of the madwoman has simultaneously become increasingly multidimensional. Before the 19th century, "madwomen"

in literature typically suffered mental breakdowns as a direct consequence of patriarchal oppression. During the 19th century, however, female consciousness began to awaken amidst psychological collapse, marking the embryonic stage of women's resistance. As this resistance intensified, spanning into the 20th century, an increasing number of female characters employed "mad" behavior to actively challenge masculine hegemony. By the mid-to-late 20th century, the trope of the madwoman had acquired far more pluralistic connotations: their "madness" served not merely as a weapon to advocate for women's rights, but more profoundly, as a struggle to assert their ethnic and cultural identities. A comprehensive review of the madwoman's portrayal in Anglo-American literature reveals the arduous trajectory of the awakening of female consciousness within these societies. The role of the madwoman has shifted from the literary margins to the center stage, transitioning from silence to vocal outcry. It has gradually evolved into a powerful narrative strategy employed by female writers to expose the inherent ugliness of the patriarchal system, thereby assuming increasingly significant meaning [21]. These characters cry out for the women confined to the "attic" and the ethnic identities suppressed by mainstream dominant cultures. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the limits of treating diverse racial, colonial, and cultural experiences through a single evolutionary model. The "madness" of the Creole heiress in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the former slave in *Beloved*, and the Chinese-American woman in *The Woman Warrior* arise from distinct historical and structural conditions that cannot be fully subsumed under one linear narrative. Future research would benefit from attending more closely to how specific configurations of race or class produce qualitatively different forms of female marginalization that intersect with but also exceed the paradigm of patriarchal oppression.

The injustice women endure constitutes the metaphorical "attic" that confines them. Since the 19th century, women have made strenuous efforts to break free from this confinement. Judging by their narrative outcomes, the "madwomen" in Anglo-American literature appear never to have truly escaped the attic. Nevertheless, despite their predominantly tragic fates, these figures have provided invaluable guidance for the path to female emancipation. Propelled by the evolution of the "madwoman" archetype, the day when women can finally step out of the attic and "peacefully" pursue self-actualization is no longer a distant prospect.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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