

The Mad Woman at the Periphery of Provincial Society: A Comparative Reading of Joseph Addison's "On Witchcraft – Story of Moll White" and Shawkat Osman's "সৌদামিনী মালো" (*Soudamini Malo*)

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Abstract

In the exploration of the portrayal of lone women pushed to the periphery of society, Joseph Addison's (1672-1719) essay "On Witchcraft – Story of Moll White" (1710) and Shawkat Osman's (1917-1998) "সৌদামিনী মালো" (1984) (*Soudamini Malo*) serve as illuminating case studies. This comparative analysis reveals the recurrent theme of societal oppression faced by these women building onto Gilbert and Gubar's concept of 'the mad woman in the attic'. The paper analyzes how Addison and Osman, through their male narrators, provide critical commentaries on societies that alienate solitary women. The narratives, despite their temporal and cultural differences, converge on the portrayal of marginalized women, prompting a call for discourse and societal introspection. The shared condition of 'the mad woman' in disparate cultural contexts emphasizes the urgent need for ongoing conversations surrounding gender, power, and societal expectations.

Keywords: Provincial Society, Comparative Reading, On Witchcraft– Story of Moll White, "সৌদামিনী মালো" (*Soudamini Malo*)

Introduction

In the dusky confines of an attic, bathed in the flicking glow of candlelight, a ragged figure lurks in the shadows - gleaming eyes and frenzied movements that transcend the mere physical realm. Charlotte Brontë, in her timeless novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), breathes life into the character of Bertha Mason, whose haunting presence resonates through the pages of literature to this day.

This manifestation of the 'mad woman', embodied through Bertha Mason, becomes a template for subsequent explorations of the female experience. With such prime examples in fiction, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar theorize the very distinct experience and the inner workings of the female writers in the nineteenth century in their 1979 revolutionary work *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. The authors highlight the struggles female writers face in expressing their voices and asserting their identities in a predominantly patriarchal literary landscape. 'The mad woman in the attic', hence, represents the societal constraints imposed on women which leads to the ostracization of freethinking women. The concept underscores the prevailing skepticism and societal refusal to acknowledge the credibility of women deemed 'mad', perpetuating a narrative that discredits their perspectives and undermines their agency.

Expanding the lens to encompass diverse literary landscapes, Soudamini Malo of Shawkat Osman's *Soudamini Malo* and Moll White of Joseph Addison's essay 'On Witchcraft – Story of Moll White' emerge as emblematic figures. Parallel to the thematic resonance encapsulated by Bertha Mason, these characters embody the recurring trope of lone women who are pushed to the periphery of society. Notably, they transcend the conventional portrayal of the mad woman as spectral entities, eliciting a complex amalgamation of pity and fear due to their unconventional circumstances and the ostensibly mystical powers attributed to them – a dimension to their character seemingly elusive as these solitary women are assumed to be weak and witless.

This paper endeavors to undertake a comprehensive analysis of Addison's Moll, who is a 17th century English woman, juxtaposed against the contextual backdrop of Osman's Soudamini, who lives in the 20th century Indian Subcontinent. Despite the temporal and socio-temporal difference, the paper seeks

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to unveil the parallels in living conditions and societal treatment of these characters, sharing thematic threads that transcend cultural and historical divides.

A 'Man-less' Existence

The French critical theorist's Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory questions the 'phallogocentrism' of western language which defines the female as lacking male organs and, therefore, assumes an innate inferior position of women. 'Phallo-' represents male-centric dominance and 'logocentrism' emphasizes the supremacy of speech and written language. Women, by this definition, are missing physical and mental aspects that their male counterparts have, indicating them to be incomplete or lacking. As language plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions, influencing cultural norms, and constructing social hierarchies, these structure privileges masculine values, marginalizing and subjugating alternative perspectives. Hence, Derrida points to these hidden biases embedded in language, deconstructing the systemic bias.

In both the short story and the essay, the practical implications of Derrida's phallogocentrism theory come to light as we witness the harrowing experiences of Soudamini and Moll. Both the characters are targeted by avaricious men and an amorally pious and selectively extremist society that is blinded by superstition and prejudices and are seeking scapegoats to bear the consequences of their actions. Moll White and Soudamini Malo have in common the absence of male relatives in life, particularly a husband. Despite being wealthy, Soudamini Malo becomes vulnerable after her husband's death and not before. Osman's commentary on the trope that equates women with property, portraying the unguarded, 'man-less' woman as more valuable than her possessions, is apparent when the predatory men of the village target not only Soudamini but also her wealth. With the only man in her life now gone, she is depicted as an unguarded treasure trove. Those same men feel threatened when Soudamini adopts a son, reinforcing the idea that a young boy commands more respect than a grown woman and must be present in her life to safeguard her.

Osman's secondary narrator, Nasir Molla initially praises the youth and strength of Soudamini. However, he later notes, "অবশ্য সৌদামিনীর হাতে কয়েকটা লোক ছিল" (Osman, 1984, p. 3) [Though Soudamini had the help of a few men.] The crucial detail that Nasir Molla fails to take into account is that Soudamini has in her possession a shotgun that she is capable of using herself, showcasing her capability to defend herself without relying on the assistance of other men. Nasir's oversight depicts the stereotypical assumption that a woman's strength and resilience must be supplemented by male support, disregarding the agency and competence that women may inherently possess.

Similarly, while Moll's marital status remains ambiguous, the narrative implies that her ostracization could be averted with the presence of a husband or son. This exploration unveils the societal norms deeply ingrained in cultural constructs, shedding light on the complex intersectionality of gender, power, and societal expectations.

Men of Reason

Both Osman and Addison's primary narrators, Nasir Molla and The Spectator, are men of reason, compelling the readers to trust their accounts and opinions. The narrators embody rationality and carry an air of authority and objectivity, creating an expectation of unbiased analysis and shaping the readers' understanding of the events and ideas presented. The choice of male narrators, whether deliberate or not, with the writers being male, reflects the societal norms where men are deemed the epitome of rationality. At the same time, this invites reflection on the role of gender in shaping perceptions of rationality.

A man of law by profession, Osman's Nasir Molla is critical of the British Mission in the Indian subcontinent and is aware of human rights and the ulterior motives behind the British Mission of spreading Christianity among the people who are primarily followers of Hinduism and Islam. He has nothing but good words for Jagadish Malo, the late husband of Soudamini, who was cunning enough to deceive the English "lords" to earn an easier life. However, Nasir has no criticism about him despite Jagadish's intention of remarrying as Soudamini was blamed for not being able to bear children. It is up to debate if Nasir offers no criticism of Jagadish out of respect for a deceased person or because he is a man and of his race. He

refrains from being critical about a man who was of the same position as he is. However, he assumes and pays heed to gossip when Soudamini is accused of poisoning Jagadish, blaming her for his sudden death. He is critical of Soudamini's assumed action even though he has no proof of it: “এসব ক্ষেত্রে কোনো মেয়ে কি করে, বোঝা দায়। কিন্তু তুমি বলছো স্বামীকে হত্যা করবে- তা অনুমান করা মুশকিল. মুশকিল কিছুই নয়” (Osman, 1984, p. 3) [You never know what a woman might do in such a situation. But you may say it is impossible to assume that someone would kill her husband. Nothing is impossible.] It shows that he is confident in Soudamini's assumed crime whereas Jagadish's obvious illicit work is written off as cleverness.

Addison's essay starts with the assertion, “There are some Opinions in which a Man should stand Neuter, without engaging his Assent to one side or the other. Such a hovering Faith as this, which refuses to settle upon any Determination, is absolutely necessary to a Mind that is careful to avoid Errors and Prepossessions. When the Arguments press equally on both sides in Matters that are indifferent to us, the safest Method is to give up ourselves to neither.” The topic being women being accused of witchcraft, the narrator – being a man of intellect – washes his hands off the matter at the very beginning. The thought that such issues might be too trivial to occupy a man's mind is perhaps also insinuated.

The readers are reassured that the narrator's opinion will not be inflicted on them. But as Addison's essay proceeds, the narrator, much like Nasir, is clear about his Pontius Pilate-esque position – confident of his neutrality yet providing reasons to entice the reader to take a ‘rational’ stance. He makes sure to let the reader know that he is of clear judgement and a man of reason, which can be found in the aforementioned lines and in the following ones: “I endeavor to suspend my belief till I hear more certain accounts.” (Addison, 1711, p. 33) Very meticulously, he establishes trust, leading the readers to view his judgement as accurate. Hence, a woman's story is told and distributed through the lens and judgement of a man, revealing the nuanced interplay between neutrality, persuasion, and the gendered perspective embedded in the storytelling.

Addison's Sir Roger, despite being a Knight and a man of high position, entertains the possibility of Moll White being a witch as he points out her broomstick and tabby cat to the Spectator. The villagers bring her to him for “making children spit pins and giving maids the nightmare.” He further secures his position as “justice of peace” as he informs the Spectator of saving Moll from the villagers when they wanted to toss “her into a pond” and try “experiments with her”, proving how vicious a society can be to a lone woman while acquiring a mighty position for a seemingly kind Knight. The irony lies in the Knight being “puzzled about the old woman” which accounts for his inability to understand her condition.

The reality experienced by someone with schizophrenia is challenging to comprehend for individuals with stable mental health. Gilbert and Guber, in accordance with this, analyze the female perception of reality as different from the standardized male perspective. This they term the ‘schizophrenia of authorship.’ Rather than conforming to the conventional standards, post-structuralist writers created this literary canon of the madwoman to represent this schizophrenic approach to their craft. In alignment with this, the male characters in both texts, despite insisting to be intelligent men, fail to comprehend Moll's reality and Soudamini's nuanced intentions and emotions. The question arises whether this dynamic reinforces established societal norms or instigates a discourse challenging prevailing perspectives.

Outcasts still Victims of Male Gaze?

In a close Lane as I pursued my journey,
I spy'd a wrinkled Hag, with Age grown double,
Picking dry Sticks, and mumbling to herself.
Her Eyes with scalding Rheum were gall'd and red,
Cold Palsy shook her Head; her Hands seem'd wither'd;
And on her crooked Shoulders had she wrap'd
The tatter'd Remnants of an old striped Hanging,
Which served to keep her Carcase from the Cold:
So there was nothing of a Piece about her.
Her lower Weeds were all o'er coarsely patch'd
With diff'rent-colour'd Rags, black, red, white, yellow,

And seem'd to speak Variety of Wretchedness.

This haunting poem, cited by the Spectator, describes the wretched physical state of Moll White. On the other hand, Soudamini Malo's physical attributes and "beauty" are described meticulously at every stage of her womanhood. Ironically, Nasir Molla omits any descriptors for her when recounting her story during the time when Jagadish was still alive. However, as soon as Nasir's narrative progresses to the point where the husband has met his end, an abrupt shift occurs, and Nasir starts describing Soudamini's appearance with phrases such as *তখনও দেহ আছে* [she still had her body] and *শরীর গৌর আর মুখ সুন্দর* [fair body and a beautiful face].

Albeit this sudden inclusion of various descriptors presses on the fact that she was vulnerable because not only did she lack a male presence in her life, but her beauty and youth also became highlighted, which would attract the attention of predatory men. However, as Soudamini grows older, a poignant transformation occurs, and no more descriptors of her physical beauty can be found in the text. Predatory men now redirect their attention solely towards her wealth. Speaking of Soudamini's brother-in-law, the narrator says, "বিধবা বৌদির দিকে নজর পড়া স্বাভাবিক। ভুল বললাম, বৌদি নয়, সম্পত্তির দিকে।" (Osman, 1984, p. 3) [It is normal to be attracted to the widowed sister-in-law. My mistake, not the sister-in-law, but her wealth.]

On the other hand, Moll White's body is described as a "carcass". Phrases such as "wrinkled Hag, with age grown double," "mumbling to herself," "eyes with scalding rheum," "cold palsy," "crooked shoulders" are used as descriptors. To analyze the reason of the deliberate absence of Moll's physical description, the same method can be applied. It is because of her advanced age and her haggard, pitiful appearance that she is not deemed worthy of a detailed physical description. In stark contrast to Soudamini, Moll's description does not warrant an emphasis on physical details. She does not attract attention because of her beauty or wealth, but for the perceived madness and alleged witchery. This narrative choice highlights the prevailing socio-cultural ideology that a woman is either valued for her beauty and subjected to male surveillance or she is old and perceived as a threat to society.

The Silent Protagonists

Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her 1911 book *The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture* talks of the pervasive practice of viewing the world through male perspective or inflicting a male-centric perspective on worldview and terms it 'androcentrism'. This tendency involves the influence of male viewpoints on societal norms, thereby shaping the prevailing cultural narrative. Gilman's point is to highlight the need for critical examination and acknowledgement of the inherent biases that arise from a male-oriented worldview and inflicting this view on women.

Both the short story and the essay center around and are named after female protagonists but, with the narrators being men, their stories are told through the male perspective. Osman and Addison offer their commentary and criticism of societies that alienate lone women. Ironically, both the female protagonists of their texts are silent for the most part. Rather than unveiling the enigmatic aura surrounding the protagonists, the absence of the female perspective leaves it to the reader's imagination. In both works, the female protagonists succumb to the fate the society inflicts on and decides for lone women, fostering a sense of mystery and prompting readers to interpret the untold aspects of their experiences.

Although Soudamini shares her silent, mysterious, loyal-with-a-murderous-streak characteristics with a *femme fatale*, yet, when she is finally given a dialogue to reprimand the men attempting to separate her from her adopted son, her expression of strength and rage is compared to the Hindu Trimvirate God, Shiva. Describing Soudamini, the narrator says, "সৌদামিনী চোখ থেকে শিবের মতো আগুন ছড়িয়ে..." (Osman, 1984, p. 4) [Fire spread from her eyes like Shiva's.] This choice

of comparison avoids the common and potentially more fitting parallel with Kali – the enraged Durga.

In Nasir's detailed narrative about Soudamini, her own perspective remains notably unexplored, proven by the lack of dialogues attributed to her. When she finally speaks, it is to show her intense emotions, emphasizing her rage and strength. Moll White, on the other hand, is solely shown in moments of disorientation and vulnerability, reduced to begging. She does not have any direct dialogue as the narrative revolves around Sir Roger's observations of Moll and the superstitions and beliefs associated with her.

The Social Construction of the Lone Mad Woman

While there exists the Gilbert and Gubar's 20th century concept of 'the mad woman in the attic,' there also exists a parallel narrative of the mad woman living at or pushed to the periphery of society. Freud explores defense mechanism that is an unconscious response to the superego. It presents itself through avoidance, selective memory, denial as a way to suppress or negotiate the unwanted, thereby alleviating anxiety. When this mechanism fails to function properly, it may leave a psychological pattern which is core issue as seen in stories as Earnest Hemingway's 'Cat in the Rain' and Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper.' In the first, the female protagonist's suppressed desires and unmet needs manifest in subtle but poignant ways that the reader may miss. Similarly, in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' the protagonist's repression escalates into a haunting descent into madness.

Jacques Lacan's the Real, is distinct from reality. It stands for the raw and unfiltered experience that resists symbols and languages, making it impossible to capture or articulate them. Lacan's trauma chain discusses the inability to comprehend this Real, which leads to dysfunction and results in violence, madness, etc. (Lacan, 1957). This concept is illustrated in scenarios where an innocent person is sent to jail and fails to find a reason or make sense of the situation, end up becoming mentally ill and resort to extreme actions such as killing their inmates.

Moll's "lips were observed always in motion" indicating utterance of incantations. The villagers always found her stumbling on cross-shaped sticks. No mistake in church was given a pass as they "concluded that she was saying her prayers backwards." Nobody would interact with her. She was blamed for every failed task. The suppressed fear and trauma from such treatment and accusation of witchcraft can be blamed for her disoriented mind. It is because such mistreatment that some women were compelled to distrust their own sanity and believed themselves to be witches when they were, in fact, social pariahs. The Spectator acknowledges this dynamic, clearing his stance, when he writes "the poor wretch that is the innocent occasion of so many evils begins to be frightened at herself, and sometimes confesses secret commerce."

Similarly, Soudamini is driven to madness as well by opportunistic men who selectively invoked the laws of the land only when it benefitted them. Before her death, Soudamini is described to have lost her sanity, invoking every name of God, reflecting the profound impact of societal exploitation on her mental state. Both Moll and Soudamini's end showcase the tragic consequences of societal oppression of marginalized women. They embody the women existing on the edges of our society who are neither left in peace nor integrated into mainstream society.

Conclusion

The last paragraph of the essay sums the whole theme neatly up, evincing society's tendency of ostracizing lone women – who might otherwise be self-sufficient and independent- and driving them mad. "I hear there is scarce a village in England that has not a Moll White in it. When an old

woman begins to dote, and grow chargeable to a parish, she is generally turned into a witch,” writes Addison. Represented by two male authors of two very different cultures, the two texts being from different centuries, still share the same condition of the mad woman, which leads us to believe that much discourse is required in this area.

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