

UNHEARD VOICES OF MARGINALIZED MOTHERHOOD IN *EVERY DAY IS MOTHER'S DAY*

EVERY DAY IS MOTHER'S DAY ROMANINDA MARJİNAL ANNELİĞİN DUYULMAMIŞ SESİ

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Abstract

Women's madness is considered to be socially constructed as a result of the rules they have had to obey since their childhood. From their childhood to motherhood, women are expected to meet certain expectations. They are expected to be obedient daughters, loving wives, and caring mothers, which inevitably puts heavy pressure on women. As a result of their endless responsibilities, they do not have a chance to develop a healthy self, which leads them to have psychological disorders as a reaction to their oppression in society. The history of women's madness has been investigated by Jane Ussher, Elaine Showalter, and Phylis Chessler. They indicate that, apart from biological reasons, women's madness is based on oppressive societal norms put on women's shoulders. In Hilary Mantel's novel, *Every Day is Mother's Day*, women's madness as a social construction is reflected through the main character, Evelyn Axon, who is not liked by the people around her due to her extraordinary appearance and behaviors. She is reflected as a single mother who takes care of an intellectually disabled daughter, Muriel. As the novel proceeds, the reason that lies in Evelyn's madness is revealed through her tragic childhood and marriage. Forced to marry a pedophile when she reaches a certain age, Evelyn has to deal with her disabled daughter on her own since her husband does not accept his daughter as his child. Besides, without having enough support from social services, she handles her disabled daughter according to her motherhood ideals. Another challenge she faces is that her daughter is raped and pregnant; however, she deals with the situation by herself as she knows that she is the one who will be accused of her daughter's rape, not the harasser, which leads to her murdering the baby. Therefore, it is clear that women's madness is related to their never-ending efforts to be ideal daughters, wives, and mothers, which is mirrored through Evelyn in Hilary Mantel's debut novel *Every Day is Mother's Day*.

Keywords: Motherhood, Madness, Hilary Mantel, Every Day is Mother's Day

Özet

Feminist bakış açısı, kadın deliliğini ataerkil düzenin kadınlara dayattığı baskının bir sonucu olduğunu öne sürer ve bunun sonucunda deliliğinin toplumsal olarak inşa edildiğini belirtir. Kadınların kendi ailesi içerisinde itaatkâr kız çocuğu olması, evliliğinde ideal eş görevlerini yerine getirmesi ve anne olunca çocuğum tüm ihtiyaçlarını karşılaması beklentisi, kadınlar üzerine fiziksel ve psikolojik olarak baskı kurar. Kendi benliğini kendisi inşa edemeyen kadın toplumun ona dayattığı rolü benimser. Bunun sonucunda kadın kaçınılmaz olarak bu düzene ve baskıya tepki olarak psikolojik rahatsızlıklar geliştirir. Jane Ussher, Elaine Showalter ve Phylis Chesler kadın deliliğini tarihsel olarak incelemişler ve kadın deliliğinin biyolojik nedenlerin yanında sosyal normların baskısı sonucunda da oluştuğu sonucuna varmışlardır. Hilary Mantel'in *Every Day is Mother's Day* romanında ise kadın deliliğinin sosyal inşası, ana karakter Evelyn Axon aracılığıyla yansıtılmıştır. Evelyn, komşuları tarafından alışılmışın dışındaki görüntüsü ve tavırları yüzünden sevilmeyen bir karakterdir. Engelli bir kız çocuğu vardır ve doğumundan itibaren zihinsel engeli olan kızına tek başına bakmak zorunda kalmıştır. Roman ilerledikçe Evelyn'in deliliğinin sebebinin çocukluğunda ailesini kaybetmesine, ona bakan teyzesinin onu evlenmeye zorlamasına ve bir pedofiliyle evlenmesi olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Bunun yanında romanda, 1970lerde bir kadının tek başına engelli bir çocuk yetiştirmesinin zorlukları da anlatılmaktadır. Buradaki önemli nokta sosyal servislerin engelli çocuk annelerine yeteri kadar destek sağlamaması ve Evelyn'in kızını kendi annelik idealine göre yetiştirmeye çalışmasıdır. Karakterin karşılaştığı başka bir zorluk ise kızının cinsel saldırı sonucunda hamile kalmasıdır. Evelyn toplumun kendisini suçlayacağını bildiğinden kızının hamileliğini saklar ve bebek doğduğunda ise onu bir kanala atarak öldürür. Bu bakımdan roman, ataerkil toplumun kurallarına uyararak yaşamaya çalışan bir kadının başına gelen trajik olaylar neticesinde ve bu olaylara tek başına mücadele etmek zorunda kalmasının yarattığı baskı sonucunda kaçınılmaz olarak delirmesini Evelyn aracılığıyla anlatılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Annelik, Delilik, Hilary Mantel, *Every Day is Mother's Day*.

Introduction

Women's madness has been intercorrelated with patriarchy. Labeling women as depressed, hysteric, or mad has always been easy throughout history. However, the underlying reasons for women's madness have been an issue. It is considered that women's madness is based on patriarchal practices. In addition, women's mothering has also been a discussion topic among feminist scholars and critics since parenting is acknowledged to belong to only mothers. This article posits that marginalized motherhood is based on women's unheard voices in her struggle in patriarchy through Hilary Mantel's debut novel *Every Day is Mother's Day* (2013).

The origin of madness dates back to ancient Greeks in the name of insanity and melancholia. In the Middle Ages, madwomen were the witches dealing with plants and finding cures for diseases. They were hunted and burnt to death as it was believed that these women were suffering from an illness. In the following centuries, the majority of psychiatric patients were women (Showalter, 1987, 3) Before the Victorian Period, mad women and men used to be chained and seen as animal-like creatures. In the Victorian era, on the other hand, the chains were removed; however, madness and womanhood were acknowledged as the same (Ussher, 1992, 65). Madwoman of the Victorian Period is accepted as the "foremother of the modern-day woman diagnosed as neurotic, phobic, anxious, depressed, anorexic or schizophrenic" (Ussher, 1992, 64). Women who were raped and had an illegitimate child were believed to be negative influences in society and sent to asylums, which means that victims, not the true perpetrators, were penalized (Ussher, 1992, 23). Additionally, regarding the conditions of the asylums and the mistreatment of the doctors, a full recovery for women in the asylums was almost impossible. They were the true victims of misogyny and oppression in society (Ussher 1992, 247). In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, investigating nineteenth-century literary works, Gilbert and Gubar point out that the madness of the Victorian Era and revolting against women's oppression are affiliated with each other (2000).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Freud marked a big change in the analysis of human psychology by introducing psychoanalysis. In "Aetiology of Hysteria", he states that women suffer from hysteria as a result of the repression of sexual assault during their childhood; however, when his findings were not appreciated, he had to make a series of changes in the following years and constructed his arguments on such concepts as women's penis envy and Oedipus complex (Masson, 2003, 3). Nevertheless, Freud's arguments were objected to and questioned by feminist theorists and academics. They indicate that women's mental illness does not derive from only their biology, but they suffer mental disorders as a result of the oppression of patriarchal values. On the other hand, it should be highlighted that they *do* accept that mental disorders have biological reasons, but women's madness has a close relationship with their oppression in society.

Between the World Wars, women started to work as men were on the battlefield, but after men's return from the war, women had to leave the public sphere and were encouraged to stay in their domestic sphere to look after their children. Especially after WWII, new therapies started to appear to treat men traumatized during the wars; however, Elaine Showalter underlines that those therapies were special to soldiers, whereas the majority of the patients were women in asylums (1985, 18). Showalter also highlights that the number of women in asylums during war times decreased as they became "stronger and less vulnerable to mental breakdown" (1985, 195). In the 1960s, an antipsychiatry movement appeared. It was suggested that the examination of mental

illnesses should be carried out by investigating the patient's family dynamics and the institution of psychiatry (Showalter, 1985, 219). In the 1970s, on the other hand, women started to challenge the psychiatric and medical applications of traditional treatments and aimed to have a more feminist approach to the treatment of patients (Showalter, 1985, 250).

In *Women's Madness*, Jane Ussher (1992) suggests that women do not become mad just because of their biology or a problem related to their cognitive ability, but because of misogyny. She also claims that men's madness is related to their criminality whereas women's is given psychiatric justifications. Therefore, she believes that what leads women to madness lies in deconstructing the term, and suggests that madness be handled culturally (1992, 132). In addition to Ussher, in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, Elaine Showalter claims that women's madness is highly related to their social roles such as daughter, wife, and mother (1985, 3).

Phyllis Chesler, in *Women and Madness*, focuses on the importance of parental care for an individual's mental health. She states that children who lack nurturance face tend to be enclosed in a form of madness (1989, 18). Parallel with Ussher and Showalter, Chesler argues that, apart from pathological reasons, women's madness should be evaluated in social and cultural contexts (1989, 31). Women are labeled as men, but their madness "represents a socially powerless individual's attempt to unite body and feeling" (Chesler, 1989, 56). The reason behind their madness is that women are not encouraged to develop their own selves but are forced to obtain certain roles to meet patriarchy's demands; therefore, there are only few women who can "develop strong socially approved selves" (Chesler, 1989, 44).

In literature, madness has also been used as a theme for several purposes. From ancient Greek tragedies to contemporary literature, mad characters have been created to reflect certain human conditions. In Shakespeare's plays, the theme of madness is handled through King Lear or Hamlet. *Jane Eyre's* Bertha Mason is also a character discussed among feminist critics in terms of women and madness. However, it is criticized that the theme of madness is not handled to reflect society's oppressive impact on these characters. On the other hand, contemporary literature has started to deal with madness, especially women's madness, by investigating patriarchal society's values to find out how these values lead women to madness. Hilary Mantel's *Every Day is Mother's Day* (2013) mirrors a woman's madness by touching upon themes of motherhood and disability.

Having won the Booker Prize twice, Hilary Mantel dealt with different genres during her literary career. She wrote fiction, historical metafiction, an autobiography, and a memoir. Her early works have been categorized as black comedies reflecting Britain's social problems in the 1980s. (Byrne, 13, 2020). She worked as a social service worker, which inspired her to write her debut novel, *Every Day is Mother's Day*, in 1985 and its sequel, *Vacant Possession*, in 1986. She won the Booker Prize twice with her historical novels *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *The Mirror and the Light* (2020), which reflect the Tudor era. In *Eight Months in Ghazzah Street* (1988), Mantel portrayed Saudi Arabia's oppressive regime. In *An Experiment in Love* (1995), she dealt with women's sexuality through college students. She also wrote memoirs *Giving up the Ghost* (2003) and *A Memoir of My Former Self: A Life in Writing* (2023), which was published after she died in 2022.

Regarding the history of women's madness, it is clear that women have been subjected to meet the demands of patriarchal values. When the impacts of women's oppression on their psychology began to be visible, they were accused of having a weak nature. On the other hand, through the

feminist revisit of the perceptions towards women's mental disorders, women's madness started to be investigated culturally and socially. In her novel *Every Day is Mother's Day*, Hilary Mantel mirrors a mad woman turning into a criminal after her disabled daughter is raped by revealing the sufferings of her childhood and marriage to a pedophile (2013).

1. The Marginalized Motherhood in Hilary Mantel's *Every Day is Mother's Day*

In patriarchal societies, there is almost no distinction between mothering and parenting. It is always women who are expected to meet their baby's needs by making them believe that women are natural-born mothers while fathers do not have the same feelings in their anatomy. However, feminist critics object that it is a way of oppressing women in patriarchal societies. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir claims that womanhood, in conventional terms, is culturally and socially built by forcing women to obey a set of rules, such as marrying at a certain age and becoming an obedient wife and caring mother (1974). In *Every Day is Mother's Day*, the main character, Evelyn Axon, is portrayed as a woman who is forced to marry a man she does not know when she reaches a certain age. After a while, she has a daughter, Muriel Axon, who has intellectual disability. The novel mirrors Evelyn's sufferings as a mother of a disabled child (Mantel, 2013).

In the novel, Hilary Mantel reflects women's madness and the unheard voices of marginalized mothers through Evelyn Axon. She is demonstrated as a mad woman without any friends or relatives. However, Mantel unveils that her madness is based on her tragic childhood and marriage, which finally leads to her unconventional motherhood. As it is known, in patriarchal societies, women are expected to be obedient wives and caring mothers, but Evelyn is represented as a mother who beats her disabled child. She does not try to communicate with her. What is more, she does not think that her daughter, Muriel, is a human being because of her disability. Therefore, Evelyn can easily be labeled as a marginalized, unloving, and uncaring mother.

A woman's responsibility as a wife or mother never ends, what's more, she barely has any rewards, and she is economically dependent on her husband, which leads her to madness (Ussher, 1992, 261). The reason behind Evelyn's madness is that she has to deal with everything on her own. She raises a disabled daughter without knowing how to deal with her, and she does not have a regular income. She works as a medium and pursues a life in poverty and isolation. What is more, she marries a man who turns out to be a pedophile. Therefore, it is crystal clear that she carries a heavy burden on her shoulders. Jane Ussher states that madness stems from "systematic and regulated discursive practices", and it is not only related to human anatomy, but it is a way of protesting (1992, 288-289). This protest does not have to be revealed as radical activism, but it can be a silent one, as in *Every Day of Mother's Day*.

Diagnosing an individual as mad is labeling the person based on her abnormality (Ussher, 1992, 134). Goffman explains that if an individual is not willing to meet society's expectations, it is inevitable for this person to be labeled as mad (1961, p.130). As for the representation of Evelyn's madness, it is seen that she is a woman who has the "habit of muttering to herself in the queue at the Post Office" (Mantel, 2013, 11). In addition, labeling a woman mad has always been easier, and it puts less pressure on the perpetrator (Ussher, 1992). In Evelyn's case, everybody focuses on her strange behaviors and house. Even though her neighbor Florence was harassed by Evelyn's husband Clifford when she was a child, she does not sympathize with Evelyn, whose husband is a pedophile. Instead, she describes Evelyn as mad. She tells Evelyn, "I must tell you that I regard

you as an odious and interfering woman” (Mantel, 2013, 111). However, nobody around her knows that she lost her parents when she was a child and is raised by her aunt, who asks the house when it is high time for Evelyn to marry, which results in her marrying a pedophile who asks her to “turn a blind eye” to whatever happens in their garden (Mantel, 2013, 174).

In addition to her tragic childhood and wifehood, Evelyn suffers as a mother of a disabled child. In *Reconstructing Motherhood and Disability in the Age of Perfect Babies*, Heidi Landsman claims that mothers of disabled babies were required to keep their disabled children in isolation at the beginning of the twentieth century (2009, 4). The reason is that these babies are not considered to be culturally suitable in society (Landsman & Van Riper, 2007, 77). Additionally, according to Ryan and Runswick-Cole, the reason why disabled people and their mothers are doomed to live in isolation is that the physical environment is not designed for them. Also, both the disabled and their mothers cannot stand being stared (2007, 206). In the novel, Evelyn has to cope with people’s judgments, prejudices, and stares, which makes her feel upset and powerless, indicated as follows:

Evelyn’s heart sank. Like this, they prolonged her existence. They could take her at any time, kill her (broken neck at the foot of the stairs) or leave her a shell without faculties. But they preferred to watch her fear, her pathetic ruses, her flickering hopes which they would dash within the hour; that was the only explanation. (Mantel, 2013, 20)

Therefore, according to Landsman, the biggest challenge for mothering a disabled child does not derive from the condition of the disabled child, but from the societal acceptance of the disabled baby and its mother (2009, 11). Evelyn may be portrayed as a mad woman, but she is well aware that her deviant appearance and personality are judged by the people around her stated as follows:

Yes, Evelyn thought, how they steer you to cheerful topics; how after twice meeting they cross the road and pretend that they didn’t see you so that they can avoid the whole embarrassing encounter: a widow. There is, Evelyn reflected, a custom known as Suttee; to judge by their behaviour, many seemed to think its suppression an unhealthy development (Mantel, 2013, 11).

Children also play an important role in women’s madness since it may become “soul-destroying, tiring and leaving a woman with little sense of identity other than that of the mother” (Ussher, 1992, pp.258-259). Evelyn does not get any support from her husband to raise Muriel since he does not accept her as his daughter due to her disability. Therefore, Evelyn has to take care of Muriel on her own, but she does not know how to deal with a disabled child. Furthermore, mothers of disabled children would like to be seen as mothers who can fulfill their motherhood duties (Llyod, 2001, 717-718). Besides, these mothers complain that they are discriminated against by their family and society as it is believed that they are unable to meet society’s expectations both as a wife and mother (Llyod, 2001, 717-718). Therefore, it is inevitable for mothers to strive in a hopeless and powerless situation, Jane Ussher argues that the individual’s powerlessness is later replaced with her madness (1992, 256).

Mad women have been represented as “women who dared to question, who attempted to rebel, and who thus speak for us all” (Ussher, 1992, 39). Evelyn always questions what will happen to her disabled daughter after she dies because she knows that the social services do not provide enough attention to Muriel, so she attempts to rebel by hiding her daughter’s pregnancy and killing the baby without any trace and speaks for all the women who follow the same trajectory through the oddity of her personality and house. When she recognizes Muriel’s pregnancy, Evelyn thinks

that she has to deal with this situation by herself since she is afraid of being judged as a bad mother in the neighborhood. She knows that she will be the one who is to be blamed for her daughter's rape, not the harasser. Thus, she decides to handle the problem by locking Muriel inside the house. However, when the baby is born, Evelyn decides to throw it in the canal because she does not have the power to deal with the judgment of her neighbors and social services. It means that the pressure she has to carry on her shoulders leads her to become a madwoman and a murderer since she believes that the system she lives in cannot save her from the crisis she has been having for a lifetime (Mantel, 2013).

Elaine Showalter defines madness as the "desperate communication of the powerless" (1987, 5). Ussher draws attention to the different perceptions towards men and women. She states that women are seen as mad, whereas men are bad (1992, 170). She adds that if madness is the absence of reason, then it means that any violent or criminal woman is not under the control of her senses since femininity is not associated with criminality or violence (1992, 172). In *Every Day is Mother's Day*, on the other hand, Evelyn is mad, violent, and criminal at the same time. She has a strange house and appearance. She beats her disabled daughter and murders her grandchild. Hence, it is evident that Evelyn is not displayed as a woman with motherly feelings. She does not enjoy mothering her daughter as expected from a mother. She calls her daughter a "fool" because she assumes that Muriel is a human being who lacks comprehension and communication (Mantel, 2013, 22). She is a "hopeless idiot" for Evelyn (Mantel, 2013, 15). When Muriel calls her "Mother!", Evelyn thinks that she says, "Murder!" (Mantel, 2013, 44). Thus, it is obvious that Evelyn does not represent the traditional mother figure. Even the first days of her motherhood are not represented as a joyful experience. It is stated in the novel that "Evelyn wanted to be alone in the house." (Mantel, 2013, 44)

On the other, it should be noted that she is quite overwhelmed by mothering a child like Muriel on her own. She is afraid of dying because she believes that nobody will take care of Muriel. In addition to Muriel's disability, her rape and pregnancy disturb her mental wellbeing. She is so oppressed that she does not share her problems with Muriel's social worker because she is aware that the social worker, Isabel, would accuse her of Muriel's rape, so she does not trust anyone but herself. Isabel recognizes the change in Muriel's body, but she does not pay enough attention since she thinks that she would like to be sexually interested in a disabled woman (Mantel, 2013, 68). However, it is common for disabled people to face verbal, physical, and sexual abuse (Wendell 1996, 64). Also, it is reflected in the novel she plans to quit her job as she aims to work at a job with "no emotional upheavals or moral dilemmas" (Mantel, 2013, 1996). Therefore, it is apparent that the novel criticizes the lack and ignorance of social services towards the lower class of the 1970s and 1980s through Evelyn and Muriel. These characters represent the problems of

the housing of single mothers, shifting orthodoxies in social work and the slow privatization of state assets. Furthermore, they gesture towards the embedded and repressed knowledge of sexual violence at the heart of British culture, in that they presciently anticipate, if do not fully realize, the unearthing of child abuse and neglect as a key trauma at the heart of the state; trauma that emerged into the British public realm in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Byrne, 2020,16).

Evelyn's working as a medium represents the witches burnt in the Middle Ages. Jane Ussher comments that the reason for witch burning is that these women were "doubly guilty, for being woman and wicked" (1992, 43). Evelyn's death is similar to the witches'. Witches were hunted

and burnt by men while Evelyn is haunted by patriarchy, which is her husband, neighbors, and authorities all turning a blind eye to her situation and killed at the end of the novel. Thus, it is inevitable for Evelyn to be driven to madness. She struggles in poverty, suffers in her marriage, and undergoes a variety of psychological pressures. As a single mother, she does not have any financial security or psychological support. Even if the social service workers are aware that Muriel's situation is worsening after her father's death, they do not take action apart from reporting it (Mantel, 2013, 31-32). They never question Evelyn's situation as a single mother who is poor, uneducated, and inexperienced in raising a disabled child, which results in her madness, criminal actions, and, finally, her death at the end of the novel.

Conclusion

It is known that English society began to adopt a more conservative social and domestic life after World War II. Women were encouraged to deal with their domestic life more as men were returning from the battlefield and demanding their workplaces occupied by women during the war years. Therefore, a resurgence of domestic norms was imposed on women by making them believe that they belonged to the private sphere. As a result, women started to re-enter the domestic sphere and adapted to their roles as conventional daughters, wives, and mothers. They were required to marry at a certain age and have children since it was the ideal of the period, but the subversion of women had serious consequences for their psychology.

Every Day is Mother's Day (2013) tackles the sufferings of a mother of a disabled daughter in the 1970s and 1980s in England. In the novel, the mother, Evelyn, is not portrayed as a conventional mother. That is, she is acknowledged as a madwoman in her neighborhood due to her attitude, appearance, house, and disabled daughter. On the other hand, as the novel proceeds, it is revealed that Evelyn's madness is related to her childhood, marriage, and the challenges of having a disabled child in a patriarchal society.

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