

Madness as Feminine Language: *Écriture Féminine* and the Politics of Transgression in *Wuthering Heights*

Ashifa.S, III BA English, Department of English, Nehru Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. Malathi.R, Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, Nehru Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. drmalathirajendiran@gmail.com

Abstract

Victorian literature frequently associates female emotional excess with madness, reflecting broader patriarchal anxieties surrounding women who resist social expectations. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* presents Catherine Earnshaw as a figure whose emotional intensity and fragmented identity destabilize conventional notions of femininity, rationality, and domestic order. This paper examines Catherine's madness through Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, arguing that her psychological fragmentation functions not as mere instability but as a form of feminine expression that exceeds patriarchal language. Catherine's refusal to conform to fixed social roles transforms madness into a transgressive mode of communication through which suppressed desire and identity emerge. Drawing upon feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, this study explores how female madness in Victorian literature often reflects resistance against structures of repression and control. The paper further argues that Brontë anticipates later feminist concerns regarding female subjectivity and bodily expression by portraying madness as both protest and consequence within patriarchal society. Through Catherine Earnshaw, *Wuthering Heights* reveals how emotional fragmentation becomes a site of resistance against social systems that attempt to discipline feminine identity.

Key Words: *Wuthering Heights*, madness, feminism, *écriture féminine*, transgression, Victorian literature

1. Introduction

Madness in literature has rarely functioned as a purely medical condition. More often, it emerges as a cultural and political label imposed upon individuals who exceed the emotional, behavioural, or ideological boundaries established by society. Within nineteenth-century patriarchal culture, women were particularly vulnerable to such classifications. Victorian ideals of femininity emphasised obedience, restraint, emotional moderation, and domesticity, constructing the "ideal woman" as passive and self-sacrificing. Women who resisted these expectations or expressed intense desire, anger, or independence were frequently perceived as irrational, unstable, or morally dangerous. Female madness therefore became deeply connected to broader anxieties surrounding feminine autonomy and social transgression.

Literature of the Victorian period repeatedly reflects this tension between female subjectivity and patriarchal control. Women characters whose emotions exceed socially acceptable limits are often punished through isolation, psychological fragmentation, or death. Madness, within these narratives, functions not merely as individual instability but as a cultural response to women who challenge restrictive gender structures.

As Elaine Showalter observes, the history of female madness is inseparable from the historical regulation of women's behaviour and emotional expression (Showalter 3). Psychological disturbance is therefore frequently represented not as inherent weakness, but as a consequence of repression and confinement.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* presents one of the most complex explorations of feminine transgression in Victorian literature through the character of Catherine Earnshaw. Catherine resists fixed definitions of femininity and refuses complete submission to domestic expectations. Her emotional intensity repeatedly destabilises the social structures surrounding her, particularly those associated with class, marriage, and patriarchal order. Rather than embodying the calm refinement expected of Victorian womanhood, Catherine expresses contradiction, excess, passion, and psychological unrest. Her eventual breakdown is often interpreted as emotional instability or personal failure; however, feminist literary criticism allows her madness to be reconsidered as a form of resistance against restrictive social systems.

This paper examines Catherine Earnshaw's madness through Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, a theory that challenges patriarchal language structures by foregrounding feminine modes of expression associated with fluidity, multiplicity, emotional intensity, and bodily experience. Cixous argues that dominant forms of language are shaped through masculine rationality, leaving little space for female subjectivity and desire (Cixous 879). Through this theoretical framework, Catherine's fragmented speech, unstable identity, and emotional excess can be interpreted not as meaningless hysteria but as a form of feminine language that exceeds patriarchal logic.

The paper further argues that Catherine's madness functions simultaneously as rebellion and consequence within Victorian patriarchal society. Her psychological fragmentation emerges from the conflict between emotional truth and the restrictive expectations imposed upon women through domesticity, marriage, and social respectability. Drawing upon feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, this study explores how *Wuthering Heights* transforms female madness into a site of transgression, resistance, and suppressed self-expression. By portraying madness as a response to patriarchal confinement rather than simple psychological collapse, Brontë anticipates later feminist concerns regarding identity, embodiment, and feminine subjectivity.

Ultimately, *Wuthering Heights* reveals how patriarchal society attempts to discipline women whose emotions and desires exceed accepted boundaries. Catherine Earnshaw's madness remains significant not because it confirms Victorian fears surrounding feminine instability, but because it exposes the violence underlying the structures that attempt to silence her.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Feminist Interpretations of Female Madness

Critical discussions surrounding female madness in nineteenth-century literature frequently examine the relationship between psychological instability and patriarchal repression. Early interpretations of women's madness often approached it as moral weakness or emotional excess, reinforcing Victorian assumptions regarding femininity and irrationality. However, later feminist criticism challenged these readings by arguing that madness often emerges as a response to social confinement rather than an inherent defect within women themselves.

Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* remains one of the foundational studies connecting madness with the historical regulation of women. Showalter argues that female insanity has frequently been shaped by cultural

expectations that restrict women's emotional, intellectual, and social autonomy (Showalter 3). Women who resisted accepted gender roles were often pathologised and silenced through medical and social discourse. Madness therefore functions not merely as illness but as a mechanism through which patriarchal society disciplines feminine transgression.

Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpret female madness in literature as symbolic rebellion against patriarchal confinement. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they argue that nineteenth-century women writers repeatedly employed images of madness to express suppressed rage, frustration, and resistance (Gilbert and Gubar 78). From this perspective, the "madwoman" becomes a figure who exposes the violence underlying social expectations imposed upon women.

These feminist approaches are particularly relevant to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, where Catherine Earnshaw's emotional fragmentation reflects tensions between female desire and patriarchal structures of domesticity and social order.

2.2 *Écriture Féminine* and Feminine Expression

Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* provides an important theoretical framework for understanding feminine expression beyond patriarchal language systems. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous argues that dominant forms of language and writing are structured through masculine logic, hierarchy, and rationality, leaving limited space for female subjectivity and bodily experience (Cixous 879). *Écriture féminine* emerges as a mode of expression associated with fluidity, contradiction, multiplicity, and emotional intensity.

Rather than adhering to rigid structures of reason, feminine writing destabilises linear meaning and challenges fixed identity. Cixous encourages women to "write through their bodies," allowing suppressed desires and experiences to enter language (Cixous 886). Such writing often appears fragmented or excessive because it exceeds the limits established by patriarchal discourse.

Although *Wuthering Heights* predates twentieth-century feminist theory, Catherine Earnshaw embodies several characteristics associated with *écriture féminine*. Her speech repeatedly moves between contradiction, emotional excess, and unstable self-definition. Catherine refuses complete separation between self and desire, most famously declaring, "I am Heathcliff" (Brontë 82). Her language destabilises rational identity and instead expresses emotional truth through fragmentation and intensity.

Through Catherine, Brontë anticipates later feminist concerns regarding language, embodiment, and feminine subjectivity. Madness therefore becomes not only psychological disturbance but also an alternative form of expression that resists patriarchal order.

2.3 Patriarchal Domesticity and Female Confinement

Victorian domestic ideology positioned women within restrictive social roles centred upon obedience, marriage, and emotional restraint. Feminist literary critics have frequently examined how nineteenth-century fiction reflects the tensions produced by these expectations. Women were expected to embody moral purity and domestic stability while suppressing personal ambition, anger, and desire.

Nancy Armstrong argues that domestic fiction often functioned as a cultural mechanism that shaped acceptable models of femininity and female behaviour (Armstrong 5). Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that women characters who fail to conform to domestic ideals are frequently punished within literary narratives through isolation, madness, or death (Gilbert and Gubar 90).

In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Earnshaw's psychological conflict emerges from her inability to reconcile personal desire with the social expectations attached to marriage and class. Her decision to marry Edgar Linton reflects the pressures of social mobility and respectability rather than emotional fulfilment. Thrushcross Grange, associated with refinement and domestic order, gradually becomes a space of emotional suffocation for Catherine.

Brontë portrays domesticity not as stability but as confinement. Catherine's longing for *Wuthering Heights* symbolises a desire to escape the restrictive structures imposed upon feminine identity. Her madness exposes the emotional violence underlying Victorian expectations surrounding womanhood and marriage.

3. Catherine Earnshaw and the Language of Madness

Catherine Earnshaw's madness cannot be understood merely as emotional instability or individual collapse. Throughout *Wuthering Heights*, her fragmented speech, contradictory emotions, and unstable sense of identity reveal a struggle against the limitations imposed upon her by patriarchal society. Catherine's psychological breakdown emerges from the conflict between personal desire and the rigid structures of class, domesticity, and femininity that attempt to define her existence.

One of the most significant moments in the novel occurs when Catherine declares, "I am Heathcliff" (Brontë 82). This statement disrupts conventional notions of identity grounded in individuality and rational separation. Catherine refuses to perceive herself as a socially contained subject, instead expressing a fluid and interconnected identity that exceeds patriarchal logic. Her language becomes emotional rather than rational, destabilising fixed categories of selfhood.

Through the lens of *écriture féminine*, Catherine's fragmented expression acquires deeper significance. Her emotional excess and contradictory speech reflect a form of feminine language that cannot be fully articulated within patriarchal discourse. Rather than functioning as meaningless hysteria, her madness becomes an attempt to communicate desires and emotions that remain culturally suppressed.

During her illness, Catherine repeatedly recalls childhood memories and longs for *Wuthering Heights*, rejecting the domestic identity associated with Thrushcross Grange. Her inability to recognise herself within the mirror symbolises alienation from the socially constructed role imposed upon her as Edgar Linton's wife. Madness therefore becomes both resistance and fragmentation: a refusal to submit entirely to patriarchal expectations, even at the cost of psychological destruction.

4. Transgression, Desire, and Patriarchal Violence

Catherine Earnshaw's madness is inseparable from her transgression of Victorian gender expectations. Within nineteenth-century patriarchal society, femininity was closely associated with emotional restraint, obedience, and domestic stability. Women were expected to suppress excessive passion in favour of social respectability and marital duty. Catherine's character repeatedly resists these expectations through her intense emotionality, refusal of submission, and rejection of fixed social identity.

Her relationship with Heathcliff represents a form of desire that cannot be contained within the structures of class and domesticity. Unlike her marriage to Edgar Linton, which reflects social ambition and economic security, Catherine's connection with Heathcliff exists beyond the logic of Victorian propriety. Their bond destabilises distinctions between self and other, civilisation and wilderness, reason and emotional excess. As a

result, Catherine becomes a threatening figure within patriarchal order because her desires exceed socially acceptable boundaries.

The conflict between emotional truth and social expectation ultimately produces Catherine's psychological fragmentation. Although she chooses to marry Edgar Linton for reasons of status and refinement, she remains emotionally attached to Heathcliff in ways that disrupt her domestic role. Her inability to reconcile these conflicting identities contributes directly to her breakdown. Rather than presenting this conflict as personal failure alone, Brontë reveals the destructive consequences of a society that forces women to divide themselves between desire and respectability.

Gilbert and Gubar argue that female madness in nineteenth-century fiction often emerges from conditions of patriarchal confinement that deny women emotional and intellectual freedom (Gilbert and Gubar 77). Catherine's suffering reflects this condition. Her madness becomes both protest and punishment: protest against restrictive gender roles and punishment for refusing complete submission to them.

The spaces within the novel further reinforce this tension. Thrushcross Grange symbolises discipline, refinement, and social order, while Wuthering Heights represents emotional intensity, freedom, and untamed desire. Catherine's longing to return to Wuthering Heights during her illness reflects a rejection of the restrictive domestic identity imposed upon her through marriage. Brontë therefore portrays domesticity not as feminine fulfilment but as emotional imprisonment.

Catherine's death ultimately demonstrates the violence of patriarchal structures that cannot accommodate feminine transgression. Her emotional excess is treated as instability because patriarchal society lacks the language to understand female desire outside acceptable norms. Madness thus becomes the only available space through which suppressed emotions and fractured identity can emerge.

5. Madness as Feminine Expression

In *Wuthering Heights*, madness functions not merely as psychological deterioration but as a form of feminine expression that challenges patriarchal definitions of reason and identity. Catherine Earnshaw's emotional fragmentation reveals the limitations of social systems that attempt to discipline female subjectivity into silence and obedience. Through Catherine, Brontë transforms madness into a language of resistance.

Écriture féminine provides an important framework for understanding this transformation. Cixous argues that feminine expression frequently appears excessive, fragmented, or contradictory because it resists the linear structures associated with patriarchal discourse (Cixous 882). Catherine's language embodies these qualities throughout the novel. Her speech shifts rapidly between memory, desire, anger, and longing, refusing stable coherence. Rather than presenting rational explanation, her words communicate emotional intensity and bodily experience.

This fragmentation becomes particularly visible during Catherine's illness. She repeatedly recalls childhood spaces, imagines wandering the moors, and expresses alienation from the domestic environment surrounding her. Her madness therefore operates as a rejection of imposed identity. Catherine cannot fully exist within the socially acceptable role of wife and gentlewoman because such roles require the suppression of her emotional self.

Showalter observes that women's madness has historically been interpreted through patriarchal assumptions that associate femininity with irrationality and emotional instability (Showalter 5). However, feminist criticism challenges these interpretations by viewing madness as a response to repression rather than

evidence of inherent weakness. Catherine's breakdown emerges not because she is incapable of reason, but because patriarchal society denies her emotional autonomy and self-definition.

Brontë's portrayal of Catherine ultimately destabilises Victorian assumptions regarding femininity and sanity. Madness becomes a space where female desire, identity, and resistance remain partially visible despite social repression. Catherine's emotional excess cannot be fully contained within the structures that seek to discipline her, and it is precisely this excess that transforms her into one of the most transgressive female figures in Victorian literature.

6. Conclusion

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* presents madness not simply as individual psychological collapse but as a deeply political and gendered experience shaped by patriarchal repression. Through Catherine Earnshaw, the novel exposes how Victorian society pathologises women whose emotions and desires exceed socially acceptable limits. Catherine's madness emerges from the conflict between emotional truth and the restrictive structures of class, domesticity, and femininity imposed upon her.

By applying Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, this paper has argued that Catherine's fragmented speech, emotional excess, and unstable identity function as forms of feminine expression that resist patriarchal logic. Her madness becomes a language through which suppressed desire and emotional subjectivity emerge beyond the limits of rational discourse. What appears irrational within patriarchal structures acquires deeper meaning when understood as resistance against systems that deny female autonomy.

Feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar further reveal how female madness in literature frequently reflects the consequences of social repression and confinement. Catherine's psychological fragmentation therefore represents both protest and punishment within a society incapable of accommodating feminine transgression.

Viewed through feminist literary theory, *Wuthering Heights* anticipates later discussions surrounding female subjectivity, bodily expression, and the politics of language. Brontë transforms madness into a site of emotional and cultural resistance, exposing the violence underlying Victorian ideals of femininity and domestic order. Catherine Earnshaw's madness ultimately remains significant not because it confirms patriarchal fears regarding women, but because it challenges them.

References

- Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. Edited by Pauline Nestor, Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–893.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Pantheon Books, 1977.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1979.
- Homans, Margaret. "Repression and Sublimation of Nature in *Wuthering Heights*." *PMLA*, vol. 93, no. 1, 1978, pp. 9–19.

Jacobus, Mary. *Women Writing and Writing About Women*. Barnes & Noble, 1979.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982.

Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980*. Virago Press, 1987.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015.

Copyright & License:



© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.