

## **Borderline Personality Disorder, a New Site of Revolt in *The Edible Woman* and *The Vegetarian***

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### **Abstract**

The diversity and complexity of women and madness as a subject in English Literature gained much attention in the wake of feminism and post-colonialism. However, the representation of borderline cases among women in literature has surfaced as a popular subject only in the recent years. Many contemporary fictional works with feminist and psychological themes concentrate on female protagonists with borderline personality disorders for example eating and sleeping disorders, abandonment issues and compulsive behavior. The current research is an attempt to highlight the significance of this emerging narrative and to propose that it has become a new form of resistance within the feminist narrative. For this purpose, the paper critically analyses *The Edible Woman* (1969) by Margaret Atwood and *The Vegetarian* (1997) by Han Kang within the framework of psychological and feminist theories. The scope of this study is to evaluate the significance of BPD female characters (borderline personality disorder) as more impactful agents of change against the oppressive systems and societies.

Keywords: abjection, borderline personality disorders, feminism, patriarchal oppression, resistance, narrative

Literary canons like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and innumerable other works by female authors, Victorian to current times, furiously establish the 'mad woman' rhetoric as a narrative of resistance against the oppressive patriarchal system. The second wave of feminism paralleled with breakthroughs in psychiatry therefore many female writers appropriated the motif of 'female malady' to comment on the social injustice, repressive stereotypes and institutionalized exploitation of women. A long history of art and literature represented the unconventional and unruly woman as mad. "Basically, any behavior that was outside of the social norms was considered to be "madness"" (Matošević). In her essay, *Frailty, thy name is woman: Depictions of Female Madness* (2015, Julianna Little notes that, "Madness has been perceived for centuries metaphorically and symbolically as a feminine illness and continues to be gendered into the twenty-first century." (1) Consequently the Feminists by the twentieth century were able to perceive how 'female madness' is actually a 'historical label applied to female protest' and the literary madwoman was in fact the social deviant (3). As a result, just as male authors used the trope of madness until the end of nineteenth century, to silence the female narrative and to set the boundaries of social norms, many of the female authors employed the same trope to subvert the existing male narrative.

In nineteenth-century literature, madness became an important theme as an expression of suppressed rebellion; the image of the "madwoman" has mirrored the oppression of feminine potential, her symptoms seeming to critique the society that oppresses her. (Little 36)

This ensued a period of female authored works of mad narratives including asylum fiction and autobiographical works about maltreatment of people with mental illness during the nineteenth century. Even post-colonization feminist aimed to readdress the status of mad woman pioneered by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Women in the Attic*. Later on with the advent of the complex theories like 'doubly colonized self' and non-western feminism the image of mad woman drew more attention embodied in works of Morrison, Lessing and Bessie Head. The new parallels between the colonized Other and suppressed female 'other' became the key concept of the post-colonial fiction. Women like the diseased and the enslaved Other became the outsiders in the eyes of the jaundiced patriarchal societies. She was locked up, deprived of rights and silenced. It was realized that this new madwoman "suffers from "double colonization"". (Tyagi 45)

Therefore critics and authors celebrated the trope of female madness as an act of defiance and resistance as within the suppressive patriarchal system it was interpreted as their only voice and possible redemption. Although it is a visually dramatic and aesthetically shocking image, but this paper contests that there is no doubt that it worked as a dual device in the historical representation of women in literary narrative. At one hand women unshackled themselves from the hands of male dominance by refusing to comply with the ordained rules and stereotypes but at the same time madness confirmed the female's position as an outcast thereby strengthening the process of Othering by depriving them of language or degenerating their voice as unreliable narrative. Shoshana Felman in her book, *Writing and Madness: Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis*. (2003) recognizes this limitation of madness as narrative and warns that madness has become so "commonplace" that it's "sensationalized to the point of banality." (12)

Furthermore, in psychoanalysis the narrative is construed from the signifying ability of the being, the symbol or meaning making process that is language which shapes the Self and implements the law of Father. While the non-speaking being, Other or the order of the Mother is seen as annihilation of the Self. Silence itself is considered monolithic narrative which furthers the mutation of the mad woman and reduces her to a mere status of nonbeing. As we know, the nonbeing has little chance of becoming an active agent of change within the law of father, the order and system. Therefore there are, undeniably, certain confines of the madness narrative as “madness usually occupies a position of exclusion: it is the outside of a culture.” (Felman 13). This paper though, acknowledges the strength of madness as a narrative of revolt but it also proposes that the theme of female madness can be more improvised and studied as inclusive or inside of culture to voice the resistance of women against oppressive systems of patriarchy. For that purpose this paper moves on to an analysis of more complex and contemporary narrative of female madness and resistance, namely, the narratives of borderline cases.

The border line personality disorder are mental issues with certain social and psychological indicators that may seem similar to hysteria but are somehow more definite. These cases may bear cursors like eating disorders, insomnia, memory issues, anxiety, and obsessive compulsive disorder. ‘Women diagnosed with borderline personality disorder have affective, behavioural, interpersonal, self and cognitive dysregulation’ (Feigenbaum 51). This dysregulation is not only a reflective of the social systems but it is also a critique of its repressive and oppressive norms. There has been little or no awareness of the borderline personality disorders or BPD even as late as the previous

decade but with the rapid growth in psychiatry there has been a change in people's understanding of BPD. Many writers like Atwood, Munro and Lessing have lately portrayed female protagonists who are BPD cases. Even pop culture has developed powerful images of female Super heroes with bpd such as the Black Widow. Movie adaptations like *The Girl, Interrupted* and *The Girl on the Train*. All of which indicates a transfiguration of the psychological resistance from commonplace and 'exclusive' madness to specific and inclusive forms of it like BPD. The women in these modern fiction and non-fiction are breaking free from the choice of either/or. They reject the norms of patriarchal exploitation and propose a constant threat to the legitimized and systematic oppression of women. But instead of using the much exhausted trope of madness they employ a new and more multifarious form of revolt and resistance that originates from the narratives of border line cases.

BPD, like Hysteria and madness, is also a gender biased disease both in pathological and literary sense. N. Ntshingila quotes in a paper titled *Experiences of Women Living with Borderline Personality Disorder* that, 'Under normal circumstances women are affected by life's major changes such as marital problems, job changes, assumptions of major social roles and the evolution of an adult self during early and middle adulthood.' (Holm, Berg, & Severinsson 561).

This gendered illness thus provides contemporary feminist writers to employ the trope of bpd as the new narrative of resistance and revolt replacing the all or nothing choices women embodied in the madness narratives. These women with bpd are not completely mad but they are not entirely normal too, thus they stand on the borders of

the society or social order. They are the functional residents at the fringes and peripheries unlike the silenced and marginalized *Other*, the mad woman. Instead of accepting their expulsion from this symbolic order or the world of narrative they combat it from the peripheries of the society. They do not leave the society or accept abandonment as the only alternate by being silent or confined to attics and rooms. These women problematize the very notion of madness by showing some symptoms of irrational and still holding onto the rational Self. They are women of questionable whims, embarrassing sizes and strange desires. These women with borderline personality disorders bpd are the ‘Subjects’, in Kristevian sense, of the society and in that capacity they constantly question, engage and threaten the order of the society and the norms of patriarchy. Thus they defuse the boundaries of male social order and challenging the reductive narrative of self/ other, subject/ object binaries by becoming Subjects themselves. In order to understand the role of Abjection through borderline cases, this paper makes use of Julia Kristeva’s theory of Abjection proposed in her essay, *Powers of Horror*.

In her essay Julia Kristeva describes that abject is neither I, the subject nor is it object the Other it is not nothing too. ‘[t]he abject is not an object facing me, which I name or imagine ... The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I. (1) It is ‘a radically excluded’ entity that ‘draws me toward the place where meaning collapse’. (2) It is above all ambiguity. (9). ‘Subjects are what disturbs identity, systems, orders.(4) This ambiguity and disturbance is not only a challenge to the I, that is the male narrative or law of father but also a powerful form of revolt and redress. In this context the mad woman is the witch, the outcast and exile whereas

women with borderline cases are anomalies existing within the order of society that are never fully complying with its system. Their bodies and behaviors disturb the idea of the 'normal' woman and yet they function as wives and mothers or 'females'.

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva quotes Celine that '...these females can wreck the infinite...' (159) to point out the power of abjection in women such as a two-faced mother or a betraying beloved. Through the rejection of their stereotypical role these women can confuse even destroy the male ego even without an exclusive conflict. A woman who blatantly defies the norms becomes the Other, and one who subscribes to her gender role eventually loses her individuality whereas as an Abject woman deprives the male of his power to claim his own subjectivity since it is a correlative reality with respect to woman being the Object. The symbolic order, Subject/ object, remains suspended as long as she refuses to become part of the either one of the binaries. Kristeva postulates,

Owing to the ambiguous opposition I/Other, Inside/Out- side—an opposition that is vigorous but pervious, violent but uncertain—there are contents, "normally" unconscious in neurotics, that become explicit if not conscious in "borderline" patients' speeches and behavior. Such contents are often openly manifested through symbolic practices, without by the same token being integrated into the judging consciousness of those particular subjects. Since they make the conscious/unconscious distinction irrelevant, borderline subjects and their speech constitute propitious ground for a sublimating discourse ("aesthetic" or "mystical," etc.), rather than a scientific or rationalist one. (7)

Janet Wirth-Cauchon writes in, *Women and Borderline Personality Disorder: Symptoms and Stories*, that “the person diagnosed borderline is said to occupy: the ambiguous, vague and unstable region between sanity and madness.” (37) Like the Subjects they defy the power structures the right to name which is the “core element in social control” (37) thereby destroying the “taxonomic borderland” positioned between “reason and unreason” (38). Psychiatric discourse has been one of the main system through which women are “represented as Other” to the supposedly “rational human subject” (39) unlike madness which is constituted as “object”(40) in discourse, borderline personality disorder challenges “standardized definition” (78) signifying the existence of a shifting , uncertain and fragmented abjection. This “bewildering and irreconcilable” abject questions and breakdowns the hierarchical power structure. Therefore women with bpd are subjects who become powerful agents of change and challenge the limited and pre-defined roles in society.

*The Edible Woman (1969)* is a story of a young girl whose rational structured and conventional world starts to dissolve as she becomes extremely conscious of her Self-image. . Marian starts to display symptoms of food disorder, insomnia and nausea following her engagement to Peter who is a conventional man. She “consoled herself by getting drunk.” (3) Eventually she develops disgust with food and wonders “if I am getting anemia” (137), which is a key aspect of abjection as Kristeva points out , “ Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (2) In psychiatry,

The term ‘eating disorder’ can refer to any abnormal eating pattern



that negatively affects a person's physical or mental health, usually involving either severe restriction of food intake or excessive overeating. Environmental factors such as parental interaction at an early age, child abuse, social isolation and peer pressure are all believed to play a role in the development of eating disorders." (Feldman, 2010)

She finds herself oscillating between the two worlds and therefore at this site of fear her abjection and bpd originates. One of the world is socially approved as it is based on the norms of patriarchal society to which she belongs and where she is engaged to Peter, a "conservative" man (77) who knows that women are "uncivilized" and a sin is "unforgivable" if it is "public".(85) Her idea of self is shaken as she starts realizing that she is leaving "the big decisions up to him" whereas she didn't expect this from the person she knew she was. It made her feel "exhausted" although she knows she has "to learn to compromise" (137). She is caught in web of utterances made by Clara "a bitter house wife" (40) who lets herself be treated like a "*thing!*" (39) and "had no practicality" or control over her "mundane aspects of life" and her own body" (37). Clara and Peter represents the orthodox values but it makes her feel "unsettled" (46) to comply with or appreciate their choices. She feels "caught, set down and shaken" (87) although she tries "to move" but she finds herself "stuck" (91). On the other side, people like Ainsley, Duncan and Len who resist the social norms seem to snub her for "rejecting" her femininity (95). Marian differentiates herself from Ainsley because she believes "Ainsley isn't respectable, whereas I am. It probably the way we dress" (8). Although she doesn't know how to "justify" her own "opposition" to Ainsley's ideologies yet

she shuns other “people’s prejudices” and society at large (44). Ainsley believes that “mother-child” relationship is natural and “birth is legitimate” (44), whereas marriage is a social norm. She begins to lose her sense of Self as she becomes more and more obsessed with her Self-image which is a pronounced feature of bpd in Peter’s world she is condemned for her “irresponsible gaiety”(71) whereas, in the other world she is considered “Prude” (44) . Eventually she reaches to a breaking point where her Self-image dissolves. She is an embodiment of abjection as she is stuck at the borderline of the two worlds. In an article *Letters*, Sarah K.Cahn informs that,

Borderline abjection also influences interpersonal and kinship relationships; it is common for borderlines to have patterns of unstable relationships and painful fallings-out, often informed by an inability to control powerful emotions. I contend that the abjection of the borderline does not render these affective knowledges useless or somehow less ‘valid’; rather, they encourage us to consider knowledge in different, more complex ways (84).

This experience as an abject therefore, provides Marian an opportunity to re-address her ideologies and life. Although in the end, we do not see her as an unruly liberated woman but she does not succumb to the stereotypical femininity as she defies the confinement of being a traditional wife and stops “thinking in terms of either/or”, she embraces the fact that “the thing is wholeness” (43). She redefines her life which is a culminating moment where she bakes a cake with a female form on it. This changes her own self-image and she says “Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular

again. I found my own situation more interesting than his” (350). We see her stare at the “blank eyes” and feel “she was going to be sick” (325) of the woman on the cake. She realizes that “the image was completed” and then she questions “All that work had gone into the lady and now what would happen to her?”. She tells it to the lady that she looked “Very appetizing. And that’s what will happen to you; that’s what you get for being food`. Her fate had been decided” (342) but once she cuts the cake, she feels “her body had cut itself off” (325). Even Ainsley is left shocked by her action as she gulps “the full implication of what she saw” she exclaims in horror “You’re rejecting your femininity!” (345).

This leaves the room for a new system, a reform through claiming of the lost voice. By eating the face of the woman on the cake, she regains her Self, destroying the existing consumer production order. This symbolic act does not only mark her defiance of the male order but also obliterates the natural boundaries of self and other. Marian rejects the system of order that “demarcate ‘acceptable’ norms of femininity; while emotionality and dependency are normatively ‘feminine’ traits, the unstable emotionality and desperate dependence of the borderline create a line of transgression which is pathologized (Cahn 81)

Sandra Harding’s standpoint theory exists in relation to dominant epistemic modalities. That is, in a hierarchized society, those ‘at the top’ organize the world around them; as such, knowledge of and by marginalized groups can offer a more complete picture of the workings of any given social world because the experiences and knowledges of marginalized selves render visible new knowledges, new problems,

and new solutions (24). This effect of abjection creates “a place where the borderline’s knowledge can be held as valid, in spite, or perhaps because of, this abjection by ‘asserting BPD as the basis of a distinctive epistemology that constitutes a valuable form of counter-knowledge’ to dominant male narrative (85). Hence, this analysis pursue what Sarah Redikopp proposes that to register and record this borderline narrative is “a task fundamentally feminist, fundamentally radical and wholly necessary.”(73)

*The Vegetarian (2007)* is a South Korean novel authored by Han Kang. It traces the story of Yeong-hye, an averagely talented graphic artist and an ‘unremarkable’ wife to a well-established businessman. She decides to stop eating meat which proves a life changing experience for her as an individual but most of all as a woman belonging to a traditional Korean family. Although this seems like a very personal choice and yet the novel explores how it becomes a rejection of her culturally defined role as a Korean wife and daughter. This resolution of Yeong-hye is a result of a nightmarishly bloody dream she has but it complicates her relationships with her family and society at large. So much so, that she becomes an enigma for her parents and husband who seem to have no choice but to abandon her in the end. The novel raises questions about the stereotypical expectations from women like Yeong-hye and reassess the possibilities offered by the societies to such women. Yeong hye is a classic case of borderline personality disorder for she expresses many pronounced symptoms of bpd such as nausea, food repulsion and insomnia and in later stages even hallucinations.

Yeong hye has a very passive and docile personality that seems to suit Mr. Cheong, the man she gets married to. He proclaims at the very onset of the novel

that, “passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground” (9) although he found in her no “special attraction” but he was contented that there were no “particular drawbacks” (10). He had “inferiority complex” so he always intended to marry “the most run-of-the-mill woman in the world” because the “women who were pretty, intelligent, strikingly sensual, the daughters of rich families” threatened him as they may have proved disruptive for his “carefully ordered existence.” (ibid). In their five years “smooth marriage” she proves to be a woman of “few words” and no whims at all. This passivity of Yeong hye’s character is a conformity of her gender role in the social order and a guarantee of her husband’s superiority.

The narrative in the first part of the novel is ‘first person’ which further emphasize the Subject/object order and hierarchy of the patriarchal society. This order is in accordance with the psycholinguistic Symbolic order of meaning making, the law of father. Later however, she starts defying her role as an “ordinary wife” (10) by creating dysregulation in the pattern of narrative through her ‘dream’ narration interjected in between the first person narrative of Mr. Cheong. She repeatedly defines that her reason for becoming a vegetarian is a dream that confuses Mr. Cheong as an extremely irrational thing. He is haunted by the clarity of her voice and strangeness of her statement, “I had a dream—she’d said that twice now.” (14), and thus keeps on reverting to it. In psycholinguists dream, being part of subconscious, is the law of the mother. Therefore Mr. Cheong feels his reality stands challenged by this dream whereas he could have accepted any other rational and traditional reason such as “Health reason,

for example...or religious, perhaps?" (20), for her Vegetarianism. He is embarrassed and shocked by this 'unreasonable' 'other side' of his wives personality.

She becomes an ambiguous and complicated individual rather than a mechanical being by acting unpredictably. She wastes all the meat stored in the fridge on the pretext of her dream, she does not provide her husband the assistance in his day to day routine nor does she iron his clothes or sees him off to work. Her husband is thrown off balance by this irrational behavior and her serene expressions, clear voice and disheveled hair. (ibid). He is only able to snub her, in complete state of shock he says "Are you crazy?" and "Have you lost your mind?" (13). He is completely unable to perceive the situation as his otherwise conventional wife refuses to fit in her ordained role so he ends up announcing "You're insane! You've completely lost it."(14). This erratic pattern of behavioral changes symbolize Yeong-hye's growing bpd. She grows "thinner", "practically stopped sleeping" and is "actively avoiding sex", (16) all of which are seen as "obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes" (15) and rebellion against her social role as a woman. Whereas these are the most prominent features of borderline personality disorder.

Yeong hye's father, the most unapologetic "patriarchal man" tries "force feeding" her some meat whereupon she attempts suicide. (23) As deduced from the research Ntshingila states that among the borderline cases in women "it was evident that there were childhood experiences of living in an unsafe space, related to unhealthy family dynamics, boundary violations..." (1) The role of Yeong hye's father is that of an aggressive patriarch and she has been 'only victim of their father's beatings.' (89).

the novel shows several scenes of boundary violation including Yeong-hye's rape by her husband thereby establishing her case as a bpd. This marks as the tripping point for Yeong-hye. Despite her "hysteria, delusion, weak nerves" (17) Mr Cheong is reluctant to accept her mental abnormality and keeps on avoiding the truth. "There's nothing wrong with her, I told myself, this kind of thing isn't even a real illness. I resisted the temptation to indulge in introspection. This strange situation had nothing to do with me." (17) The most ordinary woman becomes utterly unknowable for him. (15) which scares him.

Yeong-Hye rediscovers herself at the verge of defilement of self. Food motive becomes central. She loses her role and status as wife, daughter and eventually as human being. Through this process of effacement of self, she engages with stereotype related to her mind, body and identity. The persistence dialogic exchange does not die with her, on the contrary, it seems to transmute itself into her sister's idea of self or subjectivity. Her sister starts to question her value, status and existence in the society. She lingers on the borders of abjection too. It also highlights the hidden patterns of hypocritical system and argue instead of escaping or debunking the existing violence of system.

To conclude both the text share the bpd in women signified through food disorder, insomnia and depression and anxiety through which both the texts provide a feminist critique of patriarchal society. But unlike mad women narrative, here the psychological aspect and narrative are not silenced instead they disrupt the language of power and stigmatization of mental illness. The two narrative insists on perpetual dialogic interaction between the identities, roles and norms by positioning the female

characters at the stand point of Abjection. Thus this narrative holds a chance of a positive reform thereby, making the revolt a powerful tool to bring about a revolutionary change. “While abjection originates as a psychic process it affects all aspects of social and cultural life; it ‘is not a stage “passed through” but a perpetual process that plays a central role within the project of subjectivity” (Tyler 2009, 80). Through this constantly shifting subjectivity women will be able to “expose”, rewrite and resist the patriarchal oppression. Catherine Clement in her book *The Newly Born Woman* (1975) acknowledges that bpd women are the abjects of the social order “And more than any others women bizarrely embody this group of anomalies showing the cracks in an overall system” (7) but she also highlights the power invested in the women through this new madness as it threatens the restrictive and suppressive hierarchies structured in the correlative binaries. They do not have to choose between the two extremes, the mother and witch, instead their identities as bpd are more liberating albeit marginal. So to establish the relationship of the boundary with the center of system Clement cites Strauss, “Their peripheral position in relation to a local system does not prevent their being an integral part of the total system in the same way that this local system is.” (8) “Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes and it is that zone we must try to remember today.”(6) This paper therefore is an attempt to explore and stress the importance of the representation of borderline personality disordered women in literature to open up new avenues of discussion regarding their status in society. It is high time that the more complex female subjectivity gets represented in art to combat the repression and stigmatization of female diversity.



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