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FEMALE SYMBOLIC CONFINEMENT

**with Jean Rhys, Margaret Drabble,
A.S. Byatt, and Margaret Atwood**

Casa Cărții de Știință

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Chapter 1.

WOMEN'S CLOSED SPACE

In her 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë created a secondary, shadow character, Bertha Mason, a lunatic imprisoned by her husband in the attic of a Victorian castle. She became a symbol for the rejection of rationality, of strict rules in a patriarchal society. The setting was an attic where Bertha was locked and guarded by an older woman. Yet, at night, Bertha found ways to escape from her prison. She rambled through the castle like a ghost, a shadow of the dark. She set the castle on fire. The character became emblematic for female irrationality, a symbol of the dark, hidden unconscious which surfaces in the form of mental pathology. This chapter attempts to change the setting of the prototypal mad woman. The household becomes a spatial emblem of female confinement. It is a womanish space. Its ambivalence means both confinement and escape; it is both a suffocating space, as well as a liberating one.

Patriarchal social patterns still dominate. According to these, women are fragile. Their wish to be otherwise than delicate is strong, yet the uncontrollability of their bodies betrays them. Female weakness originates in uncontrollable monthly loss of blood, uncontrollable pregnancies which both redefine and incarcerate her. The woman becomes a prisoner of her own anatomy and physiology, a slave of her biological fertility. The metaphorical household becomes an embryonic space of female confinement. Female representation of space relies heavily on the feminine psycho-emotional panorama. The attic, the kitchen, the bedroom, or any other room of the house may become prisons. Anatomic components of the reproductive apparatus, such as the uterus, the nutshell of life, adjacent parts as the ovaries, the fallopian tubes, may become psychological enclosures, as well. Aspects related to motherhood, such as pregnancy, birth, infertility, miscarriage, abortion, and menopause hold the woman captive. Somatic pathologies, either gynaecological or other types (headaches, brain tumours, suffocation from asthma), become subtle, implicit forms of emotional discharge. Mental disorders are extreme, explicit ways of emotional liberation from patriarchal chains.

The two British contemporary writers A.S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble are sisters and literary rivals. Some of the female characters in their novels have common points. They follow more or less a similar pattern, inspired from the two

writers' maternal model in their real life. Women characters rage against the protective, yet perilous, suffocating enclosure of domesticity. This annihilates female individuality and intellectual inclinations. It hinders literary pursuits. Stephanie Potter, in A.S. Byatt's novel *Still Life*, is a soft variant of Margaret Drabble's Bessie Bawtry, in *The Peppered Moth*. Both these female characters have the same inner regret: their domestic confinement to the detriment of their literary careers. Margaret Atwood creates an imaginary collective female imprisonment, in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the dystopian, dictatorial Republic of Gilead, the Handmaids are fertile young women. They have an exclusively procreation role, they give offspring to families who confront with sterility. The norms in the Republic of Gilead forbid books to women, deny them any access to knowledge and culture. Marian McAlpin, in Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman*, is not a free woman either. She is a victim of men's tendency to subdue women, to devour them from the inside, to annihilate their individuality. Her form of revolt is to stop eating, a symbolic denial of her female body which is a prey for men. It is her strategy to run away from them. Jean Rhys's female characters are depressive women, with no family. Yet they are not free either. They lodge in Paris hotels or temporary homes; they do not have their own permanent income. Their past and painful memories entrap them. They hide away from society, walk the streets at night, and deliberately isolate themselves in obscure hotel rooms with dark curtains, to protect themselves from the harsh reality. They want to forget the past, yet they cannot. Jean Rhys's female characters are fragile, lonely, and therefore vulnerable. Their maternal instinct exists. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha's immense emotional trauma is the death of her new-born baby, in hospital, a few days after his birth. Jean Rhys is the writer who gave utmost importance to Charlotte Brontë's character, Bertha Mason. She portrays the same mad woman, under a different name, Antoinette Cosway. She retraces the character's steps from her native place to England, where she becomes a captive. She explains her mental disorder, inherited from her mother. This disorder is ambivalent; it is both incarcerating and liberating.

The premise of this chapter is that there is an intrinsic, symbolic correspondence between the female psyche and the domestic space. The general aspect of the household, as well as its details, such as the household objects that populate the space of female confinement, can offer precious information about the emotional baggage that the female characters inhabiting that space carry with themselves. Psychological traumas surface discreetly at the material level of the household configuration.

1.1. The madwoman in her home

This subchapter investigates some clinical tableaux of women whose altered mental state is an expression of their emotional traumas. The frailty of their psyche turns against them, under various forms of depression, anxiety, hysteria, claustrophobia, or agoraphobia. In addition, I decipher the way in which these pathological manifestations relate to closed spaces of domestic confinement, enclosures where women consume their unhappiness. Women characters' mental disorders are reanalysed in their interdependence and correlation with the spatial coordinates of the household which form a suffocating prison and thus limit women's freedom. The depressive episodes with female characters in the novels under perusal rely on their traumatic experiences, occurring mainly during childhood. Abusive parents trigger the unconscious choice of an abusive male partner. The limitations imposed by a patriarchal society cause psycho-emotional claustrophobia and suffocation. The effect is a more or less evident neurosis, depression entwined with episodes of hysteria. With its initial shadowy presence, lurking in the darkness of a dusty attic, the archetypal mad woman, locked and oppressed, gradually acquires psychoanalytic liberating valences inside intersecting literary realms belonging to Byatt, Drabble, Atwood, and Rhys.

In her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys recaptures the Victorian prototype of the madwoman hidden in a secret, Gothic attic. The Caribbean author portrays Antoinette Cosway from childhood to maturity. Jamaica is her native country. As a young woman she has lived at the Coulibri Estate until Rochester, her husband, takes her to England. After the wedding, her madness surfaces little by little. She inherits her mental disorder from Annette, her mother. When Antoinette arrives in England, Rochester imprisons her in a dusty attic. Antoinette Cosway, locked both in her mad woman's attic and in her genetically imprinted mad uterus, becomes the prototype of an encaged female neurosis. She is a prisoner of the memory of her mother, whose symptoms of madness worsen with the death of her son, Pierre. The mother rejects the daughter who feels the need for maternal affection. Antoinette is a prisoner of her madness and of patriarchal rules which she cannot understand and, therefore, obey.

In their 1994 article entitled "Mothers, Daughters and Madness in Works by Four Women Writers: Bessie Head, Jean Rhys, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ama Ata Aidoo", Liz Gunner et al. approach female madness **under the sign of the distant and problematic relationship between mother and daughter**, in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

Yet the stifled, overpowered colony, the woman, through madness finds a space to articulate a sense of a brilliant and unbroken land, a place never finally understood by the coloniser, the powerful husband figure who has the middle section of narrative, exhibiting all the ambiguities of the coloniser, attracted but yet repulsed by the land/woman he overpowers. (143)

The metaphorical association between the madwoman and geographical spatial coordinates is evident; it makes visible the allusion to a similarity between the colonised land and female corporeality and emotional confinement.

In almost all her novels, Jean Rhys focuses on the female prototype of the depressed, neurotic, lonely woman, no longer in her youth, having experienced marital abandon and unfulfilling maternity. In her 1939 novel *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys portrays Sasha. She is a middle-aged woman who rambles through the streets and hotels of Paris in search of her past memories. She remembers almost obsessively the death of her baby son, soon after his birth. Sasha has female anonymous avatars, walking on the streets of Paris. These avatars are depressed women who attempt to fill the emptiness in their hearts. They try clothes in shops. They become shadows of solitude. Their despair is visible in their hysterical behaviour:

I look at the window of the first shop. There is a customer inside. Her hair, half-dyed, half-grey, is very dishevelled. As I watch she puts on a hat, makes a face at herself in the glass, and takes it off very quickly. She tries another – then another. Her expression is terrible – hungry, despairing, hopeful, quite crazy. At any moment you expect her to start laughing the laugh of the mad. (53)

The anonymous mulatto woman is another avatar of Sasha. She suffers from loneliness and depression because of her displacement. Her genetic, biological otherness extrapolates to the image of the mad woman as the other: “She wasn’t a white woman. She was half-negro – a mulatto” (78). Her displacement is both spatial and social. She lives with a man without being legally married to him: “Everybody in the house knew she wasn’t married to him, but it was even worse that she wasn’t white” (78). She cries abundantly, she drowns her unhappiness in alcohol: “She had been crying so much that it was impossible to tell whether she was pretty or ugly or young or old. She was drunk too, but that wasn’t why she was crying. She was crying because she was at the end of everything” (78). She is a social outcast, living on the brink of society. She prefers the solitude of her house, during the day. She is the shadow woman who walks out only at night. She reminds the reader of Bertha Mason who suffers from mental instability and who

escapes from her attic prison only at night. Like her, the mulatto woman is a social outcast. "She said that every time they looked at her, she could see how they hated her, and the people in the streets looked at her in the same way. [...] She told me she hadn't been out, except after dark, for two years" (78). Thus, the mulatto woman reminds the reader of Bertha Mason or Antoinette Cosway. Both stay locked up in their attics during the day and get out only at night.

Self-isolation from the outside world and avoiding social contact make the psychological pattern of Jean Rhys's female protagonists. The spatial coordinates in her novels include two separate, opposite worlds: one exterior, of social interaction, the other interior, of female rediscovery and redefinition. As the title of Jean Rhys's novel *Good Morning, Midnight* suggests, antagonistic aspects such as day and night, outside space and interior space, rationality and irrationality, entwine. In the act of plunging into her own unconscious, Sasha Jansen assimilates the inversion between night and day, as an act of revolt against social norms which she defies, for the sake of introspection: "I feel ill today. [...] I'll lie in bed all day, pull the curtains and shut the damned world out. [...] There was a monsieur, but the monsieur has gone. There was more than one monsieur, but they have all gone. What an assortment! One of every kind. [...] I'll lie in bed all day, pull the curtains and shut the damned world out" (64-65).

In her 1928 novel *Quartet*, Jean Rhys portrays the female protagonist, Marya, as a prisoner of a forbidden amorous relationship. While her husband, a Polish refugee, is in prison, Marya falls in love with Heidler, himself a married man. Marya is a woman with fragile nerves. She does not seem properly anchored into the real world. She has a dreamy and depressive nature. In order to forget the unhappiness of a relationship that leads her to nowhere, Marya drinks alcohol and takes sleeping pills. Her depression changes her physical appearance. When her husband gets out of prison, she confesses to him her illegitimate affair with Heidler. Her husband pushes her; she falls down, knocks her head, and dies. The clinical tableau of Marya's depression includes her melancholic nature, her addiction to alcohol and sleeping pills, and her premature physical decay. Her "tormented and deformed look" (97) is specific to a depressive mood. As a definite symptom of depression, Marya prefers self-seclusion in dark rooms where she lies unable to move: "So she would lie for hours, tortured by love and hate" (97). Her corporeal paralysis is a form of revolt of her body against a situation she cannot escape. The impossibility to move expresses her emotional confinement, her psychological paralysis. She is unable to let go what she cannot obtain, what she should discard as destructive. Heidler does not want to leave his wife, Lois, for Marya. The latter's despair causes a repressed violence towards Lois. The main female character in this novel is far from gaining any satisfaction

from cheating on her husband. She drowns in a morass of disappointment which she is unable to overcome. Her violent death seems to be the final, extreme solution. It releases her from the cage of her emotional fragility. Marya visits her husband in prison. Male confinement becomes the counter echo of female imprisonment by patriarchal chains, by melancholy and depression. Other women characters who visit men in prison are Candida Wilton, in Margaret Drabble's novel *The Seven Sisters*, or Alix Bowen, in *A Natural Curiosity*, by the same author. All these women characters unconsciously transpose their solitude and unhappiness on male counterparts who ultimately become aggressors of femininity, of delicacy and fragility. Both male murderers whom Candida Wilton and Alix Bowen visit in prison are extremely dangerous. The former raped and killed a woman, whereas the latter is a serial criminal with a life sentence, whose victims were mostly women. Marya's husband, in Jean Rhys's *Quartet*, transforms into his wife's murderer. Heidler himself is Marya's psychological criminal. The sadomasochistic interdependence between the female victim and the male aggressor contours and labels these relationships which reflect, in a more violent and concrete manner, the psychological war between men and women. When Marya chooses to confess her adulterous affair to her husband, she might be unconsciously aware of the ensuing brutal consequences. Nevertheless, she gives in to male violence, in a desperate gesture to break her emotional cage.

Both Candida Wilton, in Drabble's *The Seven Sisters*, and Marya, in Rhys's *Quartet*, assume their roles of victims of male violence. The former does this by emotional identification with the male convict's real victim. Candida walks on the dark paths bordering canal banks in London. She thus retraces the steps of the woman murdered by the man she visits in prison. She secretly imagines herself having the same frightful fate. Marya, on the other hand, seems to relish her role of victim of insensible men. She assumes her excessive emotional fragility, her depression, her psychological imprisonment. She thus resembles a hypochondriac who enjoys her own imaginary illness. She complies with her role of victim; moreover, she grows fond of it. She seems to bestow on it the aura of supreme acquisition of femininity. She is ultimately an encaged bird that enjoys her cage and does not wish to escape from it.

For Julia Martin, in Jean Rhys's novel *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, self-confinement in isolated rooms has an organic connection with female depression, especially with headaches. The decorative motifs of the wallpaper are representative for her mood. They demonstrate that women are highly influenced by the aesthetic value of surrounding things in the domestic landscape:

The room had individuality. Its gloom was touched with a fantasy accentuated by the pattern of the wallpaper. [...] The effect of all this was, oddly enough, not sinister but cheerful and rather stimulating. Besides, Julia was tired of striped papers. She had discovered that they made her head ache worse when she awoke after she had been drinking. (10)

Julia Martin becomes another version of the prototype of the sad, depressed, and lonely woman. She falls prone to hysterical fits when she realizes that Mr Mackenzie takes interest in her no more. Jean Rhys creates the image of the woman who depends on men for a living, who sells her body in order to survive. Julia is a shadow, irrational woman, living in the penumbra of organized society. She permanently feels that she is not part of a rational scheme. She has an affair with Mr Mackenzie who eventually leaves her and refuses to give her money anymore. The latter is a rational man, well integrated into society, whereas Julia is the opposite: emotionally fragile, easily hurt, in need of protection. She is a variant of the mad woman who neglects social norms of appropriate behaviour. She loses her temper and becomes hysterical. After Mr Mackenzie leaves her, she follows him on the street. She has the mad courage to enter the restaurant where he eats and come to his table. She makes a scene and slaps his face with her glove. Then she leaves the restaurant alone. Unknown men accost her on the street, as they feel she is an easy prey, due to her emotional instability. Mr Mackenzie is aware of her mental disorder. He considers Julia a dangerous woman, as she prefers his attention and affection, rather than his money: "He knew that hysteria ruled these people's lives, but he would never have thought that it would be carried to the extremity of giving up money" (33).

In Margaret Drabble's short story "A Day in the Life of a Smiling Woman", female hysteria goes hand in hand with gynaecological illness. Jenny Jamieson, the protagonist of the short story, is a successful woman. She has a family and a career in television. Yet, her husband is jealous on her career success. He treats her with indifference and sometimes disrespectfully and brutally:

He made endless unpleasant remarks and innuendoes about Jenny's colleagues in the television world, as though he had forgotten that he had introduced her to them in the first place. Sometimes he would wake up in the middle of the night and hit her. He would accuse her of neglecting him and the children. (111)

Instead, Jenny tries to do everything perfect, on both plans. She is organised and has shopping lists and what-to-do lists. Behind her continuous attempt to perfection, she accumulates tensions. One evening when she comes home from

work, her husband does not give her any attention and then tells her reproachful words that hurt her. Her rage surfaces in a hysterical manner: "a rage so violent possessed her, as though an electric current had been driven through her, that she began to shake and scream" (112). Her hysterical bout relates to Jenny's gynaecological tumour which causes heavy bleedings at night. Her illness evolves rapidly. She makes an appointment to the gynaecologist. When she gives a speech in front of a school auditorium, she feels a considerable amount of blood on her thighs. Her uterus becomes a symbolic place for emotional outburst. She accumulates and deposits her nervous tensions and frustrations in her womb. The overflowing blood equates emotional outburst.

The connection between hysteria, the uterus, and the ovaries has been discussed by Elaine Showalter in her book, *The Female Malady – Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*. She mentions Charcot's beliefs regarding female hysterical episodes. The latter believes that hysteria intrinsically relates to the female reproductive apparatus, especially to the functionality of the ovaries: "This interpretation of hysterical gestures as sexual was reinforced by Charcot's efforts to pinpoint areas of the body that might induce convulsions when pressed. The ovarian region, he concluded, was a particularly sensitive hysterogenic zone" (Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 150).

A.S. Byatt refers discreetly to the harmful potential of marital bonds and household enclosure to cause female rage, in her novel *Still Life*. The sense of suffocation in apparently inoffensive domestic chains is liable to create extreme manifestations. Stephanie Potter is a prisoner of marriage and household life. She lives with her husband, children, and mother-in-law. She is an intellectual woman and her education forbids the display of any wild impulse of revolt against her symbolic imprisonment. Yet, she feels abandoned and lonely in her stifled revolt. When her mother-in-law is hospitalized, Stephanie feels liberated. "A craziness rose in her, half inadmissible euphoria at the old woman's absence, half the sense of her unregarded self coming painfully to life like a numbed extremity. As so often, this formed itself in a kind of anger" (Byatt, *Still Life*, 306).

Margaret Atwood provides medical descriptions of female hysteria, in *Alias Grace*. The author inserts these scientific explanations into her work of fiction which abounds in examples of female madness. Hysterical episodes, hallucinations, or experiences of amnesia are ambivalent: they are either expressions of the female unconscious, or revelations of an occult perspective:

Hysterics – These fits take place, for the most part, in young, nervous, unmarried women. [...] Young women, who are subject to these fits, are apt to think that they are suffering from 'all the ills that flesh is heir to;' and the false symptoms of disease

which they show are so like the true ones, that it is often exceedingly difficult to detect the difference. The fits themselves are mostly preceded by great depression of spirits, shedding of tears, sickness, palpitation of the heart [...]. The patient now generally becomes insensible, and faints; the body is thrown about in all directions, froth issues from the mouth, incoherent expressions are uttered, and fits of laughter, crying, or screaming, take place. When the fit is going off, the patient mostly cries bitterly, sometimes knowing all, and at other times nothing, of what has taken place... Isabella Beeton, *Beeton's Book of Household Management*, 1859-61. (157)

Set in the nineteenth century, Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* focuses explicitly on female imprisonment. Grace Marks does penitence for her suspected implication in the murder of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. She is James McDermott's accomplice in this horrible deed. Grace might also be a mad woman, as either she suffers from amnesia or she just pretends to. She does not seem to remember facts about the murder for which the authorities accuse her. She also spends some time in an asylum for mad women. Episodes of amnesia alternate with moments of perfect lucidity. This is the reason why her mental illness is ambiguous and difficult to diagnose by Dr Simon Jordan. The reader does not find out if Grace is to blame for the murder, or if James McDermott just forced her to participate in it. Her mental state is also an enigma. It may be a real mental disease or just a trick employed by Grace in order to escape the accusations. Grace might be a mad woman who does not remember that she committed murder because she was in a trance, and afterwards forgot her monstrous deed in order to protect her sanity. But she might also be a cunning, perfectly lucid and intelligent woman who wants to make people believe that she is just mad and innocent. The diary she writes does not solve the reader's dilemma. She seems sincere and tells the story up to the point where she eludes the details of the murder and stifles it in the mist of ambiguity.

Dr Simon Jordan tries to understand the inner mechanism of her psyche, to unveil the mysterious, secret corners of her unconscious. He investigates the frailty, volatility, and delusiveness of the female psyche not only with Grace, but also with a secondary female character, Mrs Humpfrey. The latter is his host; she rents him a room in her house. Nervous fragility characterizes Mrs Humpfrey. She falls prey to hysterical bouts, she faints, and she refuses to eat when her husband leaves her. In a conjunction of unhappy circumstances, she is susceptible to display visible signs of a nervous breakdown. Yet, the boundary between a real mental disorder and an astute feminine game of pretending illness, in order to entrap men, is very fragile. She might as well dissimulate an exaggerated delicacy and need of protection from men. After her husband's departure, she attempts

and succeeds in entrapping the naive Dr Simon Jordan, using her feminine charms.

In *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood also portrays anonymous women who display a variety of symptoms of mental disorder. These women become patients and prisoners of the lunatic asylum, a space where female madness displays its many modalities of expression. The asylum is ambivalent; it is both a prison and a liberating place: "At least in the Lunatic Asylum you could see out better. When you were not muffled up in a darkened room" (276). An explicit spatial allusion to the mad woman in the attic is the attic of Mrs Alderman Parkinson's house. Grace Marks and her friend, Mary Whitney, work in this house as servants, for a time. The two young girls sleep in this attic. This is where they dry the laundry. Although the attic does not hide a mad woman, it provokes female fears; it brings to surface glimpses of their psyche. It hides and shelters the most intimate, dark side of the female unconscious. Grace describes her anxiety in the attic: "But when we hung the same things up inside, in the grey twilight of the drying room, they looked different, like pale ghosts of themselves hovering and shimmering there in the gloom; and the look of them, so silent and bodiless, made me afraid" (184). The novel associates the anonymity of female madness with the symbolic confinement space, namely the attic: "Simon is in the upstairs corridor again, in the attic, where the maids live. He senses them waiting behind their closed doors, listening, their eyes shining in the semi-darkness; but they don't make a sound" (407). This is the reason why the attic becomes a spatial prototype for female neurosis confinement. It is the symbol of the feminine unconscious locked in an upper part of the house, lodging, castle, or mental asylum.

Margaret Drabble's novel *The Dark Flood Rises* associates female mental disorder with a problematic relationship between father and daughter. Dorothy is a woman in her seventies who lives in a lunatic asylum. Supposedly, she suffers from dementia; when Fran comes to visit her, Dorothy tells Fran the story of her whole life. The patient speaks incessantly in a desultory stream of consciousness. Nevertheless, her long speech contains the same refrain, the same recurrent pattern of the angry father housed to beat his daughter sometimes. The cause-effect relationship between the violent father and the mad daughter is explicit: "Fran tries to follow, picks out the recurrent motif of the angry father, wonders if he was the explanation of why his daughter is here, year after year, unageing, unchanging, living it out to the end" (42). Dorothy remembers especially the reason for which her father used to beat her: "Her father was angry when she did handstands, he didn't like her showing her knickers, he gave her the strap if she showed her knickers" (41). **Displaying one's knickers** points to the female emerging sexuality. The paternal figure punishes it, using the brutality of physical punishment. The