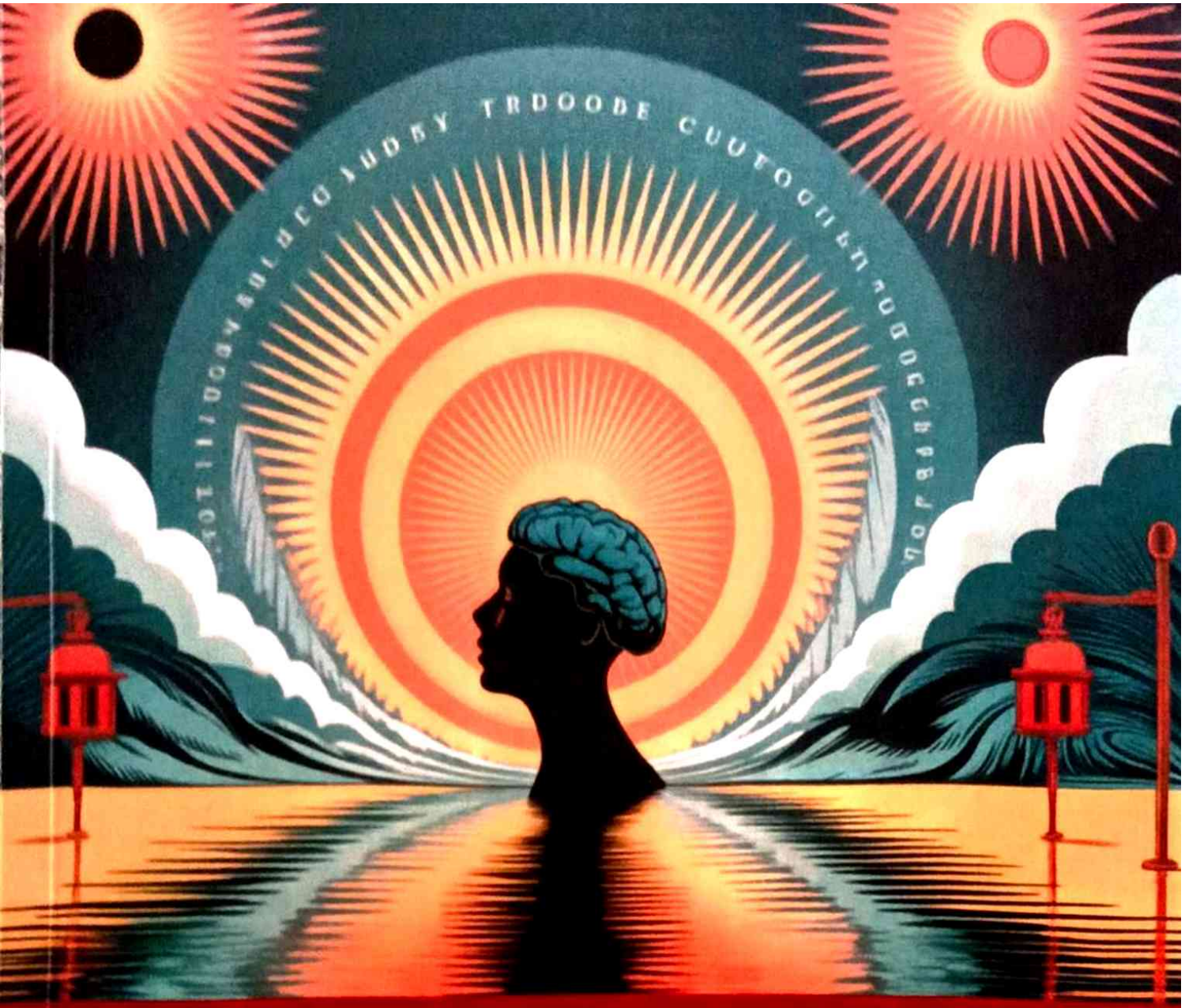

ECHOES OF THE PSYCHE:
MENTAL HEALTH AND LITERARY EXPRESSION ACROSS CULTURES

Nimisha Francis
Dr Anjali George

A Multidisciplinary Confluence

The PG Department of English
St. Joseph's College for Women, Alappuzha

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Nimisha Francis
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Lessing's utopian view of madness nudges us to rethink the concept of mental health in the digital era. Is it the way one adjusts his/her identity seamlessly across different platforms while being available at all times? Or is it the one who made the choice to disconnect from society, experience deeply and maintain the purity of the inner life even if the outside world can't comprehend it? Her fiction reminds us that denying madness through a feat of imagination is not what she is focusing upon; rather, it reflects the madness of the world.

Conclusion

Doris Lessing's fiction is a great example of how older works can be relevant and insightful for the present day. Even writing before the digital era took over, she was able to tap into the universal themes that are at the heart of modern era despondency. The following themes are recurrent in her fiction: characters' fragmented identity, their emotional overwhelm, and core issues that nowadays people blame on their digital lives. She raised predominant questions about mental health, drawing a parallel in a digital era that is always changing and dragging us far from our true inner selves.

It is important to understand that characters or personalities in Lessing's works are not entitled to their own thoughts. They appear to suffer disintegration of self only to a very limited extent when subject to social interactions or cultural structures in general. As Graham Harvey, a prominent theorist, says, *"Persons are wilful beings who gain meaning and power from their interactions. Persons are sociable beings who communicate with others. Persons need to be taught by stages (some marked by initiations) what it means to 'act as a person"* (Harvey, p. 18).

This idea is aptly portrayed through the narrative in *The Golden Notebook* where Anna is shown strategically dividing her life and personality into separate notebooks so that she can control different parts of herself. Or, how apparel, emblems, and logos are portrayed in *The Four-Gated City* as a reaction to the sensory-laden and disoriented character-like Martha to show a graphical parallel between Martha's acute sensitivity to the external world and readers' consumption of very sensory-rich semiotic texts. In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell,* the exploration of the inner world being limited to an outlandish depiction of mental illness, is very much like how AI-powered mental health instruments might inadvertently simplify nature-bound or spiritually enriched experiences.

A major difference between Lessing and other writers is that she does not intend to simplify human psychological issues: not putting insanity on a pedestal or making suffering appear ostentatious. Rather, she depicts it as a human condition caused by a

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The Horror of Sanity: Edgar Allan Poe's Exploration of Mental Boundaries in the Select Gothic Narratives

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Abstract: The gothic fiction generally represents certain horror and instability of mind. The name Gothic is a genre that revolves around mystery, horror, psychological implication by using external perception of atmosphere, supernatural use and symbolism. These are external factors that affect the horror and mystery in the minds of human beings. The madness, obsession and unreliable narrators are normally explained by the psychological depths that are usually characteristic of this genre. It is also a reflection of the restriction, staleness, gloom and inner struggle. Edgar Allan Poe is gothic and possesses the depiction of madness and mental instability. The paper discusses precarious borders between sanity and madness in the few readings of Edgar Allan Poe The Tell-Tale Heart, The Fall of the House of Usher and The Black Cat. Through such short stories, the light has been shed on such narrative techniques of unreliable narrators, psychological symbolism and rotting setting to demonstrate inner conflict revealed by gothic mystery and horror. The gothic ethos and environment propel the characters to the borderline of sanity and are usually followed by the feelings of guilt, obsession and sorrow. The horror strikes the characters and makes them lose their sanity. The loss of rationality under a heavy burden of guilt and obsession is one of the elements dramatized in the fiction by Poe (Bloom).

Human psyche is usually irrational facing the mystery and horror. The atmosphere, settings, supernatural and symbolism in these works emphasize the gothic conventions to reveal the mental illness and irrationality of the human psyche.

Keywords: Psychological torment - Gothic atmosphere – Internal conflict – Obsession – Guilt - Confession

Introduction

Gothic stories by Edgar Allan Poe examines the profound human mind which is subjected to horror and other paranormal dreads at the unsteadiness of the mentality. Human psyche irrationality is a result of paranormal atmosphere, setting and the

supernatural. Psyche usually gets confused when a character experiences paranormal occurrences in his or her surroundings. The distinguishing line between reason and madness is lost in fear, anxiety and terror. The madness of the characters causes them the antagonist in the story as in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Black Cat* and *The Fall of the House of Usher.* Horror is a weapon Poe incorporates to challenge the rational thinking and inner logic of the characters and the readers. The characters experience an internal conflict due to fear and anxiety that makes them turn into monsters in the haunted houses or tombs. The narrow boundary between their reality and mental disintegration is made more miserable as they are left feeling fear, obsessed, guilty and lonely. Through such short stories, the light has been shed on such narrative techniques of unreliable narrators, psychological symbolism and rotting setting to demonstrate inner conflict revealed by gothic mystery and horror. The gothic ethos and environment propel the characters to the borderline of sanity and are usually followed by the feelings of guilt, obsession and sorrow. The horror strikes the characters and makes them lose their sanity. "Poe's fiction often dramatizes the collapse of rationality under the weight of guilt and obsession." (Bloom). Human psyche is usually irrational facing the mystery and horror. The atmosphere, settings, supernatural and symbolism in these works emphasize the gothic conventions to reveal the mental illness and irrationality of the human psyche.

Psychological Turbulence and Paranoia

in The Tell-Tale Heart

The horror and terror are psychological in nature because of the outside influences in the story, the narrator of which are in control of their minds. The narrator insists that "You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing" at the introduction of the tale. His defensive tone brings into question the reliability. The narrator is assertive and mad. The fact that he looks and asks questions in a stable manner does not add any sense of stability to him as his tone is calm and contrasted with his actions which were irrational. The sarcasm of the cool voice does not allow the reader to think of him as a man of lunacy. "The horror in Poe's work emerges from the collapse of rational thought under emotional strain."(May). The explanation of the vulture eye of the old man is rather unreasonable and can not be explained by a deeper psychological storm. The first person narration disintegrates the mind of the person narrating and subjects the readers to paranoia, delusions and subsequent breakdown in listening to the horror.

The obsession and delusion is commonly related to madness and dismisses the irrational mind with a greater sense of rationality. Through the line, the eye of the old man is said to be

vulture, "One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it." which resembles an unusual combination of sanity and insanity. The vulture eye is scary besides the fears and in secured feeling that the narrator has. The reader shares the experience of the old man by the horror and violence of seeing the vulture through the lenses of his eye. The Id drives according to Freud are the violent impulses. "True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?". The narrator attempts to deny his insanity that consequently portrays the instability of his mind. The repression theory developed by Freud could be examined using the struggle of the rational and irrational in the narrator is experienced as the reader reads the story due to the hallucinations that one perceives. "Poe's narrators often reflect his own inner conflicts—between logic and emotion, sanity and madness."(Quinn). The narrator attempts to deny his insanity that consequently portrays the instability of his mind. The repression theory developed by Freud could be examined using the struggle of the rational and irrational in the narrator is experienced as the reader reads the story due to the hallucinations that one perceives, "Poe's tales often reflect a mind at war with itself, where guilt and self-destruction are not just literary devices but echoes of lived torment."(Silverman)

The phantom heartbeat is employed as a psychological weapon that depicts the feeling of guilt dominating the narrator and this is also passed on to the audience. "It grew louder—louder—louder! ... I felt that I must scream or die!". The sound of the heartbeat serves as a form of expression of the guilt that the narrator feels. "Poe's genius lies in his ability to dramatize the internal collapse of the psyche under pressure from guilt and fear."(Buranelli). The beating that he hears is not the real one that the hallucination that comes as a result of guilt is. By misrepresenting the truth, not only the narrator was pushed to insanity, but so were the readers. The guilt which is outwardly shown by being scared and confessing that ensues out of hallucination. The situation of murder that occurred at midnight enhances the atmosphere with senses. "I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell." It intensifies the feelings of the readers because we partake in the hallucination in the sound of heaven and earth and abruptly in hell. The line is indicative of the insanity of the narrator who can hear the sound of heaven, earth and hell. The bewilderment in the mind is depicted by the variation of thoughts regarding the sounds of all the three worlds. "It grew louder—louder—louder! ... I felt that I must scream or die!". The hallucination is a precursor to the auditory hallucination that is haunting his conscience and causing him some mental torture. The visual and auditory hallucination is invented by the description of the eye and the beating of the heart which makes his mind and thus the minds of the readers confused. This is the main visuals of fear and guilt and

confession under the psychological torture. Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!". He cannot take the weight and his guilt drives him to make a dramatic confession.

Clarity is sometimes brought about by psychological tension and instability particularly when it comes to the midnight and the early morning when affirmations can be possible. The narrator admits that he murdered at 4 am and the stress of murder is brought out in the midnight itself. The mind cogitates about the murder and the narrator attempts to confess following profound psychological thinking. This line is a result of unbearable guilt that causes him to confess, "Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! — tear up the planks!". The dramatic confession is normally linked to psychological pressures that cause confession.

The story has ambiguity due to the mental instability, association of the narrator and the old man, guilt, confession and fear. The narrative form is rather unclear since the identity of the narrator is not so stable and we are supposed to trust what he narrates but can he be trusted? The temporal ambiguity is created by the intensity of emotions, which show the past murder and later, in the time, when the confession is being recited, the readers are perplexed to correct the present and past flawlessly since the mixture of present and past is a reflection of the mental instability created by paranoia. The effect of the force of the superego of the narrator which is instigated by the feelings of guilt, fear and confession increases the moral ambiguity. Mastigophobia (fear of punishment) causes the superego to impact his head to confess of the murder.

The narrow format of the narration is an indication of the compulsive nature of the narrator. The circularity forms a loop of confessions that paces the fragmented sentences adopted by the narrator and also forms the stream of consciousness technique that prefigures the madness and obsession when the tone shifts towards the climax. The exposition shows the madness of the narrator and his fear and hallucination that elevates the action in the story resulting in the seven nights since the time that the old man sleeps to the waiting before the eyes are opened. The eighth night raises the climax with the narrator who is obsessed and is afraid of the appearance of eyes of the old man. The move climaxes with the arrival of the police and the narrator makes his confession that he had murdered the old man full of guilt and paranoia. "The narrator's insistence on sanity is the very proof of his madness—an ironic inversion Poe masterfully constructs."(Thompson).

Alcoholic Black Human Psyche in the *Black Cat*

Black Cat is about the ghostly experience of the human mind. The insanity, the guilt

and stubbornness merge in the story. The compulsive addiction to alcoholism causes violence in the narrator who begins to kill his pets and his wife. Alcohol is the situation that leads to the deterioration of moral values in the narrator. He reflect: "through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance" and changes in his personality. The dramatic opposition between quietness and inner darkness drive him to the monstrous displaying his perversion in his actions in killing them signifies the mental instability in his mind. The narrator is described as a kind and animal loving husband, but gradually his personality turns to be violent and cruel in killing his wife and his pets. His cruel and unpredictable behaviour towards his pets and his wife indicates that he treats them both in the same way. The absence of ethics, emotions control makes him homicide and irrational. The abrupt disorder causes him to progressive deterioration of sanity that is frequently characterized by rational narration. His addicted nature towards alcohol causes the Id characteristics of impulses of violence, irrationality and emotional instability. In this case, the narrator loses his emotional intelligence that develops as a result of madness. "The narrator's madness is not a descent—it is a performance, a mask worn to convince himself of control." (Bloom).

It is irrational desire to satisfy the animalistic desire in the narrator that causes perversion and results in self-destruction. The narrator comments, "Who has not… found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not?". He divulge his psychological need which causes him to ruin himself. He is immoral up to self-destruction. "The narrator's perversity is not merely moral failing—it is a psychological compulsion, a rebellion against rationality."(Bloom)

The first cat he petted over a long period of time is called Pluto and it symbolizes innocence and love. There is also an appearance of second cat which is rather deemed supernatural which signifies guilt. The second cat is the symbol of the subconscious guilt. The murder of his pet cat and his wife shows the unreasonable desires which has influenced his mental existence regarding the consumption of alcohol. The chest shapes which the latter cat are in the form of gallows and symbolize the unconscious sense of guilt in the narrator. The subconscious guilt plays on his mind by witnessing the second cat when he had killed his wife. He admits in the end which is brought by his subconscious guilt. "The narrator's confession is not a surrender to justice, but to the unbearable pressure of guilt." (Kennedy). The guilt would have caused him to experience mental torture that would have drawn him towards confession. Destruction of mind is deemed to be as "The horror in Poe's work stems not from external forces, but from the internal disintegration of the mind."(Buranelli). The mental strain and fear of detection drive him into moral awakening that culminates into his final capitulation and confession.

Psychological Madness in *The Fall of the House of Usher*

The Fall of the House of Usher involves the use of gothic atmosphere by means of a gloomy, rotting house "dull dark and soundless day". The gothic image of the atmosphere prepares the readers with the mind to confront the dread. Weather, building and isolation are some of the elements employed by Poe to bring about claustrophobia to the readers. Mansion is an element that depicts the destruction aspect of the character, who is hypersensitive and paranoid, Roderick Usher. It is a family house that is his heritage that fails like the mind of the character. Roderick Usher is a symbol of psychological decline and his psyche is a representation of the mental instability and insanity with fear and dread. His twin brother Madeline Usher is thought to be psychologically sick and had been prematurely buried. His family blood is filled with the hideous results of her delusion in the reasoning and emotional isolation. The decay and death as the themes of the character Madeline and decay unveiled the character not only physical but also psychological decay lived by living Roderick. Poe employs the ambiguity of both time and space to establish the mood of both supernatural and psychological. The supernatural elements of Madeline works on Roderick and causes him to lose his mind. The demise is unavoidable yet the mental disorder pervading the history of his clan appears to be vague and paranormal at the same time. Roderick appears to have acute sensitivity and mental instability whilst his twin, Madeline has cataleptic symptoms. The disease of both the characters merges life and death and readers are in a dilemma of who exactly is alive in the tale.

Gothic Symbolism

The hallucinated sound of the heartbeat, *The Black Cat* and mallows mark and broken mansion are the main symbols. The fall in the Usher is the symbol of the shattered mind and hereditary corrosion. I cannot say how this was--but, as I first saw the building, the feeling of unbearable gloom filled my mind. Physical mansion and the Ushers bloodline sickness are metaphoric paranormal or supernatural curse that the hereditary experiences. The twins symbolize the duality of something, the physical vs. the mental, rational vs. irrational, life vs. death, body vs. mind, reality vs. illusionary and life vs. death. The hole in the structure symbolizes the disintegration of rationality, personality and heritage of their blood.

The symbolism of the eye and the heartbeat in *The Tell-Tale Heart* is one which represents fear, guilt and psychological torment. Pluto in *The Black Cat* symbolizes naivety, love and happy aspect of life. It is that part of a person that is known and it is always pleasant. The emergence of the second cat turns into an icon of the feeling of

guilt and supernatural revenge. The white patch on the chest of the second cat is the manifestation of the subconscious guilt of the narrator and turns into the morph of the gallows in search of the narrator to confess

Comparative Psychoanalysis

In Madeline Usher, the Id is the force that will lead her to death and repression because of her unconscious and instinctual drives. The inner unconscious impulse of the human being destroys Frederic as mansion does. "I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow." — The narrator emulates the psychic decadence of Roderick. *The Black Cat* narrator is influenced by the releases of the violent impulses and the animal instinct that sees him slice the cat eye and hanging it on the wall. The primal aggression that the narrator in *The Tell-Tale Heart* has is what makes him kill the old man who has offended him with his vulture eye. Id in these characters cancel out its influence only when its section of rational being perceives the reality and drives them to the struggle between the Id and the Ego in them.

Ego, the reasonable equalizer endures inner mayhem in the acknowledgment of their reality. Roderick has a complicated ego that is torn between reality and internal disintegration that makes him hard to experience the process of death and decay. His ego is aimed at balancing his dissolving psyche and the rational being. The sack of reason in his fall into rationality is identified and perceived by the ego in the narrator of *The Black Cat* which is carried by the temptation of alcohol and perverseness. Instincts of the Id are the ones that the ego in the narrator in *The Tell-Tale Heart* attempts to explain. This line brings out the realization of ego, "Hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin…". The detailed scheme of the murder is completed by ego that fails miserably when the guilt and conscience come in to play as the narrator has attempted to demonstrate his rational existence with the help of this strategic killing. This line is experienced as repression in the character, "It is the beating of his hideous heart!".

The superego raises the morality of the character. It is the supreme one that regulates the irrational and reasonable being to the point which it rectifies, the psychological and ethical disorder. Roderick is constantly psychologically drawn to Usher, his hereditary home and the hereditary disease that is disrupting his psyche. His character and Usher fall down, and this is symbolic of psychological and moral decline. *The Black Cat*, guilt and conscience are aroused by the grotesque image of the second cat that makes him realize the superego in him to confess to the murder that he had well planned in his ego. The second cat causes the narrator to come out and confess the murder that

he had carried out. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the feeling of guilt is expressed in the form of hallucination of the auditory symbol, the perceived beating of the heart and him confessing to the murder.

Conclusion

Poe established the Gothic tradition which compels us not to look beyond the veil of reason. The manipulation of the mastery of description setting by the use of language and psychological depth internalizes the horror in the readers and the psychological turmoil is transferred to the readers through the atmosphere, symbols and the language that Poe employs makes us believe the horror. He is also skilled at the art of the manipulation of internal tremor generated within the situations that do not unfold in response to external force but due to the hallucination generated in the minds to confront the internal anarchy. Poe creates various landscapes psychological and physical. Sanity is a safe haven to human psyche at times but it is a false illusion. What appears as an avenue of escape is often an illusion and what appears not to be an avenue of escape becomes the reality. The reality sometimes is betrayed by the lucidity of mind and the internal chaos and sometimes the illusion. The selected stories unite the reason with the fear and horror of sanity is frequently addressed as being delicate and can conceal insanity. The internal factors of fear and terror tend to break the fragility.

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her story. This choice serves as a subversive act - unlike digital media, which can be censored or controlled, tapes require physical handling and direct listening. In this way, Hannah creates a space that challenges dominant discourses, echoing Spivak's call to recognise alternative archives of subaltern voices. Yet, this strategy also highlights the fragility of her agency. The tapes only circulate after her death, denying her the opportunity for dialogue or immediate validation.

Comparative Contexts in Young Adult Literature

Hannah's position as a subaltern figure is not isolated but aligns with common themes in young adult literature, where female teenage characters often struggle to have their voices acknowledged. For example, in Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak, Melinda's account of her sexual assault is ignored by her peers and dismissed by adults, leading her to express herself through art. Similarly, in Jay Asher's 13 Reasons Why, the use of cassette tapes mirrors storytelling techniques found in trauma narratives, where survivors attempt to be heard despite being ignored or disbelieved. In both cases, the young female characters embody the paradox of the subaltern: they try to speak, but their words are constantly mediated, questioned, and confined.

Hannah Baker exemplifies the condition of the female subaltern in young adult literature: her voice emerges through creative strategies that resist complete erasure, yet remains confined within adult-centred structures that determine how her story is received. The interaction between Spivak's concept of subalternity and Butler's theory of performativity highlights the systemic obstacles that prevent Hannah's narrative from being recognised as valid, emphasising the ongoing conflict between adolescent expression and adult control.

Surveillance, Discipline and Institutional Control

Michel Foucault's ideas about power, surveillance, and discipline offer a useful way to understand the institutional and social factors shaping Hannah's experience in 13 Reasons Why. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault describes how modern institutions - such as schools, prisons, and hospitals - function as mechanisms of control, not only through visible authority but also through the internalisation of norms (199). In the series, the school operates as a disciplinary institution, where both formal and informal systems of surveillance regulate student behaviour, often at the expense of their emotional well-being. Hannah's experience illustrates how surveillance is maintained through institutional neglect, peer scrutiny, and the use of emotions as tools for social control.On an institutional level, Hannah faces a system that prioritises procedures over empathy.

ECHOES OF THE PSYCHE:
MENTAL HEALTH AND LITERARY EXPRESSION ACROSS CULTURES

Echoes of the Psyche: Mental Health and Literary Expression Across Cultures explores the intricate relationship between the human mind and literary creativity across diverse cultural landscapes. Bringing together critical perspectives, this volume examines how literature becomes a powerful medium for articulating psychological distress, resilience, identity, and healing.

Traversing genres, histories, and geographies, the essays in this collection illuminate how mental health is not merely a clinical construct but a deeply cultural and narrative experience. From personal trauma to collective memory, from silence to expression, the book reveals how writers transform inner turmoil into aesthetic and political discourse.

By situating mental health within broader socio-cultural and literary frameworks, this work invites readers to rethink the boundaries between pathology and creativity, and to recognize literature as a vital space for empathy, resistance, and understanding.

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