

Constructing Madness, Power, and Subjugated Knowledge: A Foucauldian Reading of Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* (1987)

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Abstract

This article explores the complex relationship between those deemed “mad” and society. It reveals the diverse ways through which madness functions as a social construct in societies that still exclude those outside their boundaries. It aims to expose how *Juletane* (1987) by Myriam Warner-Vieyra challenges boundaries within an oppressive socio-cultural system. The novel moves beyond the depiction of madness as a purely psychological condition. It presents it as a stigmatizing label positioned between the categories of ‘reason’ and ‘unreason’, and imposed upon individuals, particularly women, who find themselves in the face of embedded strict expectations. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s conceptual insights, the study claims that madness is a crafted epistemic certainty produced through the silencing of women's voices by patriarchal institutions. Ultimately, the article reveals the methods that *Juletane* seeks to move beyond definitions of rationality by converting her madness into a counter-epistemology, from which she struggles to generate crucial consciousness.

Keywords: Madness; Social Construction; Michel Foucault; Power/Knowledge; Women's Resistance.

Introduction

Madness remains one of the most contested aspects in the social sciences. Its complexity has generated multiple interpretations and shifting perceptions across history, eras, and cultures, and it is also laden with numerous political, social, medical, psychological, and religious assumptions and meanings. In *Juletane* (1987), Myriam Warner-Vieyra challenges prevailing views of madness as an innate neurological illness or a personal disorder. Drawing on Foucault's understanding of madness, this article employs close textual analysis to examine how madness becomes a site of alternative knowledge. Essential to this argument is *Juletane*'s diary; it is not a vision of recovery as entirely and overwhelmingly a private space for recording accounts of psychological suffering, but rather a counter-archive preserving accounts and experiences prohibited from accessing the social ladder by dominant institutional discourses. *Juletane* chronicles the violence of patriarchy and cultural estrangement while simultaneously resisting

the social authority that defines her as "mad." Her writing thus moves beyond the limits of therapeutic recovery. It serves as an alternative epistemic space, allowing the marginalized to expose the multiple contradictions inherited within patriarchal regimes of truth. It becomes a convincing testimony and a subtle manifestation of disobedience against mechanisms of isolation that seek to deny her agency.

Madness has been studied from different perspectives, such as post-colonial and feminist scholars; Bella Brodzki (1993) and Ann Elizabeth Willey (1997) have linked Juletane's madness to oppression, cultural estrangement, and trauma. This paper extends these views by depicting madness as a form of subjugated knowledge.

1-Madness as Social Construct and Subjugated Knowledge

In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965), Michel Foucault argues that the historical treatment of those considered mad reflects systems of exclusion, involving both physical and conceptual relegation. Their treatment represents a moral error, as it is not limited to confinement and isolation but also denies them a legitimate sphere and voice within the domain of reason. According to Foucault, specific accepted norms determine human behaviours, and those who deviate from accepted norms become subject to symbolic exclusion and moral judgment.

From the Classical Age onward—even more clearly during the nineteenth century—Western society situated madness in a neutral space, stripping it of meaning and disturbing its disruptive force. The same culture did not challenge what madness discloses about human nature and social order. The Age of Enlightenment was an era in which reason was viewed as humanity's crowning achievement. Madness came to express "the unreason of the world" (Foucault, 1965, p. 13).

Foucault, in *Knowledge/Power* (1980), explains the effects of power and its functions as a network of relations that operates through institutions, discourses, and everyday practices. Societies are not simply governed by controlling individuals, but behaviours, decisions, and legitimacy. Power represents the axis of privileging regimes of truth and legitimate knowledge, operating through normalization rather than compulsion. Foucault (2003) argues that subjugated knowledges are the outcome of relegating, marginalizing, and burying forms of knowledge by dominant institutions and systems of power. He defines them as "unqualified or even disqualified knowledges" that remain "parallel to, marginal to, medical knowledge" (8). Exclusion thus reflects the authority of psychiatric institutions to determine which forms of knowledge are considered legitimate.

From this perspective, madness becomes a visible site of epistemic resistance in the struggle against this imposed architecture of thought, because institutions' definitions are usually accompanied by processes of silencing and the regulation of difference.

Foucault questions whether the psychiatric judgment is certain: "We leave it to medical archaeology to determine whether or not a man was sick, criminal, or insane who was admitted to the hospital for 'derangement of morals', or because he had 'mistreated his wife' and tried several times to kill himself." (Foucault, 1965, pp. 65-66).

Though patriarchy is not developed in Foucault's theory, this article extends Foucault's concept of subjugated knowledges to women's experiences under patriarchy. Women's experiences are frequently dismissed as hysterical or irrational, demonstrating how the label of madness functions as a political mechanism that diminishes women's epistemic authority and supports patriarchal hierarchies. Androcentric and gendered institutions regulate women's bodies and behaviour while defining which voices are recognized as legitimate. Consequently, patriarchy establishes the boundaries between sanity and madness, determining which forms of female expression are accepted and which are dismissed as irrational.

Elaine Showalter, in *The Female Malady* (1985), argues that the psychological suffering of women has a wide connection with gendered assumptions that interconnect femininity with irrationality, emotional disorder, and hysteria. Her feminist perspective extends Foucault's theory of power/knowledge by revealing how psychiatric institutions participate in a system of gendered power to determine legitimate experiences and voices, and therefore those whose voices are dismissed as irrational. The female madness thus critiques institutional forces that determine and undermine whose voices get heard and whose knowledge is authorized as irrational. This perspective aligns with an understanding of madness as being a site of epistemic struggle against power relations and authority.

2-Madness as Social Construct in Warner-Vieyra

Myriam Warner-Vieyra (1939–2017), a Francophone Guadeloupean writer, is best known for her novel *Juletane* (1987). She occupies a central literary position for her interrelated themes of gender, exile, and cultural displacement, and for her examination of the experiences of minorities, especially Black women from African and Caribbean cultures.

In *Juletane* (1987), Warner-Vieyra demonstrates that the psychological deterioration of Juletane grows progressively through harsh and interconnected experiences of disinheritance, racial displacement, emotional neglect, and androcentric domination. Each traumatic experience reinforces the other by producing a state of deep alienation. Juletane's identity is constructed through relations of power that govern inclusion, exclusion, and belonging. Her husband and the surrounding community shape a disturbing force of intimidation by which this man keeps his wife in a state of fear and repeatedly casts her as an outsider, denying her social recognition and emotional security.

"Mamadou arrived. His presence irritated me. I could not understand how the man I had loved, that I still loved, had in so short a time become this stranger. For a year we had been together and he had never mentioned his first family nor this child who was his daughter " (*Juletane*, p.25), Juletane's repeated observation of how Mamadou has become " stranger" carefully marks the beginning of Juletane's emotional displacement resulting from her husband's betrayal that is not confined to marital deception, rather, it reveals the destabilization of the foundations upon which her identity has traditionally been constructed. Her husband's transformation demonstrates one of the multiple personal losses and the collapse of the solid relationship established on trust and belonging. Therefore, betrayal and deception emerge as the first step in Juletane's psychological disintegration, playing a role in the social construct of madness.

Rather than being a source of love and belonging, her marriage becomes a site of silence and estrangement: "Mamadou came very late. I couldn't think of anything to say to him. Apart from 'Hello, how are you feeling?' he didn't say three words either. So we sat for the length of the visit each lost in our own thoughts like an old couple spending a long evening together. I pictured myself knitting socks while Mamadou did crossword puzzles" (*Juletane*, 31). This scene exhibits the emotional void that defines their relationship. This type of silence determines the absence of communication and psychological violence that erodes Juletane's sense of self. The institution of marriage thus represents a social network that deprives her of legitimacy, leaves her in a speechless terror, indicating the inability of the subaltern to occupy a position within hegemonic dominant structures, from which her speech becomes intelligible (Spivak, 1988), and denies her intimacy and companionship, and gradually drives her towards psychological collapse.

From a Foucauldian insight established above, Juletane's marriage acts as a mechanism regulating Juletane's manners while simultaneously denying her recognition. Silence carefully explains the consequences of marital brutality and illustrates her progressive erasure from society and the established order: "I wandered from room to room like a soul in torment" (*Juletane*, p. 36). Her physical presence is coupled with symbolic absence, where her speech carries no meaning.

Power permeates Juletane's marriage, as Mamadou increasingly retreats from Juletane's life; suffering and emptiness become heavier than before: "Mamadou had become edgy, irritable; he started coming home late and spent all his evenings with his friends" (*Juletane*, p.35). Juletane's social validation is absent in the face of her total exclusion, resulting from an unbalanced network of relationships that constructs her identity. Mamadou's behaviours transmit the dominant patriarchal reasoning of polygamy through which the husband imposes complete authority in the distribution of visibility. Juletane's suffering, therefore, results from her exclusion from the network of relationships through which her identity is socially maintained and constructed.

The quote, "Here they call me 'the mad woman'" (*Juletane*, p. 2), uncovers the Foucauldian framework of discourse and power. Through language, Juletane's madness has been constructed while simultaneously reducing her identity to pathology and mental disorder. This labeling transforms her from a speaking voice and a subject into an absent individual, overriding all human aspects. The label of "mad woman" deprives her of credibility, where her testimonial injustice is produced and prevents her testimony from being heard because of prejudicial stereotypes classifying her as a "mad" (Fricker, 2007). This status puts her under society's observation, classification, and judgment. This process confirms her abnormality within the discourse of insanity.

"He would carry on conversations for hours in his native language, with no regard for me. Whenever we went out he would introduce me, then forget me in a corner, like some discarded object, surrounded by a group of women who were smiling and kind, but who spoke no French. I saw him at a distance, chatting with the men." (*Juletane*, p. 23). This passage shows that the lack of communication contributes to Juletane's psychological fragmentation. The wide linguistic differences between the West Indian and African contexts, cultural distancing, social

unfamiliarity, and displacement intensify her unbelonging and prevent her from fully participating in the new social world. From a Foucauldian perspective, exclusion from discourses extends to exclusion from authority. Madness serves as the only tool and language through which her pain becomes narratable.

The lack of expression justifies the repeated constraints that contribute to silence and marginalize this figure, thereby strengthening her invisibility and marginalization. According to Foucault (1965), madness is determined by the historical and cultural processes of othering and exclusion, in which some forms of expression are delegitimized, and speech is silenced. Though madness is placed at the margins in comparison to certain rational discourses, it becomes a counter-discourse to many dominant regimes of truth. It explores diverse mechanisms that display how power shapes normality, abnormality, and social order.

It is through the institution of marriage that Juletane is denied existence and self-control. Her husband appears emotionally detached, devoid of emotional tenderness. Violence gradually erodes her self-confidence and self-worth: "That slap in the face was the last drop that made my cup of passivity overflow and transformed my patience into a raging torrent." (*Juletane*, p. 50). This quote locates madness within a gendered epistemology that has historically permitted the legitimacy of regulating and controlling women's bodies, conduct, and emotions. From this status, the protagonist's constructed mental illness carefully contradicts the perturbation of her psyche, and emerges as a serious outcome of an androcentric framework that pathologizes deviated behaviours from the drawn gender norms and gives authority to coercive forms of social control.

Myriam Warner-Vieyra brings to light how the normalization of masculine dominance as a sign of systematic patriarchal practice can have catastrophic and irremovable impacts on women's mental and psychological health. Juletane's violence gradually clarifies her repeated signs of irrationality. It explains clearly the culmination of brutality in parallel with prolonged processes of exclusion, silencing, rejection, and erasure. Therefore, confirming the act of suppressing subjectivity by social structures, institutions, and power constitutes the reference point at which madness is systematically produced in parallel with the deprivation of agency, selfhood, and recognition, therefore "Her madness allows her to declare war on Mamadou's household, on polygamy, her own barrenness, and the treatment of barren women" (Mountou, 2015, p.156).

3 Juletane's Madness as an Alternative Knowledge

Despite the hope to move beyond defining madness through reason and social institutions, the events of *Juletane* reveal this notion to be overly optimistic and to represent a condition through which subjugated knowledge is constituted. Though Juletane's testimony is stripped of meaning and legitimacy, her diary explicitly references the prolonged violence and exposes a counter-epistemic site, challenging polygamy, exclusion, and oppression rather than being embodied in a condition of illness.

3.1. Madness as Epistemic Resistance

The gradual psychological collapse of Juletane is the product of repeated violent acts and experiences of marital betrayal. Her marriage to Mamadou, in the hope of building a true-love

relationship, renders her speech silent and unheard within the domination of discourses, reflecting what Spivak (1988) describes as silencing the subaltern "the subaltern cannot speak" (p. 308); she later discovers that her husband systematically erodes her existence and security: "I can put the final period to this diary which Mamadou will never read" (*Juletane*, p.78). She encounters a new, strange world of polygamy and learns that her husband has hidden the truth about having two wives and children. Her migration towards fulfillment becomes an experience of cultural estrangement and imprisonment. The type of violence she lived through demonstrates the extent of everyday practices of exclusion, invisibility, and neglect.

Juletane's refusal to adjust to the drawn boundaries in her world, in an attempt to survive differently, sets her apart from the other women. Labeling her "the mad woman" stems from her inability to normalize inequalities and accept what society presents as natural. Warner-Vieyra thus uncovers the political nature of madness and relocates madness from the female protagonist to the institutions that define patriarchy and oppression as ordinary life.

Juletane increasingly uncovers diverse contradictions that are rarely visible within dominant discourses that claim social coherence: "That was where he was going last Sunday, very late at night, after he had brought me here." (*Juletane*, 78). She exhibits types of hypocrisy existing within the society and a culture celebrating family while simultaneously minimizing women's authority. She foregrounds the extent to which this culture encourages communal solidarity while legitimizing women's isolation and emotional neglect. She demonstrates how this society accepts women's suffering in the face of male domination. Juletane acknowledges how dominant discourses attempt to hide all these contradictions and the hierarchy within power relations. Her madness contradicts every meaning of pathology, and emerges as a strategy for uncovering what institutions attempt to conceal beyond their rationality. Therefore, her withdrawal, which is an outcome of her awareness of concealed reality, is interpreted as insanity by those surrounding her.

3.2 The Diary as Counter-Archive

Warner-Vieyra confirms the position of madness as an alternative knowledge. Juletane's diary does not represent simply a personal testimony but an aggregate form of Black feminist knowledge that questions patriarchal definitions of reason (Patricia Hill Collins, 2000). Warner challenges the logic of the established hierarchy by revealing how reason excludes her central character. Juletane is regarded as an irrational subject, deprived of authority, agency, and credibility.

In her diary, Juletane documents systematic acts of oppression. This diary is not simply a private victory over hardship but an aggregate practice of self-representation. Building upon Brodzki's claim (1993), "Writing not only provides emotional sustenance and intensity..." (73), but also produces an alternative epistemology through which Juletane delivers a unique mode of resistance rather than confession and challenges patriarchal regimes of truth. Her desire to chronicle a permanent positive image of solidity clarifies the rupture on which societies are built. Juletane's return to recording her resistance forces the community to confront the cost of survival and to participate in a collective release from social pressure that is simultaneously an act of moral responsibility.

She becomes the body that perceives contradictions usually invisible to those fully claiming inclusion in patriarchal societies. Though society identifies itself as rational, it normalizes accepting many unjust social practices, such as polygamous inequality, apathy, neglect, and the silencing of women. Juletane's madness emerges, exposing the irrationality and contradictions ensconced within these institutions considered rational.

The diary serves as a symbolic archive that documents dismissed experiences from prevailing social discourse and allows the very act of speaking to claim her subjectivity. Brodzki (1993) claims that "In Juletane's case, the act of writing on a blank page (conceived implicitly as confession and testimony) provides both therapeutic and cognitive benefits" (72). I consider the diary more than a therapeutic tool and a move beyond self-recovery and healing; but a venue from which new episteme is declared, and through which Juletane, as a female body, succeeds in claiming her authority over several social systems and discourses, positioning herself as both a privileged interlocutor and a voice for her disturbing narrative. Juletane's reclamation of this subjugated knowledge is never a simple triumph over strict strictures; but a stubborn persistence in the face of the impossible.

Since institutions exaggerate in classifying Juletane as mentally unstable, the whole "novel takes the form of a diary..." (Willey, 1997, p. 450). Her writing uncovers the hidden history of emotional neglect, abuse, loneliness, displacement, domination: "I feel drained. I have no one to love, no one to hate." (*Juletane*, 78). The diary thus contests the main errors, contradictions, and moral failures of institutional definitions of insanity: "Mad people are not mad, but wise and just." (*Juletane*, p. 78). It documents the society's irrationality and its systematic oppression. Juletane thus transforms the stubborn spots of patriarchy and ambiguously embedded codes into a resistant mode of struggle, converting the protagonist's indeterminacy in facing her imposed future into a rigorous certainty.

3.3 Trauma and Fragmented Testimony

The most striking example revealing the peak of madness in the novel is the shocking act of Juletane's violence, which exposes the ambiguity of the death of Mamadou's first wife's children. I argue that Juletane's disturbed memories, psychic fragmentation, psychological instability, and contradictory reflections here reflect the consequences of embedded prolonged brutality and contradict the hostile milieu of distancing. This violence is the outcome of a cumulative fragmentation imposed upon Juletane's identity as a displaced black woman in an incoherent and gendered social environment. It may also be interpreted as a result of social and emotional unbelonging, where an insecure familial role represents the perplexity and incoherence of the social world itself. This is what Juletane writes in her diary:

On Sunday, the twenty-seventh, at supper, we had a meal of boiled millet, prepared by Awa. She ate, then got up from the table, leaving me alone with the children. Did I pour the content of the medicine bottle into the children's drinking cup? Or did I leave the bottle where they could reach it? I don't remember anything...I had taken the bottle intending to swallow a few drops, as I sometimes did to have a quiet night. I found it empty in the pocket of my dress, the next day, the day after the children's death. (*Juletane*, p.74)

This harsh moment is uncertain, horrifying, and disturbing to the reader. Juletane herself is unable to tell what happened. Her fractured memory reveals her psychological disintegration, the entanglement of intrusive powers, and the accumulation of unmitigated horrors, making her lose temporal coherence. One may wonder whether she is truly responsible for ending these innocent lives, especially since she has professed her love for them: “I love Awa’s children; they are the children I would like to have had” (*Juletane*, p. 40).

Does this act have a connection with her cognizance, unconsciousness, or resentment towards her inability to have children? Warner-Vieyra associates readers with the text through the ambiguity of who the victim, the perpetrator, and the one who bears responsibility are. The key question here is not whether Juletane is guilty or not, but how prolonged violence fractures her memory system, uncertainty, and narrativity. Another example of Juletane’s madness appears in her violence against Ndeye. Juletane mentions, “Did I know that the children and Mamadou’s wife were dead? Yes, I knew, but I did not know what had brought about their deaths. Had I thrown oil on the third wife? Where that was concerned, I remembered everything” (*Juletane*, p.76).

The fragmentation of the diary reinforces its epistemological function and uncovers many hidden truths through its disjointed structure. The instability of Juletane’s memory, her uncertainty, present reflection, and emotional intensity not only demonstrate the fragmented nature of Juletane’s narrative but destabilize psychiatric certainty and strengthen Juletane’s credibility in her testimony; this splitting reveals the consequences of persistent trauma, shattering her sense of narrative coherence and showing her inability to generate a stable story (Caruth, 1996; Herman, 2015). Trauma and permanent violence disturb linear narration, tracing the lived suffering that rational discourses cannot convey. Though in their most extreme formulation, their presence implies that the condition of patriarchy will ultimately destroy the female life first of all in the psychological and spiritual sense, and afterward in the physical sense as well, whether by fragmentation and disconnection, or by total suppression.

Warner-Vieyra inserts uncertainty and transforms it into a critique of the many interpretations of madness. The scene illustrates that trauma disturbs memory and fractures the certainty of narrative. Readers themselves are unable to make a clear distinction between victim and perpetrator; the narrative itself unsettles the categories of innocence and guilt, as Agamben (1999) points out; this issue becomes baffling in a context of extreme violence. At the same time, this problem exhibits the inability of institutional psychiatric authority to make clear the dissimilarity between sanity and insanity (Foucault, 1965). This ambiguity is coupled with what Felman and Laub (1992) state that testimony disturbed by trauma is defined by gaps rather than narrative coherence, where the witness is unable to recount what happened. Her disturbed memory not only stems from her perception of black women as oppressed, but also becomes a justification for acts of violence against Afro-Caribbeans. Therefore, this ambiguous event requires a focus on the psychological devastation emerging from prolonged violence rather than presenting an extensive explanation of the individual criminal act.

"I was no longer expecting anything. I spent my days shut up in my room." (*Juletane*, p.43). This passage illustrates that rather than listening to Juletane, society transforms her speaking voice into an object of social and medical observation. Juletane's madness is triggered by the

cumulative effects of masculine betrayal and infidelity that give rise to a desire for violent retribution. Her ego's nonconformity to set rules and norms confirms that the more Juletane speaks her difficult truths about the injustice permeating her social world, the more her expressions and speech are dismissed as irrational.

Juletane's perspective, thus, focuses on how madness uncovers the reasons for prolonged violence that reveal the mechanisms by which unjust societies contribute to constructing rationality. Rather than representing the collapse of the protagonist, it reveals "a form of rebellious consciousness" and how her madness generates a counter-history that exposes institutional truth and restores epistemic strength, especially for those excluded from prevailing discourse.

Conclusion

The study shows how *Juletane* challenges the perception that madness is merely a psychological disorder or a pathology by stressing that it is produced through relations of power. Patriarchal domination and social exclusion are shown to be central forces in producing that collapse. Drawing on Michel Foucault's conceptualization of madness, the study has revealed that madness appears as a social and institutional classification that legitimizes disciplinary intervention. The hospitalization of the protagonist, in turn, does not emerge from her clinically demonstrable pathology but rather functions as a punitive measure triggered by her refusal and transgression of gendered norms and normative codes imposed by the social order. Juletane's psychological collapse is transformed into a form of critical consciousness. By extending Foucault's notions of madness and subjugated knowledges to the gendered realities circulating in society, this study shows that Juletane's madness gives voice to alternative forms of knowledge and exposes the prolonged violence masked beneath dominant regimes of truth. Since the analysis gives a considerable and exclusive focus to *Juletane*, the findings should not be related to or generalized across all studies representing madness in postcolonial literature. The study also offers an extensive framework for examining how literary texts stand in the face of institutional definitions of sanity and exhibit how power relations intervene in shaping marginalized identities.

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