



**“Madness in its
Place”:
Ecofeminism in
Janet Frame’s
*Faces in the Water***

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Abstract

In the twentieth century, placing madwomen in mental institutions was considered a civilised and progressive idea. Mental institutions were said to provide a soothing and calming environment for the patients in order to help them heal. However, Istina Mavet, the (mad)woman protagonist of New Zealand author Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water* (1961), records her unforgettable experiences of being locked up at the Cliffhaven and Treecroft Mental Institutions for being "different". The material space of the mental institutions influences Istina's emotions and further distresses her. The aesthetic space of the mental establishment is superseded by its oppressive material space, which facilitates containment and exercises control over its female inmates. Hence, the healing process serves as a form of punishment to inmates. The spatial separation of the madwomen in the mental institution mirrors their patriarchal oppression. The comfort of the patients is pushed aside and their natural surroundings ignored. This paper adopts the new materialism approach as a complement to its ecofeminist perspective. It examines the "healing spaces" that have ironically affected the inmates' mental well-being and disrupted the recovery process. It argues that although Istina is labelled a "madwoman," she challenges the notion of "sanity" by displaying a sense of realism in her narration and by using it as a strategy for survival. Madness is therefore perceived as part of her "landscape" to aid her identity construction.

Keywords: Women's madness, ecofeminist theory, new materialism, healing space, material space

The term "madness" has negative connotations and society has often viewed madness as a neurological or mental disorder, or the manifestation of irrational behaviour. Madness is also perceived as a gender-based disorder and is often constructed as a women's disease that manifests itself through unstable emotions and irrational behaviour. This reflects how psychological, biological, and social perspectives had governed the definition of "women's madness" in the twentieth century and led to the often-negatively skewed definitions of madness based on women's unacceptable behaviour, their absurd emotions, and their deviations from social conventions. In contrast to the definitions given, Carla Yanni argues that "Insanity is both personal disorder and also articulated within a system of sociolinguistic signs and meanings" (2). Similarly, Elaine Showalter¹ points to madness as a form of "protolanguage" in which the patients failed to convey their message verbally. Hence, madness itself can be seen as a meaningful way for these women to search for their sense of *Self* in their patriarchal society. However, Shoshana Felman (1975) describes madness as "either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype" (2), regardless of the person's gender.

Women are often perceived to be prone to mental illness due to their biological genes, heredity, and the belief that they have a distinct connection to nature, unlike men. According to Carolyn Merchant (1990), women and nature are seen as having an age-old association — an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history." (xix) Hence, the image of nature, which is primarily perceived as feminine due to its chaotic and disorderly functions, is seen as something which has to be controlled. The "logic of domination" (Warren, 2000), which functions in parallel with patriarchal domination, aims to justify both domination and subjugation of (mad)women. Likewise, women and nature are regularly tied together within the discourse of gender as well because both are seen as displaying the characteristic of being uncontrollable and at the same time oppressed by patriarchy. In other words, madness is part of an "essential feminine nature" (Showalter 3) unveiling itself before the masculine ethic of mental health (Chesler 129). Jane Ussher indicates that madness is always considered to be a woman's disease, a disorder linked to the "essence of femininity" (9). (Mad)women,

in this sense, are constantly being gendered by dualistic structures, such as culture/nature, male/female, rational/emotional, and so on. Therefore, the labelling of women as “Others” has chained them in the powerless position and has silenced them in many ways. Being labelled as madwomen has left them double subjugated in patriarchal society. Challenging this, “some feminists have celebrated hysteria [or madness] as a woman’s response to a system in which she is expected to remain silent, a system in which her subjectivity is denied, kept invisible” (Ussher 23).

Elaine Showalter (“The Female Malady”) introduces this concept as the female malady, where women are usually victimised in the discourse of madness; Juliet Mitchell similarly points out that there is a connection between women and madness. Joan Busfield also states, “women are more likely to be driven to madness and mental disorder by virtue of their oppression” (5). Phyllis Chesler, additionally, argues that “[madness] is perceived as a shameful and menacing disease, from whose spiteful and exhausting eloquence society must be protected” (95). As a result, women have been incarcerated and ostracised by society and “shut up” in mental institutions. Hence, the mental institution becomes the mental patients’ surreal community, where they live and socialise under a prison-like regime. It defeats the initial idea of healing and curing the patients in the hope of returning them to the “real” community. Furthermore, inmates’ voices are constantly ignored and homogenised in order to keep them confined, away from larger society.

Doctors of the nineteenth century believed most mental patients were curable only when “treated in the specially designed buildings” (Yanni 1). Unfortunately, the construction of the mental institution during this period resembled patriarchal culture, in that the internal structure of the place itself epitomised hierarchical practices. On this note, Diana Gittins² mentions that “space, as Foucault argues, is a metaphor for a site of power which usually constrains but can also liberate. The way in which space is organized constrains, limits and divides [and] can, and frequently did, oppress and repress” (5). However, this notion of madness was contained in a “self-contained space” where the boundary between sanity and insanity is conspicuous, resulting in the creation of an oppressive environment for the inmates. This paper examines the “material space” of the institution in order to uncover the woman protagonist’s resistance towards the so-called healing space. Under the concept of material space, the paper focuses on the aesthetic qualities (i.e. physical and psychological aesthetics) of the mental institution where these qualities are ultimately neglected, and presents a concurrent degradation of nature [of the place] and the women patients’ mental well-being.

The imprisonment of madwomen in mental institutions in the twentieth century is often seen as a treatment or a “therapeutic tool” (Appignanesi 85) to cure mental sickness. However, Michel Foucault (2001) argues that “confinement had become the abusive amalgam” (41) in the discourse of incarceration. It has become a form of punishment and discipline adopted by mental establishments, and now pervades modern mental healthcare services. Kwast-Greff is also against the idea of punitive procedures inflicted on the patients in mental institutions as they represent “an actual relief for all parties concerned, the woman herself, and her environment” (199). Caleb Smith (2009) mentions that the walls of the cell are meant to help the inmates to reflect on their wrongdoings, even though the design is meant to confine them, to mirror the prison’s disciplinary technique. The concept of reflection plays a vital role in the process of healing as it correlates with the idea of “correction” based on the inmates’ perceived abnormality. Foucault (1995) also questions the extent to which “punishment is humane” (74) when the inmates are being tortured in a mental institution.

Ashley Reis (2016) discusses the term “environmental illness” which further highlights “the complex ways that harm inflicted on environments comes to bear on human bodies and minds” (712). In the same vein, Donelle Dreese (2002) also indicates that “All human beings develop their own sense of place through life that determines why they love certain regions or feel utterly alien in others” (1). Thus, the idea of place includes how

the community functions in a physical space (also conceptualised as “material space” in this paper); what are the interactions between humans and their surroundings? Place in the sense of a person’s socialization with his or her material space also helps in building up our identity. Hence, the built environment, referred to as the “material space” in this paper, is emphasised because the infrastructure itself impedes the patients’ healing process.

As pointed out earlier, the aesthetic qualities or values of the “healing space” in a mental institution create a despotic environment where patients feel detached and suppressed by its hierarchical structures. Andrew Scull argues that “the traditional mental hospital was a crumbling institution, often quite literally a decaying one that was being supplanted by an ideology and a practice that emphasised containment in the community” (15). Likewise, De Cunzo also specifies, “the spatial organization, architectural embellishment, and furnishing of the ideal home structured and controlled interaction and moral retreat through carefully segregating activities and establishing strict codes of behavior” (27). Moreover, mental institutions are meant to provide soothing and calming environments for patients to restore their mental well-being. Conversely, Sternberg indicates that “hospital’s material space [seem] to optimize care of the equipment rather than care of the patients” (4). The comfort of the patients within their healing spaces are ignored. Ironically, the healing space has turned into a prison, which continuously inflicts punishment on the inmates. On a related note, Patrick Murphy asserts, “many theorists ignore the places in which women find themselves and the relation of environment to selfhood” (48). The problem faced by the inmates is the difficulty of establishing their sense of *selfhood* in the mental institution when the institution emphasises de-individualisation. In addition, the mental institution becomes the “prison to the body” (Foucault 1995). Against the societal interpretation of the main function of a mental institution as a healing space, the built material space exercises control and dehumanises them under tyrannical rule. According to Anne Rogers and David Pilgrim, “the mortification of self” occurred [in the mental institution] when a person was deprived of their previous identity through regimentation and it entailed stripping a person of their previous affirmation of self” (172). The healing process is mainly meant to de-individualise the inmates or strip them of their abnormality.

My paper aims to examine the place of “healing” through ecofeminist and new materialist approaches in order to disclose the impact of the oppressiveness of the healing spaces on Istina’s mental well-being. According to Greta Gaard, “ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature” (1). Similarly, new materialism and ecofeminism share a common objective of “disrupting dualisms in order to posit a new understanding of nature” (Casselot 78). In the present study, the metaphor of women’s madness is perceived as one of the effects caused by a female protagonist being forcibly confined in the “de-naturalised” oppressive space of the mental institution. The hierarchical structure of the mental institution resembles patriarchal mentality, and inflicts a prison-like environment on the patients confined within its walls. Istina’s experiences can be understood in relation to the repressive material space of the mental institution and her spoken and unspoken institutional life.

The Notion of Place and Mental Well-Being

Ecofeminist perspectives emphasise the interrelatedness of humans and their surroundings including natural environments, relationships between human beings and non-human beings, and so on. Changes in the

environment affect the physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being of humankind. Furthermore, Timothy Morton suggests that there is a need to examine “how humans experience their place in the world” (2). The study of women’s madness from an ecological perspective, such as the influence of the environment as well as the organisation and ecological structures of the mental institution, need to be brought into view. As noted by Marie-Anne Casselot, “new materialism is concerned with materiality as we are immersed in a physical world, surrounded and constituted by matter” (75). New materialism complements the ecofeminist approach in the current study as it focuses on “the physical aspects of our bodies, their interactions with other beings within nature and with the material world” (77). Consequently, the present study sees women’s madness as the product of the oppressive material space of the mental institution, which was supposedly designed to heal mental patients. Neurological and psychological perspectives posit women’s madness as a disease of the mind. However, few studies have analysed the surrounding factors in a mental institution that potentially shape women’s psychological development and affect their healing processes.

Firstly, the construction of the mental institution itself, for example, the location, the number of windows, the garden, and so on serves as a “symbolic role” enforced by the authority of the institution. Susan Piddock states that “buildings themselves are expressive of ideologies” and form “a means of controlling the behavior of those living within them” (14). In order to recover from mental illness, the patients have to “establish ways of feeling and perceiving their place.” Mental institutions are meant to provide soothing and calming environments for the patients to heal in; as Esther Sternberg notes, “physical space might contribute to healing” (1). She further indicates that some architects stress the importance of “nature and natural views in health and healing”. Likewise, and as mentioned earlier, Gittins asserts that “Space, as Foucault argues, is a metaphor for a site of power which usually constrains but can also liberate” (5) Despite this understanding of the importance of space, “the material space of wards was designed to facilitate containment and control of people during such experiences when violence can become an inherent part of the extreme pressures within an interior landscape” (7). Foucault also asserts that “the therapeutics of madness did not function in the hospital, whose chief concern was to sever or to ‘correct’” (151). Hence, “the idea of asylum as a ‘prison’ is also complemented repeatedly in the literature by the notion of the asylum as a ‘refuge’ or ‘fortress’ protecting people with mental illness against the risks of abuse” (Curtis, Gesler, Priebe and Francis 341). Cliffhaven Mental Institution in Janet Frame’s *Faces in the Water* fails to provide a suitable healing space for Istina and other mental patients to recuperate from their mental sickness. One of the reasons is the separation of the inmates from the natural world, which is believed to be the true source of healing. The oppressive environment in the mental institution has thus separated the patients from their commonplace daily realities, leaving them in a state of hopelessness. In Frame’s novel, it appears that the mental institution serves to punish the inmates, as within it, they are deprived of freedom and the right to heal.

Piddock notes that “understanding the purposes and uses of buildings and spaces enables a better understanding of what life was for those living within these institutions” (8). Gittins claims that the incarceration of women deemed mad in mental institutions or asylums was meant to segregate them from society and prevent them from spreading diseases to others. It is believed that irrationality is a potential threat to social stability (Tew 72). It is important to note, as Piddock argues, that “the lunatic asylum was not intended to be a place where the mentally ill remained for life” (2). Instead, the patients were expected to heal and return to society. However, what emerges is the powerlessness of the inmates who are trapped in an inhumane and

hierarchical power structure, which is the mental institution itself. It can also be noted that the inmates are deprived of freedom and, to a certain extent, also lose their rights as patients.

Throughout the novel, Istina speaks out, from within the confines of the mental institution, about the dilapidated and unhealthy conditions of the place. Being confined within the four walls, Istina and the other inmates are bound by strict rules and punished if they do not behave appropriately, though it should be noted that the definition of sanity is subjective and that acts of actualising their “deviation” are strictly prohibited. Thus, Frame debunks the representation of these mental institutions or asylums as curative or healing quarters.

Istina observes the inmates’ constant fear of the nurses and of certain treatments provided at Cliffhaven Mental Institution. The subjugation of the women inmates in the mental institution is mainly due to the hierarchical structure within the institution. Instead of providing a “healing space” for the patients to recover from their mental illness, it has ironically shaped an oppressive space for patients. They are treated like animals and their human rights are denied. They are absorbed into the community of the insane, locked up in the secluded space of the mental institution and definitely not expected to return to society. For example, the medical staff tend to scrutinise the inmates’ atypical behaviours to determine their normality:

‘Settling in?’ the doctor would inquire from time to time, as a passing breeze from another county might address an animal which it happened to catch sight of preparing for hibernation. The act of ‘settling in’ was surrounded with approval: ‘the sooner you “settle” the sooner you’ll be allowed home...if you can’t adapt yourself living in a mental hospital how do you expect to be able to live ‘out in the world’? How indeed? (Frame 34)

The excerpt above depicts the false ideas behind admitting people to mental institutions. The process of “settling in” is hindered by the structure of the mental institution. A sense of contradiction emerges when the ultimate goal of returning to society is hindered once these mental patients are locked up in the mental institution. The act of “settling in” in this context refers to the process of adjustment. The mental patients need to “adjust” their deviations to fit in with societal norms. Besides that, mental institutions follow a patriarchal structure where both male and female staff abuse the female inmates (Chesler 125).

In addition, Istina also highlights the importance of the natural environment in the healing process. Examining the material space or the physical environment in Cliffhaven Mental Institution reveals more about how punitive and inapt the environment is for these (mad)women. In one incident, Istina voices a fear of her own room:

I feared the prospect of a single room. Although all the small rooms were ‘single’ rooms the use of the phrase *single room* served to make a threat more terrifying. During my stay in Ward Four I slept first in the Observation Dormitory and later in the dormitory ‘down the other end’ where the beds had floral bedspreads and where, because of the lack of space, there was an overflow of beds into the corridor. (Frame 31)

In the novel, Istina is transferred from one ward to another based on her mental state. Istina's observation of the mental institution (i.e. via her the sense of sight and smell) is highlighted throughout the novel. Istina's sensitivity towards the abhorrent smell and repulsive sights of the mental institution is recorded in her memory. According to Nadia Seremetakis (1994):

Sensory memory is a form of storage. Storage is always the embodiment and conservation of experiences, persons and matter in vessels of alterity. The awakening of the senses is awakening the capacity for memory; of tangible memory. To be awake is to remember and one remembers through the senses, via substance. (28)

In one incident, Istina highlights the lack of space in the dormitory, resulting in some patients having to sleep in the corridor. Nadia Seremetakis argues, "senses are entangled with history, memory, forgetfulness, narrative and silence." (2) Istina's traumatic experience of staying at the mental institution is triggered by her olfactory sense and her memory of certain smells. These smells constantly prompt a connection to the mental institution. For example, she describes the repugnant smells of the mental institution:

...contending alone with nightmares of grief and despair...the peculiar smell of the other ward, a kind of ward body odour of polish and urine blended, in the manner of tobacco or herbs, to a compression of desolation and exuded now strongly now faintly as it was whittled, deliberately or casually, by the hanging around corner-leaning presence that one may call Time. (Frame 60)

Seremetakis terms this experience as the "tactility of smell" (29) where each smell triggers its own textures. Istina claims that "Wherever I went the smell of human compost seemed to follow me and distinguish me and the others of the Wire Dormitory from the rest of the ward" (Frame 204). The "corporate communication" (Seremetakis 6) between body and place experienced by the inmates represents the inner states of the mental institution. Thus, the "smell of human compost", as mentioned by Istina, designates the inmates' deteriorated mental health. Furthermore, Sternberg stresses the importance of "understanding how the physical surroundings affect emotions and how emotional responses to architecture affect health" (7). Such factors need to be taken into consideration in the design of mental institutions. The metaphor of the dilapidated and gloomy conditions of the mental institution reflects Istina and the other inmates' mental well-being. She is despondent when placed in different wards:

I tried to realize the juxtaposition of Ward Seven and Ward Six where, crowded bed to bed, the old women lay with dropped jaws and hollow cheeks and hands fretting at the bedclothes. I tried to fathom the smell of hopelessness that seeped through, tainting our furniture and carpets and cushions, and the smell I brought back with me from Four-Five-and-One, as if I had been visiting temple where a mixture of loneliness and despair was burned in place of incense. (Frame 68)

New materialism suggests that our existence in a place is dependent on our [human] interactions with other human as well as with non-human beings, "the material artifacts and natural stuff that populate our

environment” (Casselot 77). Therefore, the limited and congested material space in the mental institution is inadequate to act as a healing space for these women patients and it creates a sense of “imprisonment” for them as the physical place itself entails hopelessness and despair. This is shown in the novel when Istina indicates that the smell of decayed wood resembles the smell of imprisonment infusing their skin, mind and whole body (Frame 71).

Secondly, the hegemonic construction of the mental institution impedes the inmates’ healing process. Piddock argues that “Institutions are often perceived as being paternal or paternalistic and are sometimes seen as extensions of the family structure, with the father figure replaced by a male Superintendent” (10). Similarly, Gittins proposes “the whole structure and organization of the hospital was hierarchical and bureaucratic; the medical superintendent, like a feudal lord, ruled over all other groups in the estate” (31). The hierarchical structure of the mental institution mirrors patriarchal concepts. Istina also describes the tyrannical and unjust nurses in the mental institution:

Two patients attacked each other...I was more horrified to see that, at times, the nurses tried to provoke the patients into displays of violence. (Frame 77)

The nurses, feeling bored because there hadn’t been a recent fight, would fetch a bag of sweets from the tin...showered into the middle of the dayroom and it would be first served with fights developing, people put in strait jackets, whistles blowing; and the tension which mounted and reaches its peak at intervals - both in the patients and in the nurses who had long ago had to suppress any desire to ‘nurse’ and were now overworked degraded, in many cases, sadistic, custodians - found its release, for a time. (Frame 83-4)

According to Gittins, “while buildings undoubtedly determine and affect much of social interaction, social interaction itself can subtly alter and change the uses of the buildings” (21). The social environment in the mental institution is infused with oppressive patriarchal elements. The control over the inmates’ mind and body reflects the paradoxical power relations in the mental institution. For example, the nurses’ regime in the mental institution is tyrannical, heartless, and even sadistic. The nurses subjugate the inmates to the extent that the place is inhospitable:

It may seem strange to learn that all the nurses were most of the time without compassion; until one remembers that those who longed to care for their patients either gave up their lonely struggle in its unfavourable conditions of staff shortages and twelve-hour days, or were corrupted into harassed reluctant hypocrites and bullies with some sweet talk in Ward Seven and coarse instances in Lawn Lodge. (Frame 90)

The distress of the patients is a source of entertainment for the nurses. Istina’s observations reveal the spoken and unspoken rules of the hierarchical institution where inmates are deprived of the privacy and self-

determination needed to recuperate from their illness. The chaotic environment creates constant fear and agitation among the women patients. Istina is conscious of these inhumane domination games:

...I never fought with the patients for I regarded it as my duty to protect them from the unkindness and it distressed me when the nurse, to excuse the words that to an ordinary person would be hurting and cruel, said, 'She doesn't know any better. She doesn't know what I'm saying. Can't you understand that these people to all intents and purposes are dead?' (Frame 90)

According to Chesler, "mental patients are somehow less human than either medical patients or criminals" (95). In the mental institution, nurses treat patients as "soulless individuals", individuals who have lost their sense of self and just live aimlessly for the rest of their lives, as demonstrated in the previous excerpt. The nurses' lack of understanding and compassion towards the patients has resulted in the oppressive environment. Hence, the novel highlights the constant sense of fear and loneliness faced by Istina and the other inmates.

Furthermore, to make things worse, lack of communication is also one of the contributing factors that affects Istina's mental state. The inmates are too absorbed in their own world and the nurses such as Matron Glass and Sister Bridge are cruel, forcing them to adhere to strict rules. Istina cannot even communicate with the other patients in the mental institution because "there were the people who had long ago given up attempts at speech and now made noises more appropriate to their habitat; animal noises, whimpers; sometimes they bayed and howled like lonely dogs attending the moon" (Frame 78). The inmates' gradual mental deterioration is foregrounded in Istina's description of them as being unable to maintain their human selves. Brown (2008) states that "to be deemed mad is to be placed in a position of penultimate alterity, slipping from the category of human to subhuman, from the locus of reason to that of irrational". He emphasises the aspect of degradation from human to subhuman when an individual is identified as mad. According to Robert Whitaker (2009), "by virtue of having lost their reason, [mental patients] were seen as having descended to a brutish state" (6). These patients were, as indicated by Brown and Whitaker, reduced to the animal level and therefore seen as needing to be dominated. Whitaker (2009) states that "like all wild animals, lunatics needed to be dominated and broken...[and] the primary treatments advocated by the English physicians were those that physically weakened the mad" (7). (Mad)women, who are deemed on par with animals, are treated as animals as well in the mental institution. For instance, Istina constantly highlights the erosion of the material space of the mental institution: the place itself is inhospitable and most of the time, the smell of the surroundings weakens her state of being:

I woke in the small locked room where I lay on a mattress on the floor, with canvas blankets and sheets, and for many days I stayed there, in seclusion. I smelled the room, I went shopping among the smells - old urine mixed with misery for it was not the honest stench of babies not yet trained but a preserved and outcast adult smell of those who had known and been deprived of their knowing; the smell of stale polish, straw and straw dust, sunlessness; the smell of corners, of the wooden door that had been kicked and hammered upon for seventy years. (Frame 180)

The desolate state of Cliffhaven Mental Institution shows that the authorities pay little attention to the physical aesthetic of the mental institution, as evinced again in the excerpt below:

I rely so much on the sun; I think of the sunflowers with their ebony hearts and their searing ragged corona and their heads turned to the sun. I think it is the removal of the sun's influence that has made us mad; the sun is blocked that used years ago to scrape the unreal shadow from our brain. (Frame 148)

Sensory deprivation through the exclusion of natural elements as part of the healing treatment creates a “mad space” for the inmates. Istina makes her point clear by indicating how the lack of sunlight bound them to a fixed and trapped position. According to Sternberg, “the lack of sunlight or by prolonged exposure to artificial light or darkness” (46) will cause depression as well. Furthermore, it is also scientifically proven that mental patients who are exposed to bright sunlight will have lower stress levels. In other words, the inmates' well-being is worsened when the place itself [the mental institution] does not facilitate the process of healing.

The days passed. At mealtimes I sat at my place at the table, without eating, for the ward smell and the strangeness so overcame me and soaked into me that the food and the air and the people tasted of it. And the people: I knew now that they were automatons geared to a pitch of excitement they could not understand and fearful lest whatever or whoever controlled them should tire of giving them distraction, and let them run like a broken toys and have to find in their own selves a way of overcoming the desolation in which they lived...They thought I was ill. What would they have said if I had told them that illness can be caused by a smell, that it was the smell of Four-Five-and-One which was draining all my energy and desire to live? (Frame 74)

The constant sense of agitation has seeped into Istina's environment, resulting in the stagnation of her healing process. It creates great distress for her. Furthermore, Istina's fellow inmates are depicted as “automatons” and “broken toys”. They are left unattended and expected to deal with their own misery in the mental institution. In Cliffhaven, the patients are left absorbed in their own world of the imagination, finally losing their sanity. Istina further stresses that the environment of the mental institution is the only reason for her depression and powerlessness, draining her of her energy and desire to live. Indeed, the limited space and lack of freedom hinder the inmates' healing process. The unvarying life in the institution reflects its self-inflicted unhealthy culture. Their unchanging daily routines cause the inmates to lose their sense of time and place. Istina and the other inhabitants are trapped in the material space of the mental institution, resulting in the loss of any sense of time: “There is no past present or future. Using tenses to divide time is like making chalk marks on water. I do not know if my experiences at Cliffhaven happened years ago, are happening now, or lie in wait for me in what is called the future” (Frame 29-30). The mental institution creates a barrier for the inmates, forcing them to remain segregated from society. Istina and the other inmates voice a sense of hopelessness because they are constantly caught in a situation in which they are utterly powerless.

Cliffhaven as “Healing Space”

The notion of a mental institution as a “healing space” is repeatedly challenged in Frame’s *Faces in the Water*. Istina says, “...I was in the crazy world, separated now by more than locked doors and barred windows from the people who called themselves sane” (Frame 90). A clear boundary was set between the world of sanity and insanity. For example, she is consciously aware that she is different from the other inmates:

The family talked jokingly of my having been in a ‘nuthouse’, and I gave them what they seemed they want – amusing descriptions of patients whose symptoms corresponded to the popular idea of the insane; and I described myself as if by misfortune I had been put among people, who unlike myself as a sane person caught unwillingly in the revolving doors of insanity when there was no justification for my being anywhere near the building, helped to soothe my ruffled conceit and to lessen my family’s concern which was real and disturbing though it stayed beneath the surface and was revealed only in split second gestures and expressions which nevertheless had the sustained and detailed power of slow motion. (Frame 111)

Moreover, the patients were not expected to heal, and Istina asks “‘When can I go home?’ knowing that home was the place where I least desired to be. There they would watch me for signs of abnormality, like ferrets around a rabbit burrow waiting for the rabbit to appear” (Frame 31). Their rejection both by society and the authorities of the mental institution position them on the periphery of society. It pushes them to be compliant to the rules and regulations in order not to be punished by the nurses.

As discussed earlier, madness is perceived as the inability to reason and blend into “normal” society, and, more importantly, as a specifically female malady. However, Gittins argues that although the material space attempts “to delimit and contain mental illness within material confines, there still remains another space: the space of imagination, vision, madness, or also known as poetic space” (5). Istina engages actively with the “poetic space” where she explores her inner world and acknowledges her own imperfections: “I did not know my own identity. I was burgled of body and hung in the sky like a woman of straw” (Frame 55). Istina’s inability to associate with either sanity or insanity leaves her in a state of confusion. Internally, she tries to find a definite meaning to describe her own condition and reaches the conclusion that one must realize “that the streamlined insanity of their behavior was the product, in the beginning, of crude longing dug out from their heart” (Frame 88). It is not a matter of how society perceives them but rather how the *Self* negotiates with the state they are in. She states, “I wanted the peeled layers of human dignity to be restored, as in one of those trick films where the motion moves backwards, so that I could not see beneath the surface” (Frame 79). The unhealthy and oppressive space of the mental institution further leads Istina to situate the circumstances of the place itself as being responsible for her mental state. Ultimately, madness, for Istina, is a learning experience:

I knew the mad language which created with words, without using reason, has a new shape of reason; as the blind fashion from touch an effective shape of the sight

denied them. I knew that the people about me dared to believe what few others are even half afraid to suspect; that things are not what they seem. (Frame 91)

Her stay at different mental institutions (Cliffhaven and Treecroft) brings significant changes to her life and helps to strengthen her sense of self. Showalter indicates that hysteria serves as a form of expression, a body language for people who otherwise might not be able to speak or admit what they feel. She thus disagrees with the idea of hysteria as a sign of women's "weakness, badness, feminine deceitfulness, or irresponsibility", viewing it rather as a "cultural symptom of anxiety and stress" ("Hystories" 9).

Furthermore, ecofeminists believe that humans have been separated from "the natural ways of knowing and interacting with nature" due to their heavy reliance on technology (Casselot 86). Although this paper has not examined the use of technology to reverse mental illness, Istina's apprehension of ECT (Electroconvulsive Therapy), "a treatment that produces a convulsion by passing electric current through the brain" (Kring, Johnson, Davidson and Neale), is made clear in the novel, further intensifying her resistance to Cliffhaven. It shatters her sense of self by attempting to reconstruct her identity so as to force her and the other inmates to behave according to the norms of the mental institution. For Istina, ECT is a "new and fashionable means of quieting people and of making them realize that orders are to be obeyed. [...] faces are made to be fixed into smiles and weeping is a crime" (Frame 9). ECT becomes a form of punishment for the abnormality of the patients. Istina depicts the horrifying after-effects of the procedure, which she says leaves her feeling like a "homeless parasite" (Frame 18). She further describes her disorientation after a course of treatment: "I cannot find my way, I cannot find myself where I left myself, someone has removed all trace of me" (18). Gittins states that ECT was used as both "threat and punishment" (200); in addition to being a form of treatment, electricity was often also used as a form of torture. Istina also observes the effects of ECT on other patients:

I can hear someone moaning and weeping; it is someone who has woken up in the wrong time and place, for I know that the treatment snatches these things from you leaves you alone and blind in a nothingness of being and you try to fumble your way like a newborn animal to the flowing of first comforts, then you wake, small and frightened, and the tears keep falling in a grief that you cannot name. (Frame 17)

Anyone who does not conform to the norm is thus "corrected" and "moulded" to fit and become "acceptable". As Sister Bridge announces to the inmates, "with your personality changed...no one will dream you were what you were" (Frame 191). Istina expresses her concerns as it feels like her right to refuse the ECT is denied: "I felt remote from the arrangements being made for me; as if I were lying on my death-bed watching the invasion of my house" (Frame 191). Alien ideas are affixed to the patients' minds, acting as a "mould" to transform them into politically-correct beings:

They will find that they cannot pour their ideas of my changed self into me like liquid into the waiting mould, for surely nothing will have changed the mould itself. Or will it be changed? What exactly will they have stolen - the gentle burglars busy at my brain? (Frame 193)

The mental instability suffered by Istina and her fellow inmates is seen as unconventional. Istina perceives that ECT will change the eccentric identity of the inmates and mould them to societal norms. She sees the modification of identity as a form of violation and hence questions the significance of ECT in the mental institution. She objects to patients having to deal with “their diminishing and finally vanished identities” (Frame 147) after the therapy. Ironically, instead of helping the patients to heal, part of their identity is altered. The ECT treatment terrifies Istina to her core: “I felt no longer human...I found no place to stay...” (Frame 190). She also empathizes with the other inmates who are going through the same therapy: “Yet, they [inmates] were not strange people to me, for I knew them and could communicate with them” (Frame 199). Nevertheless, Istina perceives that nothing can change the fact that madness was a part of her identity. She asks, “Who are we [madwomen], have we changed when we no longer claim as our treasure the stalk of grass in our hand or the chocolate paper but choose the human beings that we hope to hold tight in our heart? Are we sane then?” (Frame, 218). Due to her prolonged stay in the mental institution, Istina recreates her own identity where “madness” helps her to condense the unspeakable emotions or wounds to overcome patriarchal subjugation.

Conclusion

If the world of the mad were the world where I now officially belonged (lifelong disease, no cure, no hope), then I would use it to survive, I would excel in it.³ (“An Angel at My Table” 234)

While ecofeminist approaches concentrate on external factors (for example, the *place* itself) as having affected Istina’s mental well-being, new materialism suggests that the mental institution’s poor standards of construction and its lack of maintenance have also hindered the inmates’ healing process. Additionally, the material space has ironically strengthened Istina’s sensory experience, empowering her to resist the mental institution’s patriarchal structures. The psychiatric institution separates the patients from the natural world, further exacerbating their psychological distress. By demonstrating that healing can only take place through greater contact with the external environment, this paper has argued that the artificiality of the material space of the mental institution is also culpable in the mental breakdown of women. Instead of functioning as a “healing space” for the patients, it serves as a “mad space” or a prison to prolong their mental sickness and to segregate them from the rest of the society. This analysis of madness provides insights into women’s inner voices and highlights the effects of patriarchy through an examination of women’s experiences in mental institutions. The experience of madness itself is unique for Istina because she no longer subscribes to social norms, and madness, for her, is a means of self-realisation and a phase of learning and recovery. As a result, madness creates a “self-protective distance” between the (mad)women and their oppressive “healing” space.

NOTES

¹ See Showalter, Chapter One, entitled “The Hysterical Hot Zone”.

² According to Piddock, the “material space, however, is not the only space, and try though authorities may to define, delimit and contain mental illness within material confines, there still remains another space: the space of imagination, vision, madness.”

³ In her autobiography, *An Angel at My Table* (1984), Frame wrote about her incarceration, after she was diagnosed in 1945 with a psychiatric condition, at the Seacliff Mental Hospital in New Zealand.

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