ISSN 2664-8067 (Print) & ISSN 2706-5782 (Online)
South Asian Research Journal of Arts, Language and Literature
Abbreviated Key Title: South Asian Res J Art Lang Lit

| Volume-5 | Issue-5 | Sep-Oct- 2023 | **DOI: 10.36346/sarjall.2023.v05i05.001**

Review Article

Abuse of Women in Nineteenth Century Asylums: Past and Present Representations in English Literature

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Article History
Received: 16.08.2023
Accepted: 19.09.2023
Published: 21.09.2023

Abstract: Madness has been frequently represented in English literature since it was an issue concerning not only medical practitioners and social control but also the role of women in society and the exertion of men's will over wives, sisters, daughters and other female relatives. In this paper, the condition of nineteenth century women confined to the madhouses or asylums is discussed in relation to the different representations made by two Victorian novelists, Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and a contemporary writer, Sarah Waters. Theories of insanity and the motives of women abuse are widely introduced followed by some reflections on the representation of abuse in three novels: The *Women in White*, *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Fingersmith*. A substantial difference between the first two novels and the modern one is the portrayal of sexual orientation, masochism and pornography.

Keywords: Abuse, women, asylum, madness, literature.

INTRODUCTION

Many novels and plays of the nineteenth century as well as medical treatises, depicted how social stereotypes and expectations could penalise or damage the existence of women, the fairer sex, and lead them to a mental breakdown and, moreover, favour the manifestation of mental disturbances (Marland, 2013). Unsatisfying marital relationships, one-sided romances, male prevarication, being a spintster or a widow were certainly popular reasons for the psychological suffering of Victorian women but the risk of being wrongly considered insane and then confined to a madhouse was high. An important issue to be discussed in this regard is the genesis of insanity as different theories were speculated to explain the existence of madness in British society (Bennett, 2015). Firstly, hereditary transmission was a plausible reason when it was possible to demonstrate that a parent or a grandparent was likely affected by some type of mental condition. Secondly, poverty was considered as a stressful factor and potentially responsible for the onset of criminal or immoral practices due either to an incapacity to succeed in life or a strong desire to climb the social ladder at any cost. Thirdly, gender was a determinant aspect since women were biologically at high risk of developing a mental illness in relation to their life cycle, for example menstruation, pregnancy, childbearing and menopause were considered as delicate phases for mental stability. Fourthly, race was a predisposing factor to insanity, the so called 'lunatics', an aspect which was strongly associated with cultural traditions and religious beliefs. Lastly, crime was related to moral insanity and then to madness since there is a lack of control/inhibition of sexual drives and natural impulses. Offenders, prostitutes and drunkards were considered as criminals and mad people.

There are different reasons for which women who manifested an immoral or abnormal behaviour were likely to be confined into a madhouse and consequently abused by those in charge of their detention and care who, unfortunately for women, were mainly men. A first motive was social control. In Victorian Britain, women had to be docile, submissive and dependant, and they had no right to take decisions and could not dispose of their own money or propriety. The ideal of feminism was that women were considered as the '*angel of the house*' because their place was at home with their husbands and children (Nsaidzedze, 2017) and any deviance from this stereotype was considered as an aberrant or abnormal

behaviour, often immoral and consequently insane. As a matter of fact, women who were against social norms were easily stigmatised as affected by madness and the further step was their confinement into an asylum. Such a phenomenon was a reflection of men's control over women in a patriarchal society: wives, mothers, daughters and spinsters were all subjugated to men's will. A second reason was misdiagnosis. Psychiatry was an emerging branch of medicine; it was not supported by reliable scientific data and different theories were popular at the time to explain female madness. A first belief was that women were extremely vulnerable and inclined to manifest signs of insanity in relation to biological factors such as the onset of puberty, menstruation, childbirth, menopause and even the lack of sexual activity in spinsters and widows. The relationship between madness and the female reproductive system was called "reflex insanity in women", a condition which clearly increased the social discrepancy between men and women. Social pressure was a stressful situation which contributed to the manifestation of dissatisfaction, anger, frustration, aversion, all aspects wrongly attributed to depression. "Puerperal insanity", known today as post-partum depression and psychosis, was very often a reason for admission to asylums, approximately in two-thirds of females. As a result, the number of female patients in the asylums was higher than male inmates, typically sixty-six percent of cases were women. (Showalter, 1987).

A third plausible motive was related to husband's will. In a misogynous society, it is not surprising that male power could be exerted over women in a considerable way, in particular over wives. Husbands could even decide the confinement of their spouse to an asylum (Foyster, 2002). In the 18th century, if a man suspected or detected an anomaly of his wife's behaviour, he had the right to admit her to an asylum or oblige her to a domestic detention. This was the law in force at the time because of the existence of a decree called the "Writ of Habeas Corpus". As a consequence, women could not escape the domestic walls. Separation or divorce were indisputable issues even if other relatives or acquaintances could relate to a judge about the violence and the abuse on wives. In most cases, the husband always kept the right to act at his own will. The situation became even worse when private madhouses were opened as husbands could easily ask for and pay the keeper for the confinement of his spouse. This sad circumstance was called the "trade in lunacy". Last possible reason was maltreatment. Physical coercion was frequently used to control the most critical and violent patients, especially in the first half of the 19th century, when pharmacological treatments were practically scarce. Examples of mechanical restraints were strait jackets, strait waistcoats, chains, harnesses, leather straps or belts, coercion chairs (Science Museum, 2018). Sexual abuse was also a hapless event and was commonly perpetuated by male staff towards the most fragile and severely patients whose dissent was difficult to demonstrate. In most cases of rape, women's rights and voice were generally neglected in courts in order to preserve the good reputation of the institution (Dobbing, 2021)

Representations of madness in 19th century novels

The Woman in White and *Lady Audley's Secret* are two sensation novels characterised by mystery and suspense both written in the 19th century. The authors, Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, were of different sexes but both represented the social condition of women and their presumed insanity. In the former there are three female characters, two of which were unjustly considered insane and admitted to a madhouse. In the latter there is only one female character who was found guilty of more crimes but similarly confined to an asylum. In both novels there is a man whose social power is exerted over women: in the novel by Collins, there is one man who acts with malignity against womankind while in Braddon's work the male character is trying to restore social order and a male/female equilibrium.

The Woman in White: **insanity and confinement**

The novel was published between November 1859 and August 1860. Collins had a great interest in the legal issues concerning insanity as it is described in the following points. The idea came from a French account of a lady unfairly admitted to an asylum by her brother who was interested in her bequest. In addition, the son of a public figure who publicly referred about his own experience in a madhouse, was of inspiration for Collins to write about the dangers of being allegedly confined. The novel was written in coincidence with the establishment in 1958 of a parliamentary Special Commitee which dealt with the question of protecting the rights of the asylums inmates. Moreover, in 1858 a public scandal related to the confinement of a woman, Mrs. Turner, by her husband revealed the real conditions of the asylums and the maltreatment of the patients (Fass Leavy, 1982). The issue of misdiagnosis and wrong confinement is promptly described at the beginning of the novel by the words of Mr. Hartright: 'But the idea of absolute insanity which we all associate with the very name of an Asylum ... never occurred to me, in connection with her' (WW, 22). It seems that the writer's idea is to introduce immediately to the reader the main themes of his novel, gender roles and social control. The problem of abuse of women, instead, is dealt by Collins in the following way. Two women who share the same destiny: Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie are both confined in different times to a private asylum because of the will and personal interest of the same man, Sir Percival Glyde. Anne was affected by a form of intellectual impairment, probably idiocy, a condition which at the author's time was frequently treated with the confinement to a madhouse while Laura is the victim of a conspirancy and misdiagnosed as insane thanks to the power and influence of her husband. A third female character, Marian Halcombe, is not mad but she is depicted as a strong and rebellious person who represents the opposition of women against male. She may be represented by the author as an alternative to Victorian models of feminism but, in the end, she is a woman whose behaviour is moulded in order to become socially acceptable and to be submitted to men's will (Fernández, 2022).

Lady Audley's secret: **crime and madness**

Lady Audley's Secret was published in 1862 by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. It is the story a young lady who, in her attempt to climb the social ladder, commits several crimes. Her behaviour was considered as abnormal and improper in a society in which women had to be obedient and docile. The originality of this work is the representation of a woman who, forced by circumstances and by her own disposition, engages into illicit activities that she has been able to conceal until the final disclosure. At the end of the novel, her behaviour was not considered as insane rather intentional and calculated. Familiar transmission was a possible explanation of the character's behaviour but not sufficient to explain her conduct as underlined by Dr. Mosgrove assessment of the case: 'There is latent insanity … The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood … She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence … She is dangerous!'(LA, 399). The character's low and miserable social origins are another plausible reason that determined her deviant conduct as LA herself will confess to Sir Michael during the proposal scene: 'From my very babyhood I have never seen anything but poverty. … Poverty—poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations. You cannot tell; … you can never guess what is endured by such as we.'(LA, 13) Lady Audley was a woman who lacked motherly affection as shown in the novel : 'I did not love the child, for he had been a burden upon my hands.'(LA, 372) Whether this aspect was a consequence of some postnatal mental condition, it is not confirmed by Braddon but the abandonment of a child was typically considered as the result of madness. In an era of confusion and divergences about the origin of madness, there was not enough evidence for the correct treatment of those who were affected. This is likely the main reason for the confinement of LA to an asylum and not to a prison; in any case, she was a threat to the social equilibrium established by men (Woolston, 2008).

Contemporary representations of asylums in English literature: ***Fingersmith***

Fingersmith by Sarah Waters is a neo-Victorian crime fiction and lesbian novel set in 19th century England. It is the story of two young female characters, Susan and Maud, who belong to separate social classes, as Susan is a poor maid while Maud is a rich mistress. Their social disparity is well represented in the novel by their different dresses, conduct and manners and it is the external appearance a key element to the twisting of the plot and to the unexpected outcome. As a matter fact, in the well planned conspiracy of the male character, Gentleman, it is the ladies' outfit that will determine confusion and an inversion of roles between the two girls so that Susan will be mistaken for Mrs. Rivers and then unjustly confined to an asylum. In the end, the story reveals that both girls were conned by Mrs. Sucksby, Maud's real mother, since their real origins and identities have been switched since the beginning of their lives only for inheritance matters. What is more interesting and innovative of this novel is the romance relationship between the two girls which is probably the only sincere feeling expressed here. Therefore, lesbian love is overtly depicted in *Fingersmith* differently from what happened in the Victorian period when such sexual representations were censored (Ya-ju, 2014).

With reference to the historical context, what can be considered as queer in this novel are essentially two situations: one is the sexual relationship between the two heroines while the other is the representation of sadomasochism in the sense of power control. The queerness (and insanity) of the homosexual nature of Susan and Maud's connection is related to the historical moment in which it is represented and therefore to the common conventions of Victorian society. Firstly, the role of female sexuality was practically underevaluated since the main belief that women were sexually inactive and that, in matters of sex, they were rigorously dependent on men. Secondly, moral standards could hardly justify an intimate relationship between people of the same sex because of its immoral nature. Within this context, this form of sexuality was frequently associated with insanity. For what concerns sadomasochism, it has to be intended here as a distortion of interpersonal relationships which emerges clearly in Waters's work. It is not a matter of sexual fantasies or practices, rather the expression of power abuse, typically of men over women. Mr. Rivers, partner in crime to both girls, and Mr. Lilly, officially Maud's uncle, both violate the rights of the two female characters since they exert their power and their influence on defenceless people. Susan was wrongly confined to an asylum thanks to the machinations of Mr. Rivers with the help of Mrs. Sucksby while Maud was forced to work with pornographic material as a consequence of her uncle's will (Cocks, 2011).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the asylums were not the place where psychiatric patients were treated with a level of care and assistance as conceived today. An example was Colney Hatch Lunatic asylum, which was as big as a town with its six miles of wards and corridors along with a chapel, a cemetery, gardens and a farm. Their external grandiosity often concealed structural instability and a lack of humanity especially towards women. In the Victorian period, the treatment of patients was generally called moral management since madness was considered as a moral insanity, mainly a problem of life instinctual life and seclusion was a priority (Showalter, 1987). The origin and etiopathogenesis of insanity were not clearly understood. Many theories were postulated but none of them was able to explain in an exhaustive way the manifestations of madness. Abuse on women in the asylums was related to many factors: medical malpractice, excessive use of physical restraint, lack of rights, legal dependence on men and social stigma. *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* represent two different aspects of abuse on women. The former is the example of a person who was not insane but admitted to an asylum because of a man's personal interest and power. The latter depicts a woman who was institutionalized

not for madness but for an immoral and socially inappropriate conduct. In *Fingersmith* the problem of abuse on women in Victorian madhouses is represented with an additional emphasis on gender and moral issues since the author depicts same sex love as well as eroticism and pornography.

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