CHAPTER SIX

NARRATIVES OF ALIENATION AND DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Then he turned to me and asked me my age.
“The age of madness,” I replied.

Hanan al-Shaykh1

Women, Madness, and Literature

Madness has long been the focus of feminist inquiry. The striking statistical evidence that more women than men suffer from madness, often regardless of nationality, marital status, age, class, or race, and the pervasive cultural representation of madness as a “female malady,” have stimulated a great deal of feminist scholarship.2 Many feminists have expressed dissatisfaction with the principles of psychology and psychiatry, which they fault for representing exclusively male-defined values and norms. As Barbara Hill Rigney puts it: “The feminist feud with Freud is more basic than a disagreement over the issues of female sexuality or therapeutic technique. The real quarrel is one of fundamental ideology: Freud’s deterministic philosophy, what Weisstein terms ‘the fundamentalist myth of sex organ causality,’ is perceived...as invalidating social and cultural explanations for psychosis.”3 Most feminist scholars attribute women’s high rate of mental illness to their social conditions, especially their devalued and narrowly defined roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, and to their mistreatment by a male-dominated and possibly misogynist medical practice. In her classic work, Women and Madness, the psychologist Phyllis Chesler argues that the key to understanding madness in women lies in patriarchal oppression: “What we consider ‘madness,’ whether it appears in

1 Hanan al-Shaykh, “A Season of Madness,” in I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops, p. 4.
women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex-role stereotype.”

Emphasizing that unlike men, women are categorically denied the experience of cultural supremacy, humanity, and renewal based on their sexual identity, she theorizes that some women are driven mad by this situation. In her view, “such madness is essentially an intense experience of female biological, sexual, and cultural castration, and a doomed search for potency.”

Similarly, the literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their insightful study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, conclude that “patriarchal socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally.”

They show that the fictional character of the madwoman who appears repeatedly in the poetry and fiction of women writers of the nineteenth century is the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and anger at the institutions and conventions of patriarchal culture. In creating a dark double for herself, the female author “enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts,” while at the same time expressing her despair and protest.

Other feminist scholars take the position that the association of women with madness goes beyond economic, social, and political structures to the very foundations of logos, reasoning, and articulation. They point out that within the dualistic systems of language and representation operating in Western culture, women are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind. Luce Irigaray, for example, suggests that it is the repression of women’s sexuality, identity, and language in patriarchal cultures which gives rise to women’s madness.

Elaine Showalter, in her historical account of psychiatry and madness in England, provocatively entitled *The

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5 Ibid., p. 71.


7 Ibid., p. 85.
