

Maternal Madness and the Politics of Motherhood: A Study of Postpartum Psychosis in Selected English Novels

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ABSTRACT

In English literature, motherhood was traditionally described as an emotionally enriching and spiritually uplifting experience. Modern English literature has had the first real opportunity to critique the emotionally fulfilling archetype, the construct of feminine virtue and identity, by addressing women's deepest psychological struggles within the frameworks of patriarchy. Literature suggests that the experience of postpartum psychotic illness is the product of emotionally induced social isolation and the repression of postpartum psychotic women by patriarchal institutions. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", Ashley Audrain's *The Push*, and Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch*, all deal with postpartum psychosis and the fragmentation of motherhood. Drawing on the work of Adrienne Rich, Elaine Showalter, Julia Kristeva, Bracha L. Ettinger, and D. W. Winnicott, this paper examines how the fragmentation of motherhood results from the psychologically and emotionally crippling neglect and isolation of intergenerational motherhood. The works of literature discussed in this paper show the significant and devastating impact of the absence of a "holding environment" on mothers' mental health. This paper demonstrates that the study of literature has the potential to expand the understanding of postpartum psychosis and its treatment.

Keywords: *Postpartum psychosis, motherhood, feminist literary criticism, psychoanalysis, psychological trauma, maternal identity, epistemic injustice.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Western literature has long glorified, sentimentalised, and politicised motherhood. From the Madonna-and-child iconography of medieval religious art to the self-sacrificing Victorian "Angel in the House," from the romanticised earth mothers of nineteenth-century poetry to the Pinterest-perfect Instagram mothers of contemporary digital culture, mothers have been portrayed as paragons

of selfless caregiving whose emotional fulfilment is presumed to flow spontaneously and inevitably from childbirth. However, such representations obscure the psychological complexity, ambivalence, contradiction, and misery inherent in parenting and in the construction of maternal identity. Second-wave, third-wave, and poststructuralist feminist literary studies challenge these idealised constructions by addressing the emotional and

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mental struggles women face after childbirth, ranging from “baby blues” and postpartum depression to the rarer, more severe, and deeply stigmatised postpartum psychosis.

Postpartum psychosis (PPP), a rare yet serious mental disorder, features such symptoms as auditory and visual hallucinations, delusions, disorganised thoughts, manic and/or mixed mood disorders, as well as a dangerous disconnect from reality occurring two weeks after giving birth. One or two cases for every 1,000 deliveries are diagnosed with PPP. In contrast to postpartum depression, characterised by the constant feeling of sadness experienced by one out of seven mothers, and marked by anhedonia and exhaustion, PPP is associated with a 4% to 5% danger of infanticide and suicide. The topic receives little attention in public discourse, clinical settings, and the literature.

According to the above-cited study, portrayals of maternal instability in literature depict the pain human beings endure and the social, political, economic, and gender dynamics that intensify it. The nuance and symbolism in literature and the temporality of subjective experience allow a certain way of understanding how culturally constructed views on ‘good’ motherhood and maternal instinct, as well as normal postpartum recovery, contribute to one’s mental disturbance. As is stated in Elaine Showalter’s work, *The Female Malady*, “madness is not a single simple phenomenon but a complex series of behaviours and experiences that are mediated by gender, culture, and history” (5).

Parenting is depicted in modern English literature as a process that can be psychologically taxing and even annihilating. In “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), a story about female postpartum mental breakdown, patriarchy’s role in medical manipulation (gaslighting) and the “rest cure,” involving the isolation and confinement at home as both treatment and punishment, is described. Over one hundred years later, Ashley Audrain’s novel, *The Push* (2021), highlights maternal anxiety, guilt, ambivalence, and the burden of generational trauma in relation to Blythe Connor, an extremely complicated character whose lack of ability to bond with her daughter reflects the darkest side of mothering—namely, the possibility of failing to love one’s child. In the novel *Nightbitch*, Rachel Yoder uses surrealism to explore maternal frustration. This approach reveals suppressed anger and the complete degradation of an individual’s pre-maternal self to animal transformation.

In this essay, we will explore how these three novels present a portrayal of postpartum psychosis and the splitting of the maternal self over time and across literary genres. Using a feminist and psychoanalytic perspective, this essay proposes that a patriarchal mindset, loneliness, lack of female independence, the use of psychiatric diagnoses as weapons, and the absence of caregiver networks or what Winnicott calls the “holding environment,” all contribute to or exacerbate postpartum mental health issues in these texts. The three novels under

examination counteract the medicalisation of maternal suffering, which blames hormones for her state but also rejects the romantic idealisation that denies the possibility of severe psychiatric disorders.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research utilises qualitative methods of comparative close reading within feminist literary criticism, psychoanalytic literary theory, and the medical humanities. For the selection of the three English novels with an important protagonist experiencing postpartum psychological trauma over the course of 130 years (from 1892 to 2021), a criterion of chronological and thematic comparability was adopted based on the presence of the protagonist diagnosed with postpartum psychosis, as well as the absence of comparative analysis of such texts regarding postpartum psychosis.

The decision to use “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Gilman followed from the fact that (1) the protagonist is a biological mother of a newborn child; (2) her symptoms are compatible with the clinical manifestations of postpartum psychosis (hallucinations, delusions, paranoia, disorganized behaviour, dissociation); and (3) there is either explicit or implicit connection of these symptoms to the social, personal, or institutional conditions. The books *The Push* by Audrain and *Nightbitch* by Yoder, both published in 2021, were specifically designed to address the current reaction to similar problems across different genres.

3. APPROACH TO ANALYSING THE TEXTS

Each primary work was thoroughly examined twice – first without a theoretical framework, then with feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks to identify themes and narrative patterns. They were identified as hallucinations, delusions, intrusion, dissociation, humiliation, guilt, rage, search for help, communication with medical experts and partners, among others. These phenomena were classified, e.g., under terms like epistemic injustice, abjection, holding environment failure, and generational transmission. The analysis is informed by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines elements of both feminist and psychoanalytical theory (Beauvoir, Rich, Showalter, Fricker, Freud, Kristeva, Winnicott, and Ettinger). Interdisciplinarity allows one to avoid reductionism when treating maternal madness as false consciousness and literary works as clinical cases.

4. LIMITATIONS

This study does not include Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (which depicts depression more than psychosis), Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (which has postpartum themes but is not organised around childbirth), or Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (whose protagonist is ambivalent but not psychotic). The study only investigates US and Canadian English-language novels (Gilman, Audrain, Yoder), leaving the question of postpartum psychosis in non-Anglophone or postcolonial literatures unaddressed. The research is guided by these limits.

5. TRACKING THE SCHOLARLY CONVERSATION ON FICTIONAL MATERNAL MADNESS

Maternal illness in the literary corpus has evolved from an outlier in feminist literary criticism into a dominant theme in health humanities, narrative medicine, and critical mothering studies over the last four decades. This paper utilises a range of sources, including foundational critiques of motherhood by feminist thinkers, psychoanalytic analyses of the complexities surrounding maternal subjectivity, ambivalence, and madness, and relevant academic works in medical humanities pertaining to the chosen texts.

6. FUNDAMENTAL FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF MOTHERHOOD AS AN INSTITUTION

Taking off from Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist approach in *The Second Sex* (1949), second-wave feminists explored the theme of madness in the context of motherhood in literature. In particular, Rich (1976) distinguishes between motherhood as lived experience and motherhood as a patriarchal institution. According to her, Rich is the most cited, influential and generative scholar on the issue of maternal madness in literature. She claims using her psychoanalytical and political knowledge that "the power of women's bodies" has been taken over by patriarchal society and has become associated with "control, discipline, surveillance, self-sacrifice" (13). Motherhood "has ghettoised and debased the female potential in the name of nature" (34). Even though she had three sons of her own, Rich advocates motherhood that does not involve subjection, economic dependence, and suffering. Gilman's, Audrain's, and Yoder's heroines are punished by their spouses, physicians, and their own expectations of maternal love's inconsistency.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949; English translation 1953) provides a basis for the existentialist approach. De Beauvoir defines womanhood as a culture-defined negative otherness in opposition to manhood, which is transcendent, active and cultural. Women are lacking, immanent and reproductive in accordance with the patriarchal symbolic system. Biological reproduction is presented as the highest fulfilment and destiny of women by the same symbolic structure, but deprived of the social, economic, educational, and psychological opportunities of becoming autonomous beings (de Beauvoir 524). De Beauvoir maintains that the idea of the "maternal instinct" is nothing but an illusion designed to legitimise procreation within the framework of the nuclear family. In her study, the idea of maternal instinct is further interpreted as leading to madness when women fail to have this experience. Blythe from *The Push* serves as an example.

According to Elaine Showalter, author of the book titled *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980*, published in 1985, madness was associated with the idea of asylums and the dominance of doctors who controlled women's bodies and minds. Since the nineteenth century, women's mental health problems

have been medicalised, while their real social problems, such as being locked up, economic dependence, lack of education, and rape, were overlooked, states Showalter. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", both the protagonist (as well as Gilman, who is partly autobiographical) is subjected to "the patriarchal medicine of hysteria," which includes forced inaction, solitude, and intellectual activity causing mental distress (76). Showalter provides the grounds that help to legitimise literary madness as a historically documented medical discrimination against females based on scientific knowledge.

7. PSYCHOANALYSIS OF MOTHERHOOD, AMBIVALENCE, AND MADNESS

A comprehension of the unconscious, embodied, and relational nature of postpartum psychosis necessitates psychoanalysis. If Freud concentrated on the Oedipal child, post-Freudian and feminist psychoanalytic scholarship has made considerable progress toward understanding maternal subjectivity.

In "Playing and Reality" (1971) and in subsequent articles, Donald Winnicott's "holding environment" helps conceptualise the relational context of maternal well-being. Winnicott argues that optimal child development requires the "good enough" mother to be present, loving, and to provide safety both physically and psychologically, that is, a holding environment. Moreover, what is vital for the purpose of this paper is the realisation that even mothers need a "holding environment" through the support of their husbands, families, societies, and cultures. Without that support and instead being isolated, criticised, or abandoned, the mother is unable to provide a holding environment of first order to her child. In extreme situations, according to Winnicott (304), "primary maternal preoccupation" could result in "anxiety, melancholy, and psychosis." The narrators in Gilman's, Blythe's, and Yoder's stories also experience a lack of such a holding environment: the former lacks support altogether, while the latter two suffer interference from others.

Abjection – another pivotal term used to interpret maternal madness in literature – was formulated by Julia Kristeva in her influential *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). According to Kristeva, waste, blood, milk, vomit, excrement, and the maternal body itself – as an embodied, leaky, and uncontrollable entity – constitute abjection as something disturbing the sense of stable identity and challenging clear boundaries between inside and outside, subject and object. As Kristeva defines it, abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order" (4). After delivery, a woman bleeds, lactates, stretches, stitches herself together, heals, and transforms outside of her will. As Kristeva posits, patriarchal culture strives to purify and contain abjection, thus explaining postpartum "recovery" programs, an idealised, fit, contained image of the maternal body, and silencing birth traumas, incontinences, and lactation issues. Yoder's heroine in *Nightbitch* revels in abjection: she turns into a dog, embodying all that is repressed, dirty, animalistic, inhuman, leaky, malodorous,

and violent – namely, the abject maternal body in patriarchal culture. Kristeva's approach implies that Yoder's drawing on work is a political performance of abjection, a denial of cleanness, goodness, and silence.

8. CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP ON PRIMARY TEXTS

Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" has been extensively analysed for over a century. This study's readings focus on its postpartum context rather than general female oppression and connect it to the medical history of postpartum psychosis. Susan S. Lanser's 1989 article "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Colour in America" argues that the story's Gothic domestic space directly critiques the medical establishment's treatment of new mothers and addresses the story's racial politics (the wallpaper's "sickly" colour evokes jaundice and Asian racialization). In Nineteenth-Century Literature and Medicine, Anne R. Clafin comments that Gilman deliberately blurs the line between postpartum depression and psychosis before either category existed clinically to demonstrate how patriarchal medicine promotes madness (89). This work expands on Clafin by reading Gilman alongside recent literature to show that, while the rest cure is gone, its logic of isolating, silencing, pathologising, and medicating persists.

Critical work on *The Push* is developing rapidly. Audrain's portrayal of maternal ambivalence and the taboo against admitting a mother dislikes or fears her child has been lauded. Literary Review critic Sophie Ratcliffe says *The Push* "weaponises the reader's own expectations of maternal love" to demonstrate narrative perspective gaslighting (para. 4). In *The Mother Wound: Generational Trauma and the Female Line* (2019), Janet Lazarus analyses Audrain's work psychoanalytically, suggesting that Blythe's paranoia destroys the distinction between self-identity, past and present, and trauma memory versus current reality. This study expands these ideas by focusing on epistemic injustice (Fricker) as the mechanism linking Blythe's internal psychological state to her external social world: she is not believed; therefore, she cannot trust herself, becoming destabilised.

9. FRAMEWORK CONCEPTS

The phenomenon of postpartum psychosis in modern English literature is critically analysed through the lenses of feminism and psychoanalysis. Although dopamine imbalances, oestrogen withdrawal, and sleep deprivation are among neurochemical factors associated with postpartum psychosis, gender belief systems, familial dynamics, financial stability, society's expectations of good mothering, and the concept of holding environment all play key roles in shaping it. A medicalised or constructionist approach that would explain PPP in the literature solely in terms of brain function or simple social labelling would be reductive.

10. KEY FEMINIST THEORIES

10.1 Mothers' Existential Quandary.

De Beauvoir's work of 1949, entitled *The Second Sex*, posits that women are made rather than born. Norms, economic factors, and culture form gender into an existentialist undertaking. Women are socialised to derive their sense of accomplishment from giving birth and being mothers, leaving little space for individualism, autonomy, and transcendence. According to De Beauvoir: "She is supposed to find her realisation in the child, but at the same time to realise herself through the child, and that is impossible" (524). Conformity to social conventions in the performance of reproductive functions has been legitimised on the grounds of the "maternal instinct." Having failed to realise this supposedly natural drive, Gilman's character, Blythe and the protagonist of Yoder's novel have been subjected to feelings of guilt.

10.2 Institutional versus Experiential Motherhood.

Rich's 1976 *Of Woman Born* makes this key distinction. Sleeplessness, feeding, touch, concern, joy, tiredness, and love that is neither pure nor constant constitute motherhood as experience. Patriarchal norms, expectations, stereotypes, laws, economic structures, and cultural narratives govern the institution of motherhood. Rich claims, "The institution of motherhood has a history and a political purpose; it has not been the same in all times and cultures" (13). Parenting is hard, but the institution's demands for perfection, self-erasure, cheerful cooperation, and instinctive love that mothers may not feel drive the protagonists in the selected works to madness. The institution punishes while experience creates ambivalence.

10.3 Gender and Madness in The Female Malady.

In *The Female Malady*, written in 1985, Showalter examines the intersection of gender and madness in both historical and discursive ways. For example, she demonstrates how the same traits are labelled differently depending on whether they manifest themselves in men or in women, how women's authentic suffering gets medicalised in "hysteria" and "nervousness," and how psychiatric institutions function to maintain patriarchy. In her turn, Gilman's narrator gets the rest cure, Blythe suffers from disdain and misunderstanding, gets diagnosed with "postpartum anxiety" and thus loses her perspective, and Yoder's heroine is labelled "just a mom" (as though there is no treatment for this condition).

10.4 Gaslighting and Epistemic Injustice

Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007) helps explain what happens when John dismisses his wife, Fox gaslights Blythe, and Nightbitch's husband ignores the protagonist. Fricker distinguishes testimonial injustice (when a speaker's credibility is unfairly reduced due to social identity) from hermeneutical injustice (when a collective interpretive gap prevents a speaker from understanding their experience). Both forms are present in the novels. Due to their gender, motherhood, and "emotionally unstable" status, the protagonists are not believed and suffer from an inability to articulate their experiences.

11. MOTHERHOOD, PATRIARCHY, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFINEMENT IN THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

"The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) is a famous feminist novel that explores the psychological effects of childbirth and confinement on women. Perceptual distortions (the paper peels off, takes certain forms, and has an imprisoned woman on it), paranoid delusions (her husband and his sister are conspiring against her and imprisoning her there), and fixation are presented in this novel. The psychosis is brought on by the very therapy that is supposed to cure it, which makes the story effective and educational.

11.1 Epistemic Injustice and Medical Patriarchy

It emerges gradually, almost begrudgingly, because she cannot express her "condition" in words and refers to the child only three times as "baby." Her husband, a doctor who is "of high standing," disregards the narrator's apprehensions, tiredness, perception disorders, and postpartum depression as "temporary nervous depression, a slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman 648). The rest cure devised by S. Weir Mitchell, a real physician, entails total physical rest, prohibition of any brain activity, including writing, restriction to interacting only with approved professionals, a diet of high-calorie foods necessary for building "nervous energy," as well as separation from other people, including the newborn baby. The former nursery of the colonial mansion, selected paradoxically because of its remoteness from the daily routine (her inability to hear the baby cry, which John views favourably), has iron bars installed on the windows, "rings and things" on the walls, and a "scratched and gouged" floor that speaks of an asylum cell or a place where lunatics were held. The treatment becomes punishment, and the nursery becomes a prison cell.

As Miranda Fricker claims, the patriarchal medical discourse leads to epistemic injustice; among them, testimonial injustice is especially evident in this case. John actually questions his wife's reports directly. He neither examines her, nor discusses her condition nor looks for possible social factors. Her personal experience is totally disregarded in favour of John's expertise. Even more telling is what the narrator says when discussing the fact that her husband laughs at her: "Of course he does laugh at me, but one expects that in marriage" (Gilman 648). It normalises humiliation as well as constitutes an act of epistemic violence. By acting as an epistemic authority, John defines sanity by denying women's reality. According to Gilman, refusal to recognise his wife's distress was a common practice in nineteenth-century medical patriarchy when male physicians dominated the female patients.

11.2 The Wallpaper as Psychic Screen, Projective Surface, and Delusional System

The narrator projects her chaos, psychological tensions, and delusions onto the yellow wallpaper that gives the

story its title. Her first dislike is its "sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (Gilman 650). After weeks of inaction, unable to work, write (though she keeps a journal), read, walk, or entertain, the pattern shifts. It becomes a "strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (Gilman 651). Under the pattern is a woman, first one, then many, then one, "creeping" and rattling her cage bars. Her obsessive study of the wallpaper (she cannot stop looking at it; the room has nothing else to look at) is a desperate attempt to impose meaning on her meaningless confinement and marks the breakdown of her cognitive ability to distinguish figure from ground, self from environment, inside from outside.

The narrator's identification with the trapped woman follows the criteria of a delusional system. Stage 1: The wallpaper is strange, scary, or meaningful. Stage 2: She crystallises her belief (a woman wants to break free). Stage 3: She incorporates herself into the hallucination (that woman and many women crawling outside are the narrator). Stage 4: She engages in delusional conduct (tearing the wallpaper, creeping). A fixed delusional belief and hallucination indicate psychosis (First et al. 124). Gilman masterfully illustrates this progression. The Victorian "pattern" of the good mother, submissive wife, and mute patient traps the narrator. The ugly yellow wallpaper represents patriarchal containment. Psychosis enables her to see what John, Jennie, and the rest-cure doctors ignore. The madwoman sees clearly, while the rational are blind.

11.3 Madness, Insurrection, and Tragic Liberation: The Climax

Known for its frightening, ambiguous climax, the story has the narrator tear the wallpaper in large strips, lock herself in, throw the key out the window, and creep along the baseboard around the room. John faints after forcing the door open and witnessing his wife crawling along the wall. She proclaims, "I've got out at last... And you've got to leave the key so I can creep out again as I please... And you can't put me back," "creeping over him" despite his collapse (Gilman 656).

Clinically, this is a major mental disorder: absence of reality testing (though "out" of the wallpaper, she is still inside the room), regression of the motor activity (crawling on four paws shows the regression back to infancy), inappropriate affect (no fear, compassion or other response to her husband's collapse), and probably disorganisation of behaviour. If treated today, the doctors would diagnose an incurable psychosis and send the woman to a mental institution. This ending is also a form of feminist revolt: she escapes from under John's domination, breaks the symbolic boundaries of the nursery/room/domestic life, rejects the image of the passive, obedient patient, and takes charge of her own life (delusionally). By moving across her husband's prostrate body, she also changes the gender relationships in the room, in the marriage, and in her relationship with the doctor.

The situation in Charlotte Gilman's short story is ambiguous. The liberation of the narrator is madness; there is no normal state which will enable her to regain sanity and go back to marriage and maternity without damaging her mental health. The importance of the story in the context of the feminist politics of motherhood is in its tragic insight about the destructive influence of the patriarchal system on the female psyche when the mothers' needs are being ignored, and the woman is treated with medication and imprisonment instead of support and aid.

12. MATERNAL ANXIETY AND INHERITED TRAUMA IN *THE PUSH*

In *The Push* (2021), Ashley Audrain incorporates aspects of attachment theory, intergenerational trauma, ambivalence about motherhood, therapeutic culture, and the politics of diagnosis in the 21st century, furthering themes originally explored by Gilman. Blythe Connor, an intelligent academic or writer in her thirties, is raising two children: Violet and Sam. Fears, thoughts, unstable moods after giving birth, and paranoid delusions regarding her daughter's violent tendencies trouble Blythe. In contrast to "The Yellow Wallpaper," which makes no mention of the main character's childhood or its effects, *The Push* specifically connects Blythe's problems as a parent to her own traumatic past and to her grandmother's sadism toward her as a child. Thus, "Is Blythe sick?" is just part of the question.

12.1 The Taboo of Maternal Ambivalence

Gilman's narrator's symptoms are perceptual and cognitive (the shifting wallpaper, the woman behind the pattern), but Blythe's suffering is affective: she does not love her newborn daughter. "I did not feel the way I was supposed to feel," the novel begins, breaking the most sacred patriarchal maternal taboo. "This tiny, beautiful creature made me feel inadequate" (Audrain 41). This is not sadness or anhedonia resembling postpartum depression. The absence of maternal love, culturally the most natural, instinctual, and reflexive human emotion, is a deeper affective disturbance. Nothing fills Blythe's void.

In *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (1995), psychotherapist Rozsika Parker offered a key concept. Parker argues that ambivalence, the simultaneous love and loathing for one's child, is a universal feature of mothering due to the tension between the mother's need for autonomy and the infant's need for care. The problem is the cultural stigma around acknowledging ambivalence. When mothers cannot acknowledge both love and hatred, tenderness and rage, the hate is split off, projected, disavowed, and often returns in enlarged, twisted forms (Parker 23). Because her culture and her marriage demand pure, unconflicted love, Blythe cannot voice her ambivalence. Instead of saying "I hate my daughter," Blythe thinks "my daughter is hateful," constructing a paranoid system out of her anger and animosity toward Violet.

Audrain deliberately distinguishes Blythe from postpartum depression by emphasising relational and historical factors. Blythe's difficulty bonding mirrors her own mother's emotional coldness and her grandmother's rage. Maternal mental distress is portrayed as a generational inheritance, not merely a biological or psychological problem affecting one individual. Gilman's focus on patriarchal oppressions gives way to a more complex, psychoanalytically informed account of how trauma is transmitted through maternal lines: through neglect, buried family secrets, and the mother's incapacity to touch her infant because she was never held (Lazarus 89).

12.2 Gaslighting and the Weaponisation of the Diagnostic Label 'Postpartum'

Though not named clinically, epistemic gaslighting contributes centrally to Blythe's deterioration. Gaslighting, from the 1944 film *Gaslight*, is a form of psychological deception in which one person systematically contradicts another's reality, making the victim doubt her memory, perception, and sanity. When Blythe worries that Violet may be pathologically violent (harming other children, manipulating adults, killing her infant brother Sam), her husband Fox and her therapist repeatedly suggest that she is projecting her "postpartum anxiety" and unresolved "childhood trauma" onto a spirited, strong-willed, or simply developing child.

"Blythe, your history is making you see things," Fox always says. "Please believe me" (Audrain 172). The weapon is "because of your history." Blythe herself admits that her mother was distant, her grandmother may have abused her, and she suffers from anxiety. Fox turns her own vulnerability against her, accusing her of being unreliable. The story cleverly complicates simple gaslighting: a well-meaning but overprotective husband tells a struggling wife that her genuine perceptions are symptoms of her illness.

This dynamic reveals a critical problem in the social management of postpartum mental health. Women with documented histories of postpartum depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder, or early trauma are systematically granted less credibility. She becomes, in Fricker's terms, an "epistemic subject without authority" (17). Any subsequent assertion she makes, no matter how evidence-based or supported by external events, can be dismissed as "further evidence of her illness." Her family's suspicion that Blythe is unwell becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The novel mounts a powerful critique of the depoliticising, individualising function of psychiatric diagnosis. Blythe is indeed traumatised and anxious. That does not mean she is wrong about Violet. Her therapeutic framework actively prevents her from being right that her child is dangerous to herself and others. Helpful diagnostic labels become cages.

12.3 Paranoia or Psychosis: Doubt, Certainty, and Epistemic Trust

The climax of Blythe's paranoid and possible insanity arrives at the novel's devastating conclusion, where Violet

is suspected of being the one who murdered Sam, although there was no conclusive proof. It should be noted, though, that Blythe does not see any visions; however, she is convinced that her daughter is a psychopath and wishes her death. What is important is that the novel's first-person narrative, built on doubt, uncertainty, and gaps in information, supports the idea that Violet is a psychopath too.

Blythe's epistemic doubt is captured in lines like: "Sometimes I worry I made it up. A pinch. The fall. She has frigid eyes. But then I recall her grin when Sam stopped breathing, and I didn't" (Audrain 341). Paranoia, in this telling, oscillates between certainty and doubt, reality and delusion, the "sane" position of trusting one's perceptions and the "insane" position of believing what everyone else denies. Psychoanalysis has long defined paranoia as the catastrophically accurate perception of a hidden truth.

The overall ethical/political point of view of the novel appears to be rather pessimistic: There is no solution for those women whose children are their problems – those women who have difficulties bonding with their offspring, who are confused about their feelings, burdened by generational traumas, in unsupportive relationships, etc.

13. MATERNAL RAGE AND THE GROTESQUE TRANSFORMATION IN *NIGHTBITCH*

Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* (2021), the most experimental of the three novels, abandons psychological realism for a surreal, horrific, and abject narrative. The protagonist, referred to as *Nightbitch* in her transformed state and as "the mother" or "the artist" in her human state, is a former visual artist who sacrificed her career to care for her young son while her husband works. She gradually comes to believe that she is becoming a dog (or that she already is one; the narrative never definitively resolves this).

13.1 Motherhood as Labour and Artistic Self-Erasure

As the novel begins, she laments, "Before the baby, she was an artist." The systemic violence of motherhood under patriarchal capitalism, Yoder suggests, destroys creative selfhood. Motherhood is interminable, repetitive, low-status, unseen, unpaid, and socially despised. She is "on call" 24/7 but produces no product, earns no wages, and receives no professional recognition.

The protagonist says, "She had become a creature of pure response. She feeds the crying baby. She cleans as the baby sleeps. She entertains the baby when awake. No self-decision was needed. Only reaction" (Yoder 57). This is a description of postpartum dissociation, the feeling of being a machine, an automaton, an animal, or a body without a pilot.

13.2 Abjection as Rebellion: Embracing the Dog

The protagonist takes on canine characteristics: more fur on her back and arms, an increased sense of smell (to the extent that she knows about her husband's infidelity before evidence comes to light), a desire to eat raw bloody meat, indifference to human discourse, and an entirely

physical change into a dog that prowls the streets at night. Scholars claim that the story never resolves the question of whether this happens literally or is simply a manifestation of a psychotic experience.

As Blythe experiences guilt from her own ambivalence in *The Push*, Yoder's character revels in shame, finds joy in filth, blood, odour, and violence, bites a neighbour's cat, and even bites her husband's throat.

13.3 The Politics of Community and Transformation

In the final chapters, *Nightbitch* learns of an underground community of women who transform into dogs or other creatures, spend their nights in the woods, and help care for children during the days when they feel furious, exhausted, and ambivalent. The protagonist herself becomes a leader of such monsters, or an artist making bone-and-fur sculptures.

Friendship and community do not "cure" postpartum psychosis or replace medical care, but Yoder suggests they can help reject the social factors that cause maternal madness: isolation, endless labour, emotional invalidation, the idealisation of the self-sacrificing mother, and the erasure of creative selfhood. If "The Yellow Wallpaper" ends in solitary madness, the narrator alone in the room, creeping over her unconscious husband's body, and *The Push* ends in unresolved paranoia, Blythe living alone, estranged from her husband, knowing but unable to prove her daughter's violence, *Nightbitch* ends in collective transformation, a pack of mothers reclaiming their monstrous power.

14. THEMES IN COMMON: EPISTEMIC SILENCING, DOMESTIC PRISON, AND THE FICTION OF MATERNAL INSTINCT

First, there is continuity in the experience of being silenced. The narrator in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is ridiculed and ignored by her husband, her physician, and everyone else. In *The Push*, Blythe's behaviour is blamed on her, her therapist, Fox, and her mother-in-law. The protagonist's descriptions of her mental illness in *Nightbitch* are similarly brushed off by her husband, who either changes the topic, falls asleep, or goes off on yet another business trip.

Second, there is a continuity in the image of the home as a prison. Western culture codes the house as a nurturing space for women that is safe and protected, but the three novels turn it into a prison for expectations, shame, economic dependency, and no alternative options whatsoever. Gilman locks her protagonist in the bedroom, with a nailed-down bed, barred windows, and an unopenable door. Blythe is similarly trapped inside the role of a mother unable to leave behind her daughter (and the danger she might pose to her), her marriage (economic dependency) and mothering labour.

Finally, in all three novels, the idea of maternal instinct is debunked. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator is disconnected from her child, both literally and mentally, focusing on her own mind and the wallpaper rather than

on the child. Blythe says that she did not love her daughter because “I did not feel the way I was supposed to feel.” For *Nightbitch*’s character, maternal love feels very much like fury, boredom, and escape.

15. DIFFERENCES: GENRE, TEMPORALITY, AND RESOLUTION

First, psychosis operates through the mediation of a narrative genre. Gilman uses Gothic realism to imply the supernatural (the woman in the wallpaper) as a symptom of hallucination. There is no woman in the wallpaper, only what the narrator perceives there is. In Audrain’s story, psychological suspense maintains uncertainty whether Violet is the killer or if Blythe is imagining everything.

Yoder, in her 2021 work, posits that psychological realism becomes incapable of representing maternal fragmentation because it presupposes a cohesive voice, a continuous timeline, and a consensus about reality, which cannot be achieved once these categories are deconstructed. Therefore, by working with the grotesque and the surreal, Yoder captures the ineffable experience of becoming non-human.

Second, the differences in the endings lie in the ways the problems are resolved and in the level of solidarity. Gilman ends with the narrator creeping around a room in her delusions, her husband unconscious beneath her. There is no support, no future, nor healing for the narrator; there will be no end to this creeping. Following Sam’s death, Blythe is left to live in isolation with her suspicions of Violet’s cruelty, which she cannot confirm due to her estrangement from her husband. Though there is no happily-ever-after, she has a roof over her head and access to a supportive therapist, if belated. The harsh realities were a part of life in 1892 when there was no postpartum psychosis as a diagnosis, let alone activism and online communities. Yoder, writing in 2021 and in the aftermath of both MeToo and maternal activism, is free to imagine a collective healing process, the pack of animals in the woods.

16. CONCLUSION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Ashley Audrain’s *The Push*, and Rachel Yoder’s *Nightbitch* illustrate how patriarchal oppression, emotional denials, and maternal expectations, as well as isolation and invalidation, nurture intergenerational trauma and contribute to the development of psychosis and severe psychological disturbances that exist outside the postpartum spectrum. Utilising feminist and psychoanalytic theories, this study highlights the importance of the emotional, physical, and relational dimensions of motherhood that most clinical studies, library research, epidemiology, and psychometry overlook, simplify, and then marginalise within the motherhood pathway. These works challenge cultural norms and break the taboos surrounding maternal mental health by articulating maternal psychoses, anxieties, rage, and disturbances. These case narratives promote literary research and, most importantly, provide a framework and a

call to action for the creation and implementation of comprehensive postpartum care, affordable childcare, paid parental leave, and necessary comprehensive community support.

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