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**NARRATING WOMEN'S MADNESS IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S  
*THE BIRD'S NEST*: AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS**

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***Abstract***

Shirley Jackson's *The Bird's Nest* (1954) portrays a character, Elizabeth Richmond who is facing multiple personality disorder and eventually being labeled as being anomalous. The novel is narrated from a different point of views (i.e. Dr. Wright and Aunt Morgen) as well as from Elizabeth's point of view that enable the readers to juxtapose the notion of female malady in the novel. Elizabeth's identity further disintegrates into three personalities. Social aspects of identity are often overlooked in the construction of one's identity. Hence, Clayton argues that environmental identity interacts with the natural or social world and constructs the sense of *Self* in society. Her insecurity results in the creation of different personalities to protect herself. The present study, therefore, analyses the fragmentation of Elizabeth's personalities from an ecofeminist point of view where the fabrication of personalities represents the vulnerability of women under the patriarchal driven society. Therefore, this study examines the reasons behind women's madness from the ecofeminist perspectives because ecofeminism emphasizes the importance of environmental balance to human beings. The ecofeminist approach helps in dismantling the forged representation of women's madness and further examines the effects of the environments on Elizabeth.

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## 1. Introduction

Shirley Jackson's *The Bird's Nest* (1954) forays into the postmodern grounds of mental illness, specifically delve into the multiple personality disorder. This gothic novel is narrated from different perspectives, namely Elizabeth Richmond, Betsy, Aunt Morgen, and Doctor Wright. Elizabeth appears entirely nondescript at first, living only with her Aunt Morgen and working a dull job at the museum. However, similar to the other Shirley Jackson's female characters, there are hints that there is more lurking beneath the placid surface of Elizabeth Richmond's plainness. The doctor's diagnosis uncovers the possibility of Elizabeth Richmond sharing a body unknowingly with three other very distinctive personalities (i.e. Betsy, Beth, and Bess) who each wanted to be known and heard. He proceeds to administer hypnosis treatments upon her and through this, encounters the sweet and pleasant young woman who calls herself Beth. However, he shortly comes face to face with yet another personality- a boisterous, rebellious Betsy. The last personality appears as Bess when she woke up in a hospital after she had run away to New York in search of her own mother. Doctor Wright, who has limited knowledge on such mental disorder then deduces that Elizabeth Richmond must be suffering from dissociative identity disorder or more commonly known as multiple personality disorder. He seeks to get to the bottom of this but his attempts are repulsed by Betsy and the sometimes uncooperative Bess. The different personalities try desperately to rise to the surface and Elizabeth incessantly struggles to keep them suppressed. Towards the end of the novel, the four personalities have melded to form a single entity, although there are some hints that the previous personalities still linger. Hence, the present study interprets this novel from an ecofeminist perspective that focuses on how Elizabeth negotiates with the different environments that seem to destabilize her sense of Self.

### 1.1. Madness as a Form of "Female Malady" or Resistance

For centuries, it has been revealed that the number of women in mental institutions outnumbers that of men (Showalter, 1985) and implied that madness was an exclusively female condition, with the coinage of the term 'female malady'. In short, women are prone to mental illnesses as compared to men. It is further supported by several women writers such as Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkin Gilman, Charlotte Brontë and others who depict female malady as women's syndrome associated with the volatility of women's emotion. Jackson delves more into the intricacies of women's madness, and the trials Elizabeth Richmond faces on a daily basis and soon being diagnosed as multiple personality disorder.

Multiple personality disorder is a disorder that is characterized by the presence of two or more distinct and complex identities or personality. It is also known as dissociative identity disorder. Jackson also offers readers glimpses into how women's madness is fabricated in the text, as she does not necessarily portray it as something enormously negative but instead, depicted as a young woman's battle against the social conventions termed as "psychiatric imperialism" (Chesler, 2005). The mixed perspectives also present Elizabeth from several points of views that create a deeper understanding of who she is and how she is like. Jackson spun the tale of a young woman's gradual descent into madness into something complex that should be taken seriously by providing a platform through the mixed narratives that allow the readers to relate to Elizabeth and the struggles she faced. The four personalities within Elizabeth Richmond suggest a fragmentation of identity, which symbolically represents a form of

resistance against the rigid social constructions, or rather, against patriarchy itself. The personalities within her that gradually emerged are vastly different from the frail and weak Elizabeth Richmond. Consequently, she sits in a very unique position that enables her to switch from one personality to another as an act of protest and rebellion against the subjugation women faced.

### **1.2. Elizabeth Richmond's Environmental Identity**

Clayton and Opatow (2003) argues that "because the social aspects of identity are so obvious and so important, psychologists often overlook the impact of nonsocial (or at least nonhuman) objects in defining identity" (p. 45). In *The Bird's Nest*, different personalities are triggered as a result of the place itself, and what emotions the specific place evokes within Elizabeth. The notion of "place" and identity are inevitably connected, it is the surrounding environments that insistently shape an individual's sense of Self. As identity and place are inexorably linked and thus, Elizabeth Richmond's multiple personality disorder is better understood as to why certain personalities only reveal themselves in certain places. In order to unravel Elizabeth's environmental identity, the present study will examine the notion of place she is in (i.e. natural environment and social environment). Social aspects of identity are often overlooked in the construction of one's identity. Hence, Clayton, and Opatow (2003) argues that environmental identity interacts with the natural or social world to construct a sense of *Self* in society. Clayton further elaborates that it is:

A sense of connection to some part of the non-human natural environments...a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are and can be similar to another collective identity in providing us with a sense of connection, of being part of a larger whole, and with a recognition of the similarity between ourselves and others (p. 45-46).

The shaping of one's identity is influenced by both environments, especially during the 1950s, in which patriarchal mentality shroud the meaning of being a woman. Women's restricted roles in the patriarchal society segregate and place women in the locus of passivity. However, Elizabeth Richmond, being positioned in a powerless situation, her multiple personalities represent a quandary that helps her to regain her sense of agency and further challenge the authority in the novel. The understanding of her own mental conditions unleash her inner trauma and aids her to reconstruct her sense of Self.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Women's madness has always been primarily explored through a psychological viewpoint and rarely has taken social factors into consideration. Therefore, the present study examines the notion of women's madness and their interconnectedness to the environments (i.e. natural and social) that assert roles to shape one's identity. Madness is considered as a form of female malady or sickness of the mind which cause the woman protagonist to behave atypically throughout the novel. Murphy (1995) asserts that "many theorists ignore the places in which women find themselves and the relation of environment to selfhood". The study of the individual's social factors such as the influence of the environment (the organization of the society and ecological structures of the city) is crucial to be examined the society that these women were in and the relationships between humans and non-humans also need to be highlighted

and analyzed. Similarly, Morton (2007) suggested that there is a need to examine “how humans experience their place in the world.” (p. 2).

In other words, the ‘specificity of the place allows it to serve as a basis for or reflection of individual identity’ and how ‘place and self-hood are mutually codifying’ (Clayton & Opatow 2003). This suggests that when it comes to Elizabeth Richmond, certain sides of her personalities are triggered within the condition of the certain places, such as the usual Elizabeth taking the helm at her workplace, with Betsy and Beth only emerging in the doctor’s office and at home. By using the theory of ecofeminism, the question of her complex identity as well as how it is linked to both her social and natural environments is further explored. Her sense of belonging is intertwined with her social interaction with the people around her as well as the environments that she grew up in. As her sense of place may refer to a social aspect or physical settings (built environments), it is vital to examine how the environments, as well as the protagonist’s sense of place, play roles in constructing her identity

### **3. Research Questions**

The present study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do the multifaceted environments affect the formation of Elizabeth Richmond’s multiple personalities in Shirley Jackson’s *The Bird’s Nest*?
2. What are Elizabeth Richmond’s strategies to resist patriarchy in *The Bird’s Nest*?
3. To what extent does Elizabeth Richmond’s madness acts as a form of empowerment in *The Bird’s Nest*?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The study explores the interrelatedness of human beings and their environments with regards to the discourse of women’s madness. The present study argues that the environments shape our core identity, termed as environmental identity. The study strives to determine the importance of both social and natural environments in shaping the protagonist’s environmental identity. This study intends to analyse specifically how the environments play forceful roles over the protagonist’s mental state, as well as how her identity acts as a construct relative to the environment; exemplified by how different places manage to conjure the different sides of her. The social and natural environments in *The Bird’s Nest* will be analysed as the contributing factors to the protagonist’s different reaction to different surroundings. Consequently, the different environments are also conditioned to conjure different personalities within herself as well as the notion of trauma that influences Elizabeth Richmond’s mental well-being.

### **5. Research Methods**

Ecofeminism thoroughly delves into the ties between feminism and the natural environments and how it connects to one’s core identity. From this aspect, it is possible to ascertain if the urban environment has an impact on Elizabeth’s mental state in *The Bird’s Nest*. Through this branch of feminist theory, it is fascinating to note how various environments such as built environments and social interaction, is able to shape and influence an individual. Women have long since been assumed to be

closer to nature, leading to the implication that the environments and ecological factors have a larger impact on women.

It ought to be considered that perhaps a different point of view, specifically the ecofeminism viewpoint where it is hypothesized that the environments are capable of affecting an individual's psyche, can unearth social factors that cause the subjugation of Elizabeth Richmond and women, as a whole. As the issue of female madness has always been 'defined and codified by male psychiatrists' (Showalter, 1985), it is necessary to take another view on the matter. Ecofeminism, in this case, is a perspective that seeks to link women and the environments together and reveal how one's surroundings impact one's mental health.

In the present study, ecofeminism approach highlights the degradation of the urban environment in Shirley Jackson's *The Bird's Nest* and its effects on Elizabeth. The interwoven notions of gender and environments in the patriarchal society is unfit to human sustainability.

## 6. Findings

This section probes into the notion of women's madness, where it is vital to re-consider the madwoman's narrative and re-examine the concept in the postmodern society rather than unwaveringly depicted as mad, bad and sad women. In other words, the retelling of their madwomen's experiences help in facilitating the textual representation of madness in the present study.

### 6.1. Elizabeth Richmond's Madness in the Multifaceted Environment

The title of Jackson's novel symbolically represents a *place*, like a bird's nest, aims to accommodate the three other alter-personalities. As mentioned earlier, the present and subsequent sections examine Elizabeth Richmond's resistance towards patriarchy in both social and natural environments. The social environment in the discussion refers to a place with finitude and physicality, where meaningful interactions are made. The meaningful interaction at the particular place includes a discussion on Elizabeth's limited social circle, mainly with Aunt Morgen, Doctor Wright and the alter-personalities within herself (i.e. Beth, Betsy, and Bess). The multifaceted environments include the house she lives in with Aunt Morgen, her workplace, the museum, Doctor Wright's office and finally, New York. Jackson's mastery of gothic elements in her work illustrates the isolation of natural elements from its social context that eventually contribute to the creation of an oppressed environment. In the museum where she works:

Elizabeth Richmond had a corner of an office on the third floor; it was the section of the museum closet, as it were, to the surface, the section where correspondence with the large world outside was carried on freely, where least shelter was offered to cringing scholarly souls (Jackson, 1954, p. 2).

At home, Aunt Morgen, her only relative who takes care of her is being portrayed as a masculine figure throughout the novel and it is shown in the following excerpt:

Type of woman freely described as "masculine," if she had been a man she would have cut a very poor figure indeed. If she had been a man, she would have been middle-sized, weak-jawed, shifty-eyed, and clumsy; fortunately, having been born not a man, she had turned out a woman,

and had of necessity adopted from adolescence (with what grief, perhaps, and frantic railings against the iniquities of fate, which made her sister lovely) the personality of the gruff, loud-voiced woman so invariably described as “masculine” (Jackson, 1954, p. 8).

The theory of ecofeminism is substantial in exploring the connection between women and their place to achieve selfhood. Ecofeminism thoroughly probes into the connections between women to their environments; to arrive at a conclusion that they are essentially viable in the construction of one’s identity. Even though the cause of her headache is unknown, it is partly due to the unruly environments of the place itself.

The present study also unveils Elizabeth Richmond’s multiple personality disorder as a form of resistance against patriarchal imprisonment. Women’s madness is depicted as a form of expression to go against the hegemonic power structure in the postmodern setting. Thus, although Elizabeth’s body itself represents a site for powerlessness and misogyny, her madness allows her to delve deeper into her traumatic experiences. Nevertheless, the domination by certain alter-personalities through Doctor Wright’s unsuccessful psychiatrist treatments further destabilize Elizabeth’s mind and her body as the alter-personalities gradually taking control over her sense of *Self*. The multifaceted environments in *The Bird’s Nest* affect the emergence of her multiple personalities significantly. Elizabeth Richmond’s madness is perceived as atypical in the postmodern setting. The problem lies with the social environment where Elizabeth is in. For example, Doctor Wright’s treatment separates and distinguishes the alter-personalities.

Elizabeth’s alter-personalities trigger a sense of consciousness within her that later reveals the root of her trauma. Interestingly, the different environments further trigger Elizabeth’s alter-personalities to unlock her childhood trauma that eventually causes the splitting of *Self* into several personalities. Memories of her wounds are paradoxically unimpeded through the alter-personalities’ consciousness to reenact with her traumatic past. The traumatic reliving of her childhood wounds returns typically at certain environments, via certain alter-personalities that was previously repressed by Elizabeth. The traumatic experiences thrust into Elizabeth’s consciousness as her alter-personality is basically fixated to her trauma. Elizabeth unconsciously obstructs certain episodes that include her mother’s new boyfriend, Robin. Throughout the novel, Elizabeth is mainly concerned about her relationship with her dead mother. Elizabeth tries very hard to repress her memories of her mother. Captivatingly, Elizabeth’s traumatic memories re-emerge in the conscious mind of her alter-personality. The different pieces of memories, narrated by her alter-personalities enable the readers to reconnect with Elizabeth’s madness.

## **6.2. Environmental Identity and Women’s Madness**

In the postmodern setting, multiple personality disorder, a relatively new form of madness receives very little attention in the discourse of madness. Similar to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde who possesses two different personalities, Shirley Jackson’s woman protagonist in *The Bird’s Nest*, Elizabeth Richmond unknowingly splits her *Self* into four different personalities. According to Showalter (2013, p. 164), it is the “multiplicity [that] has offered women a way to express forbidden aspects of the self.” The emergence of different personalities in the novel illustrates the madwoman’s resistance towards patriarchal dominance in relation to the discourse of madness. Hence, the present study interprets the issue of

women's madness from an ecofeminist perspective that focuses on Elizabeth's environmental identity where different environments are probable in undermining her sense of identity. According to Clayton and Opotow (2003),

Identities describe social roles, and roles entail responsibilities. An environmental identity—how we orient ourselves to the natural world—can describe the way in which abstract global issues become immediate and personal for an individual. An environmental identity also prescribes a course of action that is compatible with individuals' sense of who they are (p. 2).

Kluft (2010) describes multiple personality disorder as “conditions in which an individual's customary personality or way of being is replaced by an alternate personality or way of being, whose activities are unknown to the customary personality” (p. 61). Hence, Showalter (2013) laments the usage of different terms to address this multiple personality disorder such as “split or multiple personalities, double consciousness, and alternating personality” (p. 160) and Showalter further argues that it is previously linked to spiritualism. Kluft (2010) states that “multiple personalities involve problems with identity, memory, thinking, containment, cohesive conation, and the switching process.” (p. 62) Therefore, a multiple personality disorder patient tends to generate different personalities, where “they are relatively stable and enduring entities with fairly consistent ways of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and self” (p. 62).

This brings our attention to the possibility of socio-cultural influences on the fluidity of madwoman's environmental identity. According to Clayton and Opotow (2003) “identities describe social roles, and roles entail responsibilities” (p. 2). On a similar note, an environmental identity connects us to the environment and make sense of who we are (Clayton & Opotow 2003). Chawla (1999) argues that environmental identities derive from the meaningful interactions between the individual with his/her natural and social environments. These interactions significantly and emotionally assist the individual to understand their sense of Self. In *The Bird's Nest*, the different environments trigger the different sides of Elizabeth, bring into being the different sides of Elizabeth Richmond, the compartmentalized Self. The different personalities play their own roles and function to protect Elizabeth when she is most vulnerable at a certain place. Hence, the alter-personalities compensate Elizabeth's marginalized Self. Unlike other forms of mental disorder, Allison and Schwarz (1999) state that “multiple personality disorder is actually a coping mechanism of the mind. It is a way of handling problems that otherwise seems overwhelming. Where the whole individual can't cope, a separate alter-personality is created to handle different emotions” (p. 37).

Shirley Jackson's *The Bird's Nest* echoes the internal conflict of a young woman, living in a patriarchal society where a mental disorder is a form of the disease, inherited from her mother. Jackson's madwoman archetype is given a voice to narrate her trauma and mad experiences, whereas most madwomen characters are silenced throughout the discourse of madness.

## 7. Conclusion

For centuries, women's madness is a form of disorder particularly among women, that a term is used specifically to address this female condition; namely “female malady.” Shirley Jackson's *The Bird's*

*Nest* pries into Elizabeth Richmond's multiple personality disorder and it acts as a form of resistance against her marginalized Self. Thus, Jackson's *The Bird's Nest* re-examines multiple personality disorder, a form of women's madness through the eyes of the madwoman and different characters. The analysis reveals that Elizabeth's childhood psychological trauma causes the disintegration of her identity into several alter-personalities. Hence, the present study interprets that women's madness itself is a multi-faceted condition, subject to societal prerogative. The present study uncovers the different layers of women's madness and unleashes the many sides of the other possible factors that contribute to the formation of women's madness in postmodern society. In addition, it was through one of the alter-personalities' memories that she reveals her repressed childhood trauma. Repressed trauma is the main cause of her split personalities. At the same time, the manifestation of Elizabeth's alter-personalities, that substitutes her environmental identity, triggered by different environments function as to protect her against the patriarchal figures such as Doctor Wright and Aunt Morgen. Women's madness could be examined from a variety of alternate angles in order to shed light on the matter, and an ecofeminist perspective may help in understanding the issue from a psychosocial perspective.

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