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Author: Dr June A. Douglas

St. George's University, Grenada, West Indies

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WOMEN AND MADNESS

WOMEN'S STRUGGLE - 19TH - 20TH CENTURY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Dr. June A. Douglas

Humanities & Social Science, St. George's University,

Grenada, West Indies

ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to challenge the controversial area of women's mental health reflected in literature concentrating on the 20th century and the development of femininity and its inherent images, constructed with the onset of industrialisation in the 19th century. Inequality, present today in the labour market and in the home, is illustrated within the texts, reflecting the change in society early in the 19th century. The research studies women's health today, which suffers due to what has been proclaimed a progressive period of economic change in history. Women in Western culture have become caught up in a forced binary, in which the extant power structures have devalued basic human values such as empathy in favour of objective, rational knowledge in ways that undermine the ability to recognize and respond to the signal functions of affect so crucial to psychosocial development. (Gilligan & Richards, 2009) Women's emotionality is understood to be a problem; without trying to understand the contexts in which the symptoms have arisen, this tends to amplify the distress, at times driving them toward psychosis (Charles & O'Loughlin, 2013).

The five authors selected reveal the misery and hardship women endure by having little choice but to remain isolated in their homes bringing up their children. Western industrial society emphasises privacy and independence. Individualism and personal achievement are celebrated

within small translated social family units. Activities and relationships are governed by personal discretion, indoctrinated by strong cultural and religious pressure. Opposing such societal constraints, many female artists have struggled to assert their own individuality in relation to the work of their partners, at times ravaged by the lack of recognition of their own unique talents and values (Ayril-Clause, 2002).

By examining society rather than biological, individual deficiency, this article attempts to take a Marxist political perspective, which progresses from Marks and Angles, who explain the patriarchal social structure as being strictly economically based. The Modern Family contains the embryo not only of slavery but of serfdom, connected from the beginning with agricultural services, the inherent antagonisms developing on a wide scale within society and its state. "Such a form of the family shows the transition of the pairing family to monogamy. In order to guarantee the fidelity of the wife, that is, the paternity of the children, the woman is placed in the man's absolute power; If he kills her, he is but exercising his right." (Marx & Engel, 1978, p.489). The hypothesis of this research is to challenge this theory by examining the consequences of living within a patriarchal society and where the change is perceivable. Patriarchal power within society and its effects on the individual are illustrated brutally by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *The*

Yellow Wallpaper. Although Gilman was writing at the end of the 19th century, her work must be regarded as insightful and progressive. Her work is studied to gain an understanding of women's position in society regarding mental health. Using Gilman's autobiographical novel as a starting point for an examination, one can see that little change has occurred in women's lives during a time believed to be of immense historical and economic advancement, a period of two major world wars and ongoing minor wars together with constant universal concern with human rights have served little to improve the expectations of and towards women.

Within the constraints of this article, women's own stories from different parts of the globe are studied to gain an international perspective. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was American. Janet frame from New Zealand has written of her harrowing experience as a form of therapy. Included is an examination of the treatment of Sylvia Plath, also American but living in England. Tsitsi Dangarembga an African writer who studied to gain a third-world perspective; Doris Lessing is English, offering a worldwide perspective. The selection criteria is that all of these women suffered mental breakdowns and lived through their treatment to recount their lives, all but briefly for Sylvia Plath. In a society where almost twice as many women than men are admitted to mental institutions annually, it is evident that socially constructed stereotypical concepts of femininity and the delineation of female roles do not create happiness. The literature asks what is femininity, and through the experiences given, are women the second sex, weak, feeble and in dire need of dependency? Are women incapable of being educated to equally high standards as men and of partaking in stimulating, well-paid professional occupations alongside their male counterparts? Biologically, women do differ from men. Women, it is true, if

compared with men of a similar size, have less physical strength but are endowed with a greater capacity for stamina.

Within this article, an interdisciplinary framework is drawn upon to gain a full understanding of women's position in society for the purpose of analysis, psychology, sociology, politics, economics and scientific empiricism. Boundaries are crossed which have previously been regarded as independent studies and illustrate how great an insight literary works can contribute to the understanding of women's mental health.

Historical Reflections

Before the 19th century and the advent of industrial and agricultural revolutions, women worked alongside men on the land and in the cottage industry. Although patriarchy as a form of power and control was not a new phenomenon, and women had suffered thousands of years of oppression in central areas of their lives due to inequalities of strength on differences in reproductive abilities, the 19th century, a watershed, heralded the loss of autonomy in the labour market and hence the home for women.

With the advent of capitalism and wage labour with the expansion of the factory, coupled with the decline of the cottage industry, women were denied the equal opportunity to share in contributing to the family economy. The traditional forces of patriarchy, which acted together with the debilitating forces of the reproduction of children who were economic assets working in industry, forced women into the domestic sphere of the home. Homes, which had been the centre of cottage industry and community and social centres, became, for many women, isolated individual prisons. Raised standards of cleanliness and hygiene became essential to enable the all-important male wage labourer to take rest and respite to fulfil long hours in the public sphere of the workplace.

Values and 19th-century concerns over public health filtered down from the middle classes and were adopted by the lower classes. Women imposed standards upon each other; housework became a specialised task but remained unrecognised as a worthwhile occupation. Femininity became constructed as middle-class women became adornments of wealth and prosperity. In theory, working outside the home was deemed unfeminine and unladylike. A wife with accomplishments became a status symbol, and girls were encouraged to take up needlepoint, art and music to achieve a good marriage and be an asset to their husbands. The poorer classes could not survive with one wage earner as the concept of the family wage which was insufficient. Work considered suitable for the newly constructed feminine woman was low paid with long hours, often inaccessible to women with families with a man away in the factory and nobody to mind the children. Whilst the physical health of women in the lower classes suffered because of economic factors which forced them to work in unsatisfactory conditions, often doing menial factory tasks, such as working in sweatshops in the military trade or laundries, the mental health of the middle-class women suffered. Through the development of this ideology, they were encouraged to remain within the private sphere with little recognition of intellectual ability, managerial skills, or competence for work.

In the 21st century, it is still considered that women are only secure within sound-dependent relationships with wage-earning men. However, contentment is not guaranteed. The evidence of high divorce rate statistics can reveal this. Mothers who are often left to hold full responsibility for their family's welfare and development within the nuclear family, at a time when economically forced into dependency,

have little confidence in themselves. The Hastings women's study group illustrates this: "She sat staring at the housework, listening to the children playing in the garden, with an empty feeling in the pit of her stomach. Although she had a full day ahead of her, washing, cleaning and cooking and taking her three children for a walk in the park, she knew it would be an empty day, leaving her unfulfilled." (Hastings, 1984, p.27).

Loneliness and inherent guilt at failing to achieve the expected role and standards imposed internally and externally can lead to a mental breakdown, as will be examined within the novels. In comparison to their single female married male counterparts, married women suffer considerably more stress, anxiety, depression, a range of neurosis and various other psychological problems. The effects of running a home whilst undertaking employment were investigated, and a survey by the Alfred Marks Bureau. The outcome was self-evident: the effects of tiredness 51%, tension 33% and lack of energy to socialise 25%. This can be construed as a vital warning that flexible attitudes of the boss, colleagues, husbands and children are essential. (Hastings, 1984, p.38). Referring to the literary concept of the madwoman in the attic and Jean Rhys' character Antoinette Cosway, and later Jane Eyre, the same ending is rendered as a release from hell from imprisonment by the man who has controlled their lives and even meaning itself. This dilemma, in which a woman's well-being, freedom, and even her very life could be held in the hands of the man seen by society as accountable for her, has been longstanding in Western society, where women historically have been rendered as property rather than beings in their own right (Edwards, 2011; Murphy, 2015).

Polly Toynbee concluded in her article in the Guardian in June 1981 on girls' aspirations that "Unfortunately, many girls, in those few crucial adolescent years, make the wrong decision about their lives. They have bought a cheap, tatty, glamorised image of what makes a woman happy and fulfilled." (Hastings, 1984, p.38.) In 1989, Riska researched that twice as many women as men took psychotropic drugs. and twice as many women were in mental homes, the wrong decision is realised too late. In 2010, 2.8 million men (59%) and 3.6 million women (76%) were dispensed at least one prescribed drug. (Loikas et.al. 2010) In England in 2014, one in six adults had a common mental health problem: about one in five women and one in eight men. From 2000 to 2014, rates of common mental health problems in England steadily increased in women and remained largely stable in men. (Mental Health Foundation). Plath's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, and her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* have non-conformist aspirations... "One of the reasons I never wanted to get married [was that] the last thing I wanted was intimate security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself... The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters... Maybe marriage and children were like being brainwashed, and afterwards, you went about numb as a slave in some private totalitarian state..." (Plath, 1963, p.87).

To conclude a brief introduction as to how the power structure of society affects women and their mental health, it is helpful to look at Chesler's (1972) debate regarding the existence of gender control in the means of reproduction. Chesler (1972) investigated modern history and ancient mythology to ascertain social structures. She understood that male children graduate from a childhood

dominated or peopled by members of the opposite sex, women, to a grown-up world dominated by members of their own sex. Chesler (1972) decided that "men can safely go home again by marrying wives who will perform the rights of maternal domestic and emotional nurturance, and who are usually younger, economically less powerful and physically weaker than themselves." (Chesler, 1972, p.20).

Early 20th-century ideology which serves to medicalise women

With the establishment of a bourgeois class in the 19th century, wives became, in theory, decorative symbols of wealth, indulged us privileged and controlled children. When the confines of the home coupled with lack of stimulation caused the inability to endure life, leading to mental breakdown, these women would be reprimanded and denied further limited freedom. With the advent of capitalism and the post-enlightenment period and the preoccupation with empirical science, women were studied and objectified as separate species, a source of biological reproduction and vulnerable to its effects. 'The wandering womb syndrome' became a manifestation of madness. "Madness was seen to be closely associated with menarche, menstruation, pregnancy and menopause. The womb itself was deemed to wander throughout the body, acting as an enormous sponge which sucked the life energy or intellect from vulnerable women." (Ussher, 1992). In order to maintain sanity, it was thought that energy could only be spared at the expense of the womb. Fitch wrote in 1890 against educated women "it was feared that the opening of new facilities for study and intellectual improvement would result in the creation of a new race of puny, sedentary and unfeminine students, and would destroy the grace and charm of social life, and would disqualify women from their true vocation, the nurturance of the coming race and the governance of

well ordered, healthy and happy homes.” (Ussher, 1992, p.75 cites Fitch, 1890) This social Darwinist ideology was adopted in 1920 by the Nazi party in Germany.

The rest cure which Charlotte Perkins Gilman was treated with and which was detrimental to both her health and the health of the protagonist in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Yellow Wallpaper* was advocated by Silas Weir Mitchell in 1874. This was part of the treatment for hysteria; it included seclusion and enforced bed rest, no mental stimulation, and regular bland food combined with daily massage. It was believed to be the treatment to procure the return of the historical woman to her position of subordination. Today, feminists interpret hysteria as an expression of women's anger. The medicalisation of hysteria is a form of oppression, “the power of misogynistic discourse to define what ‘woman’ means, and to exert control over women's lives.” (Ussher, 1992, p.75) Ehrenreich and English (1978) compare this treatment with solitary confinement and the sensory deprivation used on today's political prisoners. (Ussher, 1992, p.76 cite Ehrenreich and English, 1978, p.31) Mitchell (1874) understood the hysterical woman to be deviant and defiant, not complying with patriarchal ideology for the good of the nation: “There is often no success possible until we have broken up the whole daily drama of the sick room, with its selfishness and its craving for sympathy and indulgence... A hysterical girl is... A vampire who sucks the blood of the healthy people about her.” (Ussher, 1992, p.76 cite Mitchell, pp36-37). As will become evident in examining the literature, the treatment of women's madness remains synonymous with the use of torture and confinement.

Gilman (1892) explained the genesis of her story in the journal *The Forerunner*, describing how, in 1887, she consulted

Mitchell while suffering from chronic acute depression. Mitchell's advice was to lead a thoroughly domestic life, to limit her reading to two hours a day, and to give up writing altogether. Gilman explains that she went home, obeyed these directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that she could see over. “Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained. I cast the noticed specialists’ advice to the winds and went to work again, work, the normal life of every human being... Ultimately recovering some measure of power. Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*... And sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it... [But many years later, I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*.]” (Gilman, 1892, p.4)

Gilman, hence her protagonist, understood her needs and voiced her opinions. In compliance with her husband and brother who was a physician, she takes phosphates “or phosphites whichever it is, tonics, journeys, air and exercise.” ” (Gilman, 1892, p.10). She accepts that she must not work again until she is well. Gilman voices her opinion in fiction, personally, I disagree with their ideas. “Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.” (Gilman, 1892, p.10). Under the watchful eye of her sister-in-law, the protagonist is left in isolation. Confined to a room at the top of a house in the country, with barred windows, rings in the wall, torn wallpaper, a scratched floor and gnawed bedposts.

Rigney (1978) investigates the psychological search for a ‘doppelganger’ in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a mirror image of her own split psyche, a manifestation of schizophrenia. A search for a mother figure to help heal the divided self. A

doppelganger is a valuable ally against the male world whilst being useful in a process of integration, expendable when cured. Rigney accounts for the doppelganger in *The Yellow Wallpaper* as representing not only the protagonist's divided self but all women imprisoned, "bound and inhibited by a society which insists that women are childlike, merely decorative, and incapable of self-actualization". (Rigney, 1978, p.123). Losing the sense of ego boundaries, she rips off the wallpaper to release herself. Rigney poignantly illustrates her dilemma. "Frantic to escape yet bound in One Direction by the dim memories of wifely propriety, and in the other by injunctions against suicide, she escapes into madness, making the room her refuge, creeping around its margins and locking the door against her husband." (Rigney, 1978, p.142). Gilman (1935) reported that after a month's rest cure, she would often crawl into remote closets and under beds to hide from the grinding pressure of that profound distress. Perkins escaped through divorce and work, writing her own journal, over 20,000 words a month. Her protagonist is not seen to escape from the husband who condescendingly refers to her intimately as 'his little goose', 'his little girl' who must get well for his sake, to be 'a rest and a comfort to him'. (Gilman, 1935, p.96).

Gilman uses the patterns on the wallpaper to symbolise the descent into madness caused by the patriarchal repression in the social situation. The confusion and contradiction in her situation are worked into the pattern. "Looked at in one way each breath stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes are kind of 'debased Romanesque' with delirium tremens go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity. But on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full

chase." (Gilman, 1892, p.20). Fighting for independence and identity, she is determined to succeed in the pattern and in life: "I determine the thousandth time that I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion." (Gilman, 1892, p.19).

It is open to perception where the film's protagonist is defeated or has succeeded in achieving freedom. Little choice was available to her to escape from an oppressive relationship with her husband, whose attitude towards her is that "bless her little heart, she may be as sick as she pleases". (Gilman, 1892, p. 19) In a chilling manner, she does manage to escape, freeing herself from her physical and mental imprisonment. She escapes from crippling social pressures by descending to total madness. She screams at her horrified husband that she has finally got out, and outside the wallpaper at one with her other self, her doppelganger, she cannot be put back. Hedges (1972) quotes Emily Dickinson and puts forth an understanding of the final freedom in *The Yellow Wallpaper*; "much madness is divinest sense. Much sense the starkest madness." (Gilman, 1892, p. 54). Gilman attacks women's position in society in her journal *Women and Economics*, critically analysing the same world which exists for women as for men; "the same human energies and human desires and ambitions within. But all that she may wish to have, all that she may wish to do, must come through a single channel and a single choice wealth, power, social distinction, fame, not only these, but home and happiness, reputation, ease and pleasure, her bread and butter, all must come to her through a small gold ring." (Hedges, 1973, p. 25).

Gilman's protagonist does not return to a semblance of sanity but continues to creep around the room, creeping over her husband, who symbolically and physically blocks her progression by fainting in her path. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a political

statement to illustrate the victimisation of women by society.

A continuation of patriarchal medicalisation of women in the guise of science

In this section, women's mental health is examined by analysing the experience of Janet Frame. This is a horrifying account of the treatment of a woman who did not conform to the stereotypical image of the subservient, dutiful, obedient, gregarious daughter. Janet Frame was entombed in an asylum in New Zealand for eight years and wrongly diagnosed as schizophrenic. Frame underwent 200 electroshock treatments and only just escaped a lobotomy due to the final acknowledgement of her literary abilities when she won a literary prize.

Showalter (1987) explains the technical details of ECT with Sylvia, plus vivid memories of the reality of the treatment; “two electrodes, dampened with bicarbonate solution to prevent skin burns at their points of contact, are applied to the anterior temporal areas of the scalp... A gag is inserted in the patient's mouth to prevent him biting his tongue period. An electric current, usually 80 volts... Is given, which results in a modified convulsion... After the convulsion, the gag is removed, the patient is turned on his side... Within 5 to 20 minutes, the patient gradually returns to full consciousness, although he may feel sleepy...” (Showalter, 1987, p. 207). The frequent side effects of ECT are, short term and partial amnesia and in the late 1940s, fractures. ECT was used by an American doctor Peter Braggin, argued, that women receive this treatment because they “are judged to have less need of their brains.” (Showalter, 1987, p. 207). Housewives were believed to be excellent candidates, being less skilled persons whose livelihoods are not dependent on the use of memory and intellect. An improvement is believed to occur with the result of the

treatment which reflects the male bias and the profession, finding: “mental incapacity and helpless dependence... Far more acceptable in women than in men.” (Showalter, 1987, p. 207 cited Breggin, 1979 pp. 126-7).

Frame (1990) originally chose to simulate schizophrenia in order to attract the attention of a male psychology professor. However, suffering from acute shyness and unable to interact, she eventually suffered a breakdown after qualifying as a teacher. Unable to perform and succeed in being examined by a male inspector, she recoiled into her private, secure world. With her successful pretence of schizophrenic symptoms and her final slide into reclusion, Frame was institutionalised. Showalter (1987) discusses the impact of the First World War on women and the drawback of women's emancipation through the short-lived victory and the return to the domestic sphere. By 1921, the female percentage of the workforce was 29%, exactly what it was in 1911. Showalter writes that “the war continued to be fought in the psyche, and the period of readjustment precipitated psychological problems.” (Showalter, 1987, p. 197). Although women did not suffer the same setbacks in the labour force after the Second World War, the desire by the government and society for women to return to domesticity and chastity after being mentally and physically involved in a World War which threatened to annihilate humanity could not have failed to have created psychological problems in women, already torn between unrealistic stereotypical expectations. Janet Frame was thus influenced: “at the beginning of the month when I was to celebrate my 21st birthday, my coming of age, the war was suddenly over, having pursued me through all the years of my official adolescence, as part of the development of my body and mind, almost as the ingredient of my blood, leaving its trace everywhere, even

in my hair and my picked or bitten fingernails.” (Frame, 1990, p. 62). Within the year, Frame had initiated her escape into madness. “Will you excuse me a moment please?... I walked out of the room and out of the school, knowing I would never return.” (Frame, 1990, p. 63). Three weeks later, Frame contemplated suicide as her only escape.

Showalter (1987) examines the oppression women suffer at feeling that they must constantly be observed. Their actions and appearances are on show, confirming that they exist and feel that they have no secure identities. The schizophrenic women sense themselves as unoccupied bodies. Showalter cites Berger (1972) in understanding that “A woman must continually watch herself; she is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across the room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid watching herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood, she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually, and so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinctive elements of her identity as a woman.” (Berger, 1972, pp. 46-47). Frame suffers from the pressure of portraying this acceptable surveyed exterior. “I have woven so carefully, with such close texture, my visible layer of no trouble at all, a quiet student, always ready with a smile, always happy, that even I could not break the thread of the material of my deceit. I felt completely isolated. I know no one to confide in, to get advice from; And there was nowhere I could go. What, in all the world, could I do to earn my living and still live as myself, as I knew myself to be. Temporary masks, I knew, had their place; Everyone was wearing them, they were the human rage; But not masks cemented in place until the Weaver could not breathe and was

eventually suffocated.” (Frame, 1990, p. 65).

Frame was incarcerated for eight years for realising her limitations; she was unable to continue her life of deceit and agreed to rest in the hospital for her own good. “Not conforming to social expectations or femininity, she was conveniently labelled schizophrenic, a psychotic syndrome defined around the turn of the century, emphasising the qualities of listlessness, vacancy, and withdrawal in the patient, a peculiar and fundamental want of any strong feeling of impressions of life.” (Frame, 1990, p. 203). To her detriment, Frame did not conform and was removed from society. It was not until a volume of poetry which she had written was published that she escaped being lobotomised and was released. It was later discovered that she was not schizophrenic but painfully shy and unable to conform and interact. Frame managed to reshape her life by exercising the pagan treatment she had received in the hands of an oppressively patriarchal medical profession. Frame was finally recommended to write her memoirs as a form of therapy in order to overcome her traumatic experience. She successfully followed this path, as with other women writers, endeavouring to survive by telling their stories to the world. In raising the consciousness of society to the inhuman treatment of women, they not only come to terms with their own experience of the treatment of nonconformity but optimistically prevent the same happening to others. Unfortunately, not all women survived that ordeal. In this article, Sylvia Plath unhappy experience is examined within the political context of late 20th-century and early 21st-century society, which maintains its hostility towards women who do not conform to their repressed roles as the second sex: carers and reproducers rather than equal members of society and a valuable half of the labour force.

Fatal pressure to conform

Plath recounted her experiences of confusion and contradiction throughout her adolescence in the bell jar. Under the pressure to conform, she experimented with forms of escape, which included suicide. Almost 70 years after Gilman, Plato's protagonist, Esther, experiences the treatment of women. The intolerance of women's repression forces her to escape into madness. Esther survives her attempted suicide, whereas, in reality, she does not. Shortly after writing the novel, Plath committed suicide.

Plath implicitly emphasised the fallacy and shallowness in society, which trivialises women, treating them as superficial, decorative, immaterial beings. The lack of importance given to individuality and the stress on conformity compares with Frame's story. Plus, rebellion against conformity led to her consequent downfall. Throughout the novel, Plath highlights the lack of humanity in American society. The continual emphasis on conformity and striving to succeed at the expense of others is scrutinised from the outset. The style of prolapse writing reflects society's preoccupation with conformity. The structure of society, which imposes the removal of nonconformity, inevitably leads to the torture of frame and Plath, with the use of electricity, invented originally for the improvement of humanity, Plath effectively contrasts triviality with an underlying gravity. This is continually reflected both in content and language. Prophetically, Plath writes in lines 7 to 10., I couldn't help wondering what it would be like being burned alive all along your nerves."

David Holbrook describes plus simple directness as convincing –“What is said is really meant. Simplicity with black depth. False bubble underlaid with terrifying emptiness.” (Holbrook, 1978, p. 3). It is a terrifying emptiness which Esther discovers to her detriment. Striving to

conform, to be part of the American dream, a false bubble which almost 50 years later can be seen economically to hold a terrifying emptiness. Esther struggles to accept the pressures imposed upon her period, whether she is ultimately successful in her self-imposed quest for perfection, to be best at everything she does, student, writer, model, girlfriend, sister, daughter, and finally, patient, is open to debate. Her outward success in finding self-perfection in being at one with herself and setting her own rules, boundaries and goals by escaping into madness would certainly be disputed by conformists.

Whilst examining all the options, Plath did not manage to break away from the oppressive imposition of stereotypical pressures upon women. Using madness, breakdown and suicide attempts in order to break through impossible traditional expectations did not work for Plath, and her second suicide attempt was fatal. A final statement of defeat. The stress on conformity recurs throughout the bell jar. The attitude of Esther's mother towards her antisocial suicide attempt is stereotypical, “I knew my baby wasn't like that... Like those awful people, period. Those awful dead people at that hospital. She paused. I knew you'd decide to be alright.” She later remonstrates: “You should have behaved better than.” (Plath, 1983, pp. 154, 186).

On the road to recovery, Esther finally rejects the expectations of others, which have forced her into despondency. Rejecting the obligation to love one's mother, the central role model, Esther refuses to accept the roses her mother brought to the hospital for her birthday. “And that was when I had dumped the roses in the waste basket... I hate her, I said, and waited for the blow to fall.” (Plath, 1983, p. 215). Sylvia Plath was accused by her boyfriend Norton of struggling for domesticity, “Not the continual subordination of one person's

desires and interests to the continual advancement of others! That would be too grossly unfair.” (Spender, 1983, p. 29). McPherson explains the plot of *Mother* blamed the infection of the self-hatred at the centre of 1950s femininity construction as a cause of self-destruction. McPherson goes a step further, examining whether Esther's “fear and hatred of her mother entraps her within a misogynistic version of motherhood that is potentially lethal.” (Macpherson, 1981, p. 8).

McPherson quotes Jessica Benjamin describing *The Bell Jar* as revealing how, “Women could really create themselves the gender system that oppresses them, in which freedom and desire remain an unchallenged male domain, leaving women to be righteous but de-eroticised, intimate and caring, but pleasureless.” (Benjamin, 1988, p. 42). Plus, she speaks out against this image. –“But women have lost, too. Why should they be relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of infants, feeder of soul, body and pride of man?” (Spender, 1983, p. 29).

Esther regards motherhood and baby fetuses with a scientific, unfeeling coldness. She is quite fearful of the loss of self, involved in motherhood, and is clinically interested in the pain, blood and gore of giving birth. Esther's observation of a woman given drugs whilst giving birth reiterates women's oppressive position as reproductive carers in society. “I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again.” (Willard, 1986, p. 94).

Plath incorporates within her autobiographical work the pressure experienced by women from constantly being observed. Janet Frame suffered from the pressure of being scrutinised for playing a role for others to observe in *An Angel at My Table*; Sylvia Plath emphasises the pressures upon women to conform. Plath uses the mirror symbol as a light motif throughout the novel. Esther is continually conscious of her role, portraying her external image while suppressing her internal confusion and frustration. Contemplating dating, Esther examines the double standard of femininity, the Madonna whose dichotomy of women. “The American virgin is just to seduce.” (Spender, 1983, p. 29). The Madonna whose dichotomy is evident throughout all misogynistic discourse. The perception of women being powerful through their recognised affinity to nature with regard to reproduction and menstrual cycles is contradicted by the powerlessness they experience through their supposed frailty, weakness, and liability.

Women are presented as ‘other’ within misogynistic discourse, imbued with a dreadful temptation, an equal to men and lacking in intellectual capacity. Sylvia Plath described herself thus, in her journal at the age of eighteen. Ten years of adolescence, as Kenny Roberts makes clear by 1953, make a mockery of virginity as a natural or innocent state of mind or body. “One look in the bathroom mirror and the closet reveals a stock of beauty products and prescriptions necessary to create the calculatingly innocent look of all-natural seductive virginity.” (Macpherson, 1981, p. 11). After her suicide attempt, which mirrors the first and unsuccessful suicide attempt of Plath, Esther demands a mirror but cannot accept the spoiled image of herself until she smiles. “At first I didn't see what the trouble was. It wasn't a mirror at all, but a picture.” (Plath, 1989, p. 185).

Plath's journals criticise the post-war ideology of femininity as a double standard of sexuality, a whole monumental grotesque joke, emphasising the post-war paradox. "The distance between image as success and internal dissent as hidden failure." (Macpherson, 1981, p. 8).

Plath prophetically recognised that "clockwork-like functioning is possible only in a timeless vacuum and that people constructed within that vacuum will implode and be extinguished when outside pressure exerts itself." (Macpherson, 1981, p. 11). Plath attempted, against her own philosophical ideology, to break out of her loneliness by embracing maternity. Sadly, with two small children, she could not tolerate the clockwork functioning of the female role of housewife and mother, and the outside pressure of an unfaithful husband. This led to her tragically taking her life. Twenty years on, researching depression in women, Angus Miles finds little evidence of change period studying sixty-five men and women who had suffered degrees of mental breakdown, Miles established that: "spending many hours of the day alone, or with only young children for company, that's the experience of a number of women who, in their own words, felt trapped, cut off or abandoned." (Miles, 1989, p. 90). Brown and Harris wrote in 1978: "We have found that if a woman does not have an intimate tie, someone she can trust and confide in, particularly her husband or boyfriend, she is much more likely to break down in the presence of a severe event or major difficulty." (Brown, 1978, p. 228).

Plath was treated with ECT for nonconformity, for trying to break out of societal pressures, which resulted in unhappiness, loneliness and confusion through madness and suicide. The culmination of her fascination with electricity, which began on page one of *The Bell Jar* with the Rosenberg's electrocution and progressed with the

electrifying sensation Esther experienced on her date, climaxed with the electric shock treatments which she received as a form of cure for depression. Plath quotes Carol Warren's study of mad wives to reinforce the understanding that torture is medicalised to impose oppressive social control on women. Warren reexamined medical records and interviews of a group of women in a California hospital in the 1950s, drawing a connection between the isolation of suburban housewives and depression and examining connections between husbands, hospitals and technology. One woman interpreted her treatment and her depression as: "her punishment for deviance, for failure to fulfil her role or, even more shameful, for failure to want to fulfil her role." (Macpherson, 1981, p. 55). Macpherson(1981) explains the assumption that: "taking the blame for breakdown is halfway back to normalcy, excepting one's responsibility to adjust oneself." (Macpherson, 1981, p. 55). Plath attempts to conform to this philosophy.

After her first treatment with electricity, Esther blames herself: "I wonder what terrible thing it was I had done." (Plath, 1983, pp. 152). Although Doctor Nolan assures her at a later date that treatment with ECT is like going to sleep, Esther's experience is torturous. "Something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash, a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the SAP fly out of me like a split plant." (Plath, 1983, pp. 151). Phyllis Chesler describes the life of four women, including Sylvia Plath, who were hospitalised for various psychiatric symptoms, basically nonconformity and unhappiness. Her description fits the three women chosen up to this point and those whose experiences will be drawn upon in the preceding sections. "Like many women, they buried their own destinies in

romantically extravagant marriages, in motherhood, and an approved female pleasure. However, their repressed energies eventually struggled free, demanding long overdue and therefore heavier prices: marital and maternal disloyalty, social ostracism, imprisonment, madness, and death.” (Chesler, 2005, p. 5). A high price to pay for social, patriarchal oppression.

Plath was writing from a painful, personal experience, drawing from her marital relationship and her experience of motherhood. Chesler poignantly remarks that most 20th-century women who are “psychiatrically labeled, privately treated, and hospitalised are not mad. Like Plath, they may be deeply unhappy, self-destructive, economically powerless, and sexually impotent, but as women, they are supposed to be.” (Chesler, 2005, p. 25). Plath investigated suicide in the latter part of her novel in a macabre factual manner. Coldly contemplating the pitfalls of the alternative methods, accepting the weaknesses of her mind and body. Irritated by the body's determination to survive. Esther recovers, but sadly, shortly after completing the novel, Plath is successful in her final attempt to escape.

Plath lived prior to the second wave of feminism when women were finally in a tentative position to gain quality, universal academic education and, to a certain extent, fulfil their professional aspirations. However, they suffered from torment which has not been alleviated sixty years on. Struggling to succeed in her ambition as a successful writer and maintaining equal status with an artist's husband, juggling with the double role of mother and wife and satisfying occupational status, Plath fell victim to her emotions. Crushed by the infidelity of her husband, exhausted from overwork, writing in the early hours of the morning to gain solitude, combined with the guilt and anxiety involved in dividing one's time between ambition and family, Plath was

finally defeated and followed the direction she was only too familiar with and Stephenson in her epilogue sums up the tragedy of Plato's early death, a liberated woman struggling to survive before her time: “Her writings particularly the poems and the journals conspire to give her early death the illusion of a Greek necessity. Yet how tragic it is that some lucky accident did not enable her to move on into a world with which perhaps she could have come to terms.” (Stevenson, 1998, p. 303).

Raising political consciousness through women's suffering

Doris Lessing examines the personal experience of trauma using a personal perspective. Lessing was born into a different era to Plath, however she experienced the same limitations and frustrations of 20th-century womanhood. Lessing grew up in Africa and experienced two world wars and immense political upheaval, together with two unsuccessful marriages and three children. Her political involvement took a left-wing stance, and although briefly a member of the Communist Party, Lessing remained non-conformist, struggling to survive and raise consciousness of the trauma encountered by women. Lessing adopted Marxism as a unifying vision.

In her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Golden Notebook*, first published in 1963, Lessing examines her left-wing political involvement by incorporating the red book into the novel. The structure of the *Golden Notebook* is symbolic of Lessing's belief in individualism. Within a political framework, Lessing believed in a Jungian philosophy of personality division, a process which, when worked through, would move towards wholeness. A psychological unity is achieved by recognising the elements of both the conscious and the unconscious mind. The unconscious mind is believed to hold repressed tendencies, a shadow, usually negative and unpleasant aspects of the

personality. This acknowledgement is believed to be liberating, allowing for imperfection and reclaiming energies to maintain a facade or image. Anna Wulf, Lessing's protagonist, works through a mental breakdown, as does Lessing. The adoption of Jungian philosophy may have helped her to gain wholeness and respect for herself as an individual, which women generally lack and which produces intolerable pressures which can lead to endeavouring to find escape through death. As discussed in Section 2 of the novel, women are, through the structures of patriarchal society, constantly under observation, Acting out a facade, playing a role and seeking approval. Without trivialising the centrality of the social pressure of society, Lessing investigates individual ability to surface.

Anna Wulf comes to terms with a joy in destruction experienced by Plath, Anna and her alter ego Ella of the Section 3 women, descends into self-destruction. Barely able to cope with the destruction within relationships, she breaks down mentally. Anna breaks through her descent. She gained self-knowledge and, therefore, self-acclaim through 'breaking down'. Restructuring her life, finishing her involvement with communism, and meaningless love affairs, she finds a way forward. This is epitomised by the end of writer's block which had curtailed her career. Within *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing examines the weaknesses of individuals and society, which lead to her breakdown and cause splitting and fragmentation of personality and self. For Lessing, the breakdown is used to confront the repressed, feared and hated aspects of the self. A healing unity is therefore achieved by discovering a different perspective of one's own personality by facing evil. This leads to acceptance and greater awareness. As the breakdown was a breakthrough for Anna Wulf and her alter ego, Ella, the *Golden Notebook* was a watershed for Doris Lessing. A climatic

point in her writing gives her the confidence to abandon convention in this style and future novels. The fragmented style of the *Golden Notebook* is finally linked together as an integrated whole by Anna and her lover, Soul Green, right in the first lines of each other's novels. Anna writes about three women, bringing a circular aspect to integrate the novel. The revolutionary design reflects the complex layers of the individual personality. This describes Lessing's own experience. Searching for her own identity, she broke through her own consciousness, finding success in working through her personal trauma by writing the *Golden Notebook*. Lessing writes about the levels of the psyche. "When I wrote the *Golden Notebook*, I deliberately evoked the different levels to write different parts of it. To write the part where two characters are a bit mad I couldn't do it, I couldn't get to that level. Then I didn't eat for some time by accident I forgot and found that there I was, I'd got there. And other parts of the *Golden Notebook* need to be written by the 'I's' from other levels." (Whitaker, 1988, p. 10).

This thing's contempt of the treatment of mental health, progression and recovery to a standard considered acceptable by a conformist society offers a humane way forward with Jungian psychology, in contrast to that which has been offered in the lives of Gilman, Frame and Plath examined so far. Lessing examines and criticises society's political and social forces that demand conformity, deriding individualism to the extent that pressurises, sickens and kills. However, Lessing does not experience a self-institutionalised intervention which forced Gilman to write *The Yellow Wallpaper* and which kept Frame incarcerated for eight years or drove Plath tragically to death. The protagonist of *The Golden Notebook* suffers oppressive forces which cause her to break down, but rather than being shocked, tortured or taking her life

as realistically do other characters in her novel, Anna works through madness, reemerging as a more conscious, whole person. She comes to terms with the antisocial side of her personality rather than being lobotomised or electrically shocked into conformity. Anna gained support from Saul, who is also suffering from mental instability and together, they self-heal by directing their energies into creativity, in contrast to the recommendation received by Gilman, who was shut away and denied stimulation. Lessing's experience and experimentation with Jungian psychology may not eliminate social forces which oppress, maim and kill individuals. However, her humanitarian approach to therapy reduces further damage caused by intervention, which was evident in the lives of the previous three creative women.

In contrast to an illness, Lessing presents madness as progression, a way forward, hysteria being a rehearsal for the madness which will lead to enlightenment. Describing Martha's schizophrenia in her earlier novel *The Four Gated City*, nursing understands it to be a concept of development, subjectively projected into the world at large. Nursing addresses the issue of the recognition of one's own madness reflecting the world's madness to achieve a higher state of sanity. This ideology incorporates Jungian psychology, maintaining a positive function for what society terms madness, that it is not: "What we need to be cured of, but that is itself a natural way of healing our own appalling state of alienation called normality." (Laing, 1995, p.357). Laing and Lessing accept madness as a positive sense, giving up certainty and losing the distinction between the real and the unreal, the self and the doppelganger. The result is that a state of mind will emerge far saner than that understood by society to be accepted in conformity.

Rigney writes, "Conscious madness, as opposed to the world's unconscious madness, is a way to the truth itself for Lessing: perhaps it was because if society is so organised, or rather has so grown, that it will not admit it that is except as it comes out perverted, through madness, then it is through madness and its variance it must be sought after." (Lessing, 1995, p. 357). This version of humanity's struggle is incorporated into the heart-rendering lives of all five writers. The women themselves understand their own limitations, although society refuses to acknowledge them. The cries for help remain unheard and break down as suicide is perceived as a weakness.

Cultural repression across continents

So far, the repressed lives of four white women writers have been examined, writing in the genre of autobiography, which they have used as a form of therapy to overcome their trauma. Using the writing of Tsitsi Dangerembga, through her own account of her upbringing in Africa, the repression experience within the political cultures of England, America, New Zealand and Africa, can be compared and contrasted. *Nervous Conditions* is different from the other four novels studied in that Dangerembga is not personally directed towards a breakdown of mental health. The route she takes to surpass it may be analysed, but she uses the character, Nyasha, to examine the breakdown in mental health of a black woman through cultural repression.

Roger Rosenblatt writes in his essay on black autobiography that it makes its power a minority within a minority, "existing as a genre in a consistent and unique, if dreadful outer world." (Olney, 1980, p.170). Dangerembga illustrates double oppression suffered by black women within the patriarchal community in Africa, from which she has struggled to break out. However, she certainly has firsthand experience of the oppressed lives

of the majority of women within that community.

Dangerembga exposes her innermost consciousness. Blatantly truthful and without pretensions, she portrays the reality of the double oppression that black women have to contend with and the limitations they experience in their struggle to survive. Dangerembga breaks down the barriers imposed upon her by her family and society and raises the consciousness of society by overcoming the literary oppression frequently imposed on women by the lack of opportunity and resources. The protagonist, Tamba, exposes her hatred towards her privileged brother, who blatantly represses Tamba in his power struggle. The anger and hatred she feels towards him when she discovers that he has given away the mealies which she has been growing in order to pay for her education is a cameo which portrays underlying hostility with regard to gender inequality. Tampa does not mourn his death, which enables her to gain a privileged education. Education and enlightenment subsequently enable her to examine the structure of the lives of those close to her and the foundation of their oppression. "I was triumphant Babamukuro had approved of my direction. I was vindicated." (Dangerembga, 1987, p. 57). Tamba understands the power of education, which she examines and uses as a tool to escape the confines of a society which abuses the concept of patriarchy. Tamba concludes her story by admitting that it was a painful process that she underwent and alienated her from those she loved to overcome literary oppression. Not only to proceed with her education but to absorb and use that knowledge by publishing her story and informing others. Within her story, Tampa examines the lives and minds of the four women in her life and how they have been oppressed. A wedding which is forced upon her mother highlights the extent to which the women have been

infantilized, and the majority forced to remain uneducated and to accept their repression.

Tamba's life is entwined with those of her aunt and her cousin, who had the rare opportunity of education but had not escaped oppression through their intellectual achievements. Tamba's aunt Maiguru, who had studied at an English university, was expected to be a subservient wife, itching, bringing up a family and donating all her income to her husband and his family. Nyasha, her cousin, had received an education equal to her brother but was expected to be submissive to the patriarchal power of her father, to the detriment of her health. Nyasha explains her predicament to Tamba after her mother temporarily rebels and leaves her father. "But it's not that simple, you know, really it isn't. It's not really him, you know. I mean, not really the person. It's everything, it's everywhere. You are just one person, and it's everywhere. So, where do you break out two? I don't know, Tamba really I don't know." (Dangerembga, 1987, p. 53). Tamba overcomes her academic oppression through a quirk of fate, which gives her the opportunity to surpass the poverty of her family and the oppression of women by a patriarchy. However, as she admits, it is a long and painful process.

Nyasha, the cousin of Tamba, tries to explain the pressures of patriarchy, which corrupts both men and women. Her father will not pay for her to be educated further because, in addition to any benefits going to another family, he thinks the women's place is in the home, "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother and learn to cook and clean." (Dangerembga, 1987, p. 15). The stereotype of the black woman is seen as submissive and inclined to believe that her place is in the house as it is her duty to "cling to the home since great men and women evolve from the environment of the earth's stone." (Dangerembga, 1987, p.

15). It is assumed that the woman achieves greatness by administering to the needs of the male, who can go forth and achieve outside the home. The dissatisfaction and misery that this ideology inflicts are reflected in's breakdown of Natasha. Women portrayed in black African writing often tend to have low self-esteem, and this certainly becomes so with Nyasha. Her father's constant criticism and unfavourable comparison with the conformist Tamba, combined with the fact that she feels she has no place in either European or African society, lead her to a mental breakdown. Nyasha feels that Europeans are thieves taking away traditional African values and stealing the souls of her fellow countrymen, as she says, "So you see what they've done? They've taken us away.. all of us.. They've deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other.. (Dangerembga, 1987, p. 193).

Looking in terms of the wider political context, Natasha understands the oppression of her whole community; rather than looking inwardly at the personal political, she recognises the effects that oppressive patriarchal forces have had on her. She sees Africans trapped by Europeans who have the power over the native means of existence. She does not accept her own limitations, trapped through not only her nationality but the advantages of her glass and education, which makes her position intolerable and, importantly, by her gender. "They do not like my language, my English because it is authentic and my Shona because it is not." (Dangerembga, 1987, p. 200). Natasha falls victim to anorexia, a condition traditionally associated with those who have low self-esteem. Nyasha's breakdown in mental health is used to question the soundness of European values and its effect on African women. Tamba questions the trust she had put on European values, "For I was beginning to have a suspicion.. That I had been too

eager to leave the homestead and embrace the Englishness of the mission. Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things I refuse to be brainwashed." (Dangerembga, 1987, p. 203).

Dangerembga does not deny that *Nervous Conditions* is autobiographical but answers in an interview that "it's a novel", remarking that the "interface between fiction and fact mirrored in the Jungian idea of embracing a shadow, is difficult to define." (Dangerembga, 1987, p. 193). Dagerembga discusses the problems that Nyasha is trying to come to terms with, referring to the Jungian archetypes of soul. Confused with the complex process of remembering and forgetting, Nyasha is unaware that the reason for the gap in her memory of her heritage is beyond her control period Tamba who was denied the early opportunity of education is more practical. She knew nobody made clay pots anymore, "it just wasn't worth the effort when you have these ten gallon tins instead." Asked why Tamba does not go in the same direction as Nyasha, Dangerembga replies that she has a very solid background. She knows exactly where she's come from. She may be leaving it, but it's there for her." (Dangerembga, 1987, p. 193). A solid cultural, familial support system, which is evidently lacking in Western society, enables this African woman to transcend traditional inequality and progress towards personal fulfilment.

The relationship between black women and mental health movements has many facets and concerns many groups. The matrifocal nature of black communities is illustrated in nervous conditions. Black women are considered a high-risk group with regard to the suffering of mental disorders due to the many pivotal roles they perform and the unrewarding nature of many of their responsibilities at home

and work with low pay and long, unsociable hours. The double oppression black women suffer is epitomised in the treatment of Nyasha's anorexia when the first psychiatrist dismisses her as feigning a European white person's disease, which black people are not sufficiently developed enough to have a period, not only a second sex but a second class of humanity. There is a historical tendency to view black people as sick, whether they be physically or mentally. Early racist societies declared black skin to be a form of leprosy, and runaway slaves were diagnosed as mentally diseased. Today, little has changed, suffering the same torturous treatments as white mental patients; black patients are categorised specifically: West Indian psychosis, paranoia, religious mania and Asian premarital psychosis. Black patients receive more harsh physical treatments than the rest of the population: More and longer ECT, more injected drugs and higher drug doses with less therapy, counselling and rehabilitative care. psychiatric reports are, as a matter of concern, used at the request of social workers. Mental illness can also be used as grounds for deportation. Don Durango asserts that by writing, she can make some order to all the disorganised complexities into a framework. Quoting a writer, she affirms that the only valid reason for writing is not to save the world but to save myself. Dangeremba, in accord with the other writers examined, has portrayed a heightened sense of awareness through her writing

CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

The depths of emotional trauma that women are exposed to within a patriarchal society have been examined in this paper. Up to the present day, it has been politically determined that the family unit remains in a homogeneous relationship, reproducing the minimum number of

children with a dominant male breadwinner and a subordinate female carer nurturer.

The periods covered, illustrate that little has changed within the structures of society regardless of the continuation of women's movements, historical events and the raising of consciousness. Women are not biologically but socially determined as the second sex and inferior subordinate gender, stereotyped into a role which has illustrated, can lead not only to unhappiness, loneliness and misery but, in some cases, to early self-imposed death. It is important to attempt to alleviate all suffering and misery regardless of class and gender; this has been a priority of medical and psychiatric science. However, alleviating women's suffering within institutionalised relationships necessitates not only the raising of consciousness and awareness but also the restructuring of society, the implementation of successful childcare for both women and men and the removal of the pressure upon women to remain within the domestic sphere whilst their children are young. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was innovative in her solution to women's inequality, but unfortunately, her solution is still unsolved today. "Work must be respected. Women must be admitted into occupations on equal terms with men. The domestic work they do must be respected and free to do other kinds of work as well." (p.71). She believed in continuing human progress in which women achieved true equality with men. Sadly, Gilman's solution, which has been adopted by women's movements worldwide in their battle to gain equality, is, in reality, a fallacy for most women. Irene Star writes: "For women, the alternative to chronic depression in an unhappy marriage is often poverty, a dead-end job and the additional stress of childcare responsibilities." (pp. 26-8).

Linda Pollock and Elizabeth West summarise women's lack of support in an article written in 1987, "The community as

an ideological portmanteau word for a reactionary, conservative ideology that oppresses women by silently confining them to the private sphere without so much as an even mentioning moreover it attempts to confine them, or at least implicitly to define them, at the same time as economic policy and social change pushes them into the public sphere of paid work, and yet simultaneously removes the last state props that supported them in their work in the community, that is, in the family.”

The five women writers were selected because they share a common thread of oppression. The geographical and ethnic differences illustrate that oppression is not confined to a specific culture. The black/white/ gender oppression spans the divide of internationalisation. In the firsthand experiences, the stories portray strands of their lives linked together to create and offer different variants and degrees of perceptive success. Gilman, Frame, Lessing and Dangeremba succeed in surfacing through the mechanisms of society which are loaded against women. Plath is generally perceived as failing to progress through her suffering to a high plane of fulfilment. However, she may feel that she ultimately succeeded in escaping and was finally in control of her destiny. Although this is perceived as a loss, she made her ultimate decision. Many women, through surgical intervention, are denied even that.

Although this paper does not set out to find monumental solutions to women's suffering, it is interesting to compare the similarities between the late 19th-century vision of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and a proposition made in 1978 by Ehrenreich and English, “[we need] a society in which healing is not a commodity distributed according to the dictates of profit, but integral to the network of community life.. wisdom about daily life is not hoarded by experts or doled out as a commodity but is drawn from the experience of all people

and freely shared among them. This is the most radical vision, but there are no human alternatives.” (p.220)

Sadly, both the 19th-century solution of Gilman and the late 70s vision of Ehrenreich and English look even more distant in the 21st century with the forces of capitalism crumbling and threatened recession. Dictates of profit are given even more power and illustrate the priorities given to economics over human rights and, hence, women's position in society. An integral network of community life which would give women the necessary quality to sustain their essential well-being, looks even more distant. Usher and French predict that “a rearrangement of mothering roles will have a far-reaching implications for every aspect of women's experience, madness included. It is a simple route from misery to emancipation of freedom. The consequences of collective child rearing would be eliminated if their men provided them with the same nurturance they offer them, if their children had loving fathers, and if they were able to use their other talents in the world.” (Ussher, 1992, p.534)

The clear findings of the paper are that the semi-autobiographical novels of the five women writers whose lives have been examined achieved a form of escapism through their writing. Many did not have the opportunity. Vita Sackville-West discusses the limitations of such a study and the development of emancipation. Ussher realistically writes, “It is cruel to try to make us believe that we can (achieve emancipation) and that we only need to find a different voice when the odds are stacked so heavily against most women.” (Ussher, 1992, p. 229) More importantly, Ussher prophecies that: “We must leave the myth of the sexually dangerous woman behind and move forwards into a sexuality which allows a woman to experience herself, to give and receive pleasure; and to integrate her sexuality as part of herself, not to be compelled to split it off as

forbidden or denied.” (Ussher, 1992, p. 301)

With a greater sense of awareness, society will incorporate emancipation in order to establish a satisfactory equality of class and gender, which gives women the space to choose and develop in an atmosphere beneficial to all. However, the economic determinant may result in benefits for some women middle class and not working class, thereby continuing that accessibility to examine the psychological effects of patriarchal society on women as reflected in personal political literature such as that of Gilman, frame, Plath, Lessing, and Dangerembga, and to create awareness of the divisions of class as well as gender. The restraints of the length of this paper restrict the study of alternative texts which is an opportunity for further study.

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