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## The construction of a madwoman in the attic: A re-reading of aparna sen's *parama*

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### **Abstract**

The identification of madness as feminine has been an age old practice whose reflection is found in literary texts. The present essay is an attempt to understand the politics behind the construction of the madwoman in a patriarchal society. As it's primary text, it has taken a Bengali movie, *Parama*, directed by Aparna Sen which deals with the process which leads to the victimization of the protagonist as she chooses to question social norms. She is gradually segregated from the mainstream society and identified as a woman with little sanity. Taking this process as it's key pointer, the paper intends to read the film text and lay bare the politics of marginalising women as mad and thereby stifling their voices.

**Keywords:** Madwoman, politics, construction

### **Introduction**

Since time immemorial, it has been a practice to identify madness as feminine. The medical treatises of ancient Greece recognized hysteria as a disease caused by the wandering uterus. This concept was popularized in England by the English physician, Edward Jordan with his medical treatise, *The Suffocation of the Mother* in 1603. In an article, titled, "Hysteria, Witches, and the Wandering Uterus: A Brief History", Terri Kapsalis holds:

The uterus was believed to wander around the body like an animal, hungry for semen. If it wandered the wrong direction and made its way to the throat there would be choking, coughing or loss of voice, if it got stuck in the rib cage, there would be chest pain or shortness of breath, and so on. Any symptom that belonged to a female body could be attributed to the wandering uterus. The triad of marriage, intercourse, and pregnancy was the ultimate treatment for the semen-hungry womb. The uterus was a trouble maker and was best sated when pregnant. (n.p)

Along with the prevalence of faulty perception concerning female anatomy, it was a custom to marginalize women who "doth protest too much" in the name of mental aberration or madness (Shakespeare 54). Literary representation of madwomen and their incarceration has been quite a familiar tradition for ages. In fact, such madwomen have acted as potent threats for patriarchal social order. Hence, the only way to control such insane, wayward women is to impose the idea of passive womanhood. If she resists such conditioning, severe forms of oppression would define her predicament. This paper intends to look at the politics that lies behind the construction of madwoman in patriarchal society. Taking the film text *Parama*, directed by Aparna Sen in 1985, the paper seeks to find out whether unbridled female desire/sexuality forms one of the pertinent reasons to marginalize a woman as an epitome of insanity. On that note, this study will also try to find out whether madwoman stands in opposition to the Foucauldian notion of "docile bodies" that are the by-products of any disciplinary institution.

### **Women and Madness: Looking into the Politics of Constructing a Madwoman**

In their seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar attempt a critical survey of nineteenth century literary works by English women writers where madwomen recurrently occur as significant characters. In most cases, as argued in the work, madwomen appear as the female author's extended self embodying her anxiety and dilemma which stemmed from her attempt to usurp the seat of the author/maker of a literary universe that was mostly regarded as a male prerogative. It is needless to say that there were

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numerous attempts to ostracize women writers, who made their prominent advent into the literary scene of England since eighteenth century, in the name of mental aberration. For instance, Margaret Cavendish, who not only took to writing fictions but also stepped into the formidable arena of science, was referred to as “Mad Madge” (Gilbert and Gubar 62). Intellectual women who chose to prioritize mental exercise and question patriarchal dictates were perceived as social evil. The fear, that these seemingly wayward women evoked, instigated intense castigating comments. For instance, Wendy Martin notes:

In the nineteenth century this fear of the intellectual woman became so intense that the phenomenon was recorded in medical annals. A thinking woman was considered such a breach of nature that a Harvard doctor reported during his autopsy on a Radcliffe graduate he discovered that her uterus had shrivelled to the size of a pea. (Qtd. In Gilbert & Gubar 58)

It was a common presumption that education/ideation/intellect either unsexes a woman or makes them mentally ill. Moreover, women writers, constantly living under the monitoring gaze of the patriarchal society, had to experience “disease/dis-ease” which was often inculcated within their female protagonists (Gilbert and Gubar 57). In fact, many of the prominent women writers of nineteenth century England internalised the Victorian notion of “angel in the house” so much so that they often expressed their sense of guilt for not living up to the expectations of patriarchy. In her letter to Robert Southey, written in 1837, Charlotte Bronte expresses her deeper concern: “I have endeavoured to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfil. I don’t always succeed, for sometimes when I am teaching or sewing, I would rather be reading or writing” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 63-64). Moreover it was a common practice for the women writers to write under a pseudonym or often anonymously.

Eighteenth century England witnessed the rise of women writers who boldly asserted their presence in literary market. Writers like Aphra Behn took up writing as their profession. Interestingly, a short lived genre known by the name of amatory fictions was visible along with the prominent novels like *Pamela*, *Tom Jones* or *Tristram Shandy* which were shaped by the male novelists of Eighteenth century England. These amatory fictions were quite ahead of their time as they were not hesitant to narrate the tale of female desire. Aphra Behn, Eliza Heywood and Delarivier Manley were severely castigated for practicing such fictions. It is true that the same century gave rise to the protesting voices of suffragists like Mary Wollstonecraft or Mary Astell demanding women’s rights to education and vote, but the feminists were infamous in the society for questioning patriarchal mandates for women. Wollstonecraft was termed as “hyena in petticoats”.

With the influx of English education in colonial Bengal, a class of English educated Bengali intelligentsia assumed the role of social reformers. Their ideas reflected a strong and uncritical submission under colonial modernity. Quite naturally, the issue of women empowerment was readily taken up. Several endeavours to establish schools for women were prominent. Parallel to this, there were also immense efforts to control women within the domestic space. In the imagination of English educated Bengali *Bhadraloks*, “New Women” should not transgress the social boundaries meant for them. To put it in another way,

education must shape a woman into better mother of wife. It should not empower their resisting self. Quite contrary to the demand of the day, there were women who tried to step out of their familiar private domain. Despite several crucial efforts to choke their voice, there were women thwarting those efforts. Quite obviously, they had their share of caustic comments and censure. For instance, Kadambini Ganguly, the first Indian woman doctor faced scathing attack by the then orthodox Bengali periodical, *Bangabasi*. In 1891, it published an article where the author “accused her of being a whore” (qtd. in Karlekar WS 27). Another journal *Chandrika O Prabhakar*, offered piquant criticism against girls going to school marked with obscenity. It said: “If respectable Hindu gentlemen want to turn their wives into prostitutes, who can prevent that? Not us. on the contrary, we would love to visit these schools when night falls and set tests to these female students” (qtd. in Sarkar 169). Another conservative newspaper, *Samacharchandika* presumed the male teachers as potent threats to the girl students: “If young girls are sent off to schools, they might be deflowered since lust-stricken men would never let them alone” (qtd. in Sarkar 170). Thus, it was a practice to condemn women, who were assertive, as whores or marginalize them as madwomen or witches.

#### **A Discussion on Aparna Sen’s *Parama* (1985)**

For Bengali middle class (I am not generalising. The term “middle class” has its complexities and it does not refer to a homogenous mass of people. Keeping the plurality, that the term “middle class” entails, in mind, I am particularly talking about that section of middle class who had very limited exposure to World cinema) audience, *Parama* (1985) was quite a radical film even after the advent of Second Wave Feminism in the West. The film portrays the inner journey of its female protagonist Parama which encompasses her myriad selves: contented wife of a successful technocrat, mother of three children, and the pivot of a household which sustains only because of her regular ordeal. The film begins with the very familiar frame of Durga pujo in a wealthy Bengali household of North Calcutta. The characters are introduced to the audience through the lens of a photographer, Rahul Ray. The director deliberately places Parama at the centre of all grandeur which marks the festive scene. Dressed in a traditional red bordered white sari and gold jewellery, she almost resembles the deity on the pedestal, busy with her perfunctory zeal to perform all the rituals with utmost care. She is “boudi” for some, “kakima” for others. When people ask her name, her husband speaks on her behalf.

Parama’s first transgression occurs at the instigation of the photographer Rahul Ray who proposes to take a few snaps of her as part of his assignment on quintessential Bengali housewife. This time, too, no one seeks her consent. Despite her mild protests, she had to accept the offer. This allows her a separate niche to revive her long lost interests in music, poetry and other creative pursuits of her life including love. The film depicts two contrasting images of love making: one which is portrayed as a routine affair without any emotional involvement of Parama and her husband, whereas, the other which appears to be a more aesthetic frame showcasing Parama’s gradual acceptance of her emotional attachment with Rahul. With her new found love interest, she explores nooks and crannies of her familiar city. In fact, there are several scenes where the

director portrays Parama looking at the cityscape with the lens of Rahul's camera. As this becomes a habit, she acquires a fresh perspective to look at her life as well as her relationships.

Parama's first sexual encounter with Rahul happens accidentally in her Sudha pisi's room in an abandoned attic of her parental home. Sudha pisi was a widow whose illicit love affair scandalized her entire family. She has stayed in Parama's faded memory as a woman in seemingly deranged state of mind. All day she was locked up in the attic and requested everyone to unlatch the door. This woman, awaiting her emancipation, continuously haunts Parama, appearing in her nightmares again and again. From the moment Parama acknowledges her relationship with Rahul in the film, we can sense how there is an implication that she would embrace Sudha pisi's fate in the end. Her narrative about her Sitar lessons in childhood or the rainy afternoons full of laughter and joy with her siblings are always punctuated with the tale of Sudha pisi who had to commit suicide. The film showcases a re-enactment of Sudha's ostracization in Parama's life. Rahul leaves her for his new assignment. Her entire family chooses to disown her after an inadvertent discovery of her liaison with Rahul. After her failed suicide attempt, she ends up in a hospital. In the fag end of the film, we find Parama incarcerated in the hospital space. With her cropped hair she resembles her Sudha pisi. The doctor prescribes psychiatric treatment for her but Parama refuses to go back to her family. It seems that through psycho-therapy, the family as well as the medical professionals of the hospital were conspiring together to shape the resisting woman into a docile entity. The story, here, takes a new turn as Parama's initial hesitation with her extra marital affair now erodes to give way to a rare sagacity which prompts her not to submit under an imposed sense of guilt. The storyteller brings in various phases where the family stands as a microcosm of the patriarchal society at large and seeks to scrutinize the wayward woman, denies her autonomy, restricts her physically as well as mentally, marginalizes her and even steers her way towards self abnegation. But she survives all onslaughts and promises not to submit. This time she disowns her household, her bedroom, her kitchen space where she has been toiling for ages to plan her best performances as a wife and a mother. The open ending of the film leaves us with several questions: What will be her ultimate predicament? Does she manage to sustain without any financial assistance from her husband? Will she go back to her parental house? The silent woman refuses to answer, so does the director.

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