

# Female Symbolic Confinement with Jean Rhys, A.S. Byatt, Margaret Drabble, and Margaret Atwood

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## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

The household is an archetypal, limited space marked by the imprint of femininity. The female reproductive apparatus, with its central organ, the uterus, the room where human life itself emerges and evolves, suggests boundaries and confinement. Far from being a passive organ, a mere receptacle and temporary host for the embryo that finally turns into a baby, the uterus has been powerful psycho-emotional valences. The symbolic similitude and correspondence between the uterus and the domestic space, namely the household and its rooms, leads to the relationship between the domestic spatiality and the female psycho-emotional panorama. Thus, the emotional component emerges in domestic spaces where female characters often feel suffocated by patriarchal restrictions. My entire thesis relies on this triad: the female reproductive apparatus (especially the womb) – the psycho-emotional scape – the domestic space. From this triad emerge all the ramifications that form the argumentation of the thesis.

The first chapter is entitled „Women’s Closed Space”. The first subchapter, „The madwoman in her home”, investigates the presence of pathologies in the claustrophobic, limitative spatiality of feminine domesticity. Psycho-emotional pathology refers to the mental disorder of female characters in the novels and short stories of the four authors. The obsessive-compulsive disorder manifested through the compulsion to clean, depression, agoraphobia, the female protagonists’ preference for self-isolation in dark rooms, emblems of depressive manifestations, all these signal the pathological in the four women writers’ novels and short stories.

The domestic space is a receptacle and keeper of the female emotional palimpsest. The metaphor of the mad woman in the kitchen suggests a projection of the psycho-emotional coordinates onto the spatiality of the household, especially on the kitchen, the room with the most intense emotional charge, the room where women bake and cook, where the family gather and eat together. Women have an almost mystical relationship with this special room associated with the womb where the baby grows like the dough baked in the oven.

However, the kitchen is not always a space of calmness and familial harmony as it should be. The kitchen sometimes hosts emotional disruptions or familial unhappiness. In Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the kitchen table, is the space where abortion can take place. It is also the warm place where the Marthas knead the dough and bake bread and pies. These activities symbolically allude to the baby’s growth inside the womb. In *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*, the kitchens have similar obstetrical finalities.

With Margaret Drabble, the kitchen is a receptacle of conjugal violence (in *The Needle's Eye*), or of the frustrations caused by female domestic captivity (in *The Garrick Year*), or of incipient illicit amorous affairs (in *Jerusalem the Golden*). In this last novel, Philipa Denham's disorganised kitchen is an allusion to her emotional disorder.

With Jean Rhys, the kitchen is almost non-existent. It is replaced by the Parisian restaurants and cafés adjacent to hotel rooms where the lonely, depressive women characters consume their sadness or anxiety caused by their instable financial situation, by the absence of family or by a new-born's death. The Parisian restaurants and hotels reflect familial disintegration, the decentralisation of domestic captivity, as well as a subsequent reorientation of domestic spatial coordinates towards another type of space - both limitative and liberating - which is caused by female loneliness, depression, and sadness.

The domestic space also includes household objects which have certain symbolic meanings, allusive to the female emotions. This is the reason why, after the subchapter dedicated to the female emotions and the kitchen, I focus on the household objects that correlate with women characters' psycho-emotional background. These objects harmonize and complete the domestic space as they are household details and also reveal women characters' traumas. With some secondary female characters, we encounter symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, namely hoarding no longer useful household objects which soothe anxieties and deep emotional traumas.

Among the household objects, mirrors and dolls are special as they bear a strong psychoanalytic imprint. In the novels of the four authors analysed in this paper, the mirror fulfils not only the function of facilitating self-knowledge and plunging into the female subconscious, but also the function of facilitating liberation from patriarchal prejudices and rules. In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, mirrors are absent in the Handmaids' rooms in order to avoid these women's attempts to evade through suicide provoked by the cutting edges of the mirrors. The Handmaids could also metaphorically escape from patriarchal confinement through self-knowledge and personal redefinition, which mirrors could facilitate. Similarly, in Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there are no mirrors in the attic where Antoinette Cosway is locked, in Rochester's castle. This suggests a similar patriarchal protocol of forbidding mirrors, for reasons of safety and avoidance of female self-redefinition and self-knowledge.

Although little psychoanalytic importance has been attributed to dolls, they reveal a lot of aspects about their female owners. There is a psycho-emotional dialogue and emotional transfer between dolls and the women characters who collect them. For instance, Christabel LaMotte, the fictitious Victorian poetess, in A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession*, writes a poem about dolls, about their capacity to transmit and receive female emotions.

The term „confinement“ does not mean only spatial limitation or boundaries. It initially referred to the impossibility of a woman who has just given birth to a baby, to leave her bed and household. This is the reason why the thesis dedicates an ample chapter to the symbolic captivity of motherhood. This chapter approaches the main aspects of the maternal condition, namely its fulfilment and its negation through infertility, miscarriage, and abortion.

The meaning of the lexeme „confinement“ as the post-natal restriction of woman's freedom of movement appears explicitly in the first pages of Drabble's novel, *The Waterfall*. Jane, the female protagonist, finds herself in the impossibility to leave her household, in the first days after she has given birth to her second baby, at home, assisted by the midwife.

Female infertility is a main issue in Margaret Atwood's well-known novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, where it is the main criterion according to which the dystopic patriarchal society classifies women. The imaginary Republic of Gilead circumscribes the plot of the novel at a socio-political level. The biological impossibility to bear children engenders patriarchal constraints and dramas, both for high-class women, who have to accept raising other women's children, and for the Handmaids, exclusively used for procreation and afterwards brutally separated from their babies.

Unlike infertility, abortion and miscarriage imply the initial existence of fertility followed by the termination of pregnancy, either willingly, in the case of abortion, or unwillingly, in the case of miscarriage. Miscarriage may have psycho-emotional causes, namely certain frustrations and anxieties which pregnant women may experience. In Margaret Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin* and in Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall* and *The Millstone*, we encounter examples of miscarriages caused by emotional traumas related to the female character's acknowledgement of her problematic relationship with the father of the child-to-be.

Pregnancy and birth are dealt with in several texts. The most suggestive, in this sense, is Atwood's short story „Giving Birth“. The reader witnesses the entire process of giving birth, the

protagonist's labours, as well as that of another, anonymous woman, for whom giving birth proves to be highly traumatic, especially from an emotional point of view.

Post natal depression is suggestively described by Jean Rhys, in her short story „Learning to be a mother”. The female protagonist has just given birth to a baby boy, but, at first, the mother is not able to feel affection to her new-born. He looks at her sadly, as if aware that his mother does not love him, and this is the moment when the mother's heart begins to respond. The initial emotional distance that she feels for the baby, immediately after she has given birth, signals a possible post-partum depression. This comes with an avalanche of abrupt hormonal changes which occur during birth and which may persist long after that. In time, a prolonged post-natal depression becomes a chronic mental imbalance. It results in a bad emotional relationship between mother and child, especially between mother and daughter. The problematic mother appears in novels such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, by Jean Rhys, *Lady Oracle*, by Margaret Atwood, *Jerusalem the Golden*, *The Needle's Eye*, *The Peppered Moth*, by Margaret Drabble. The menopause marks the end of the fertile period; the absence of the menstrual cycle signals the incapacity to bear children anymore. Menopause is paralleled by delicate emotional states, a fragile mental balance which makes it all the more difficult. With A.S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble, there is an explicit association between the age of menopause and the metaphorical image of the solitary witch, in Byatt's short story „The Dried Witch”, or in Drabble's novel *The Witch of Exmoor*. Christabel LaMotte, the poetess in Byatt's *Possession*, declares herself, with the passing of time, a witch isolated in the metaphorical tower of poetry.

The chapter entitled “Disguising Trauma” deals with four perspectives possibilities that both disguise and decipher important female psycho-emotional aspects. They are dreams, bodily forms of inner, emotional trauma, eating disorders, clothing and female accessories. Female characters' dreams often explicitly allude to maternity and to its anxieties, such as the fear of not being able to take care properly of the baby, of not being a good mother, or of losing one's independence and freedom of movement.

Within the sphere of the pathological, we also find eating disorders, with its two well-known extremes, anorexia and bulimia, which resonate with deep psycho-emotional traumas. Deviant eating behaviours are a more or less conscious ways to repress and disguise emotional wounds. An eating disorder which I also analyse is orthorexia, the obsession to eat as correctly and

healthy as possible. When emotional traumas, negative feelings, frustrations, anxieties are repressed, they sometimes surface at the somatic, corporeal level under the form of psychosomatic illnesses, such as gynaecological and respiratory disease, brain tumours.

In the subchapter dedicated to „Clothing and Looks”, I have discussed clothes, accessories, and make-up. All these offer clues to women’s psycho-emotional aspects. The chromatic patterns of garments and accessories insinuate certain common aspects of the female emotional experiences.

“Escaping Gardens”, the final chapter, examines the ways in which the female characters of the four authors attempt to escape from domestic, patriarchal captivity. The ways they escape from confinement are literary pursuits, poetry, art, intellectual preoccupations.

In my PhD thesis, I approach female symbolic confinement from three perspectives, which intertwine: the psycho-emotional one, the biological one (with emphasis on the female reproductive apparatus and its central organ, the uterus), and domestic spatiality. The household spatial coordinates reinterpret female corporeality, at a symbolical and metaphorical level. The house and its rooms are symbolic for the womb, which is the shelter of incipient human life and of female emotions, as well. The female emotional experiences pervade both the biological coordinates and the domestic spatiality.

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