

**“Madwomen Out of the Attic:  
The Rise of Catastrofemales in Contemporary North American Literature”**

This dissertation investigates the emergence of a distinct and critically neglected antiheroic archetype in twenty-first-century North American literature: the catastrofemale. Characterized by aimlessness, self-sabotage, affective exhaustion, and profound mental and physical disarray, these protagonists have received little sustained scholarly attention as a discrete literary figure despite their increasing prominence in contemporary fiction. This study argues that the catastrofemale constitutes a significant literary site through which contemporary authors interrogate the intersecting pressures of neoliberal capitalism, heteropatriarchy, systemic racism, and consumer culture. While these protagonists participate in a longer genealogy of female madness extending from the nineteenth-century Gothic tradition and the madwoman figure to twentieth-century confessional narratives, they cannot be adequately understood through exclusively psychoanalytic, biographical, or anti-patriarchal frameworks. Instead, the dissertation proposes the catastrofemale as a specifically twenty-first-century formation whose apparent inertia, dysfunction, and self-destructive tendencies register the contradictions of contemporary social life.

Building upon and critically extending the foundational work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, as well as later feminist scholarship influenced by Michel Foucault, this dissertation adopts a posthuman feminist framework informed primarily by the materialist philosophy of Rosi Braidotti. Through this lens, madness is reconceptualized not as an individualized pathology or purely psychological condition, but as an embodied and embedded phenomenon produced through the dynamic interaction of mind, body, and sociohistorical context. Consequently, the mental distress experienced by catastrofemales emerges neither as a private failure nor as evidence of personal inadequacy; rather, it functions as a material manifestation of structural inequalities and, simultaneously, as a form of resistance to the systems that generate them. Madness thus becomes a critical interpretative category through which contemporary fiction exposes the violence of neoliberal subject formation and the unequal distribution of precarity across lines of gender, race, and class.

The dissertation develops this argument through a progression that traces how the catastrofemale archetype is transformed when questions of race increasingly complicate the privileges traditionally associated with literary antiheroines. Chapter Two examines Halle Butler’s *The New Me* (2019) and Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), both of which center highly educated, privileged white millennial women trapped within the affective and economic structures of late capitalism. In response to their profound dissatisfaction, each protagonist embarks upon an obsessive project of self-renewal: while Millie pursues aesthetic self-optimization and corporate conformity, Moshfegh’s narrator retreats into a chemically induced year of sleep in pursuit of biological rebirth. Although their strategies differ radically, both novels ultimately reveal the failure of neoliberal fantasies of transformation, demonstrating that structurally produced alienation cannot be resolved through individualized practices of self-management.

Chapter Three turns to Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018), reconfiguring the catastrofemale through the framework of racial capitalism. Unlike her white counterparts, the Chinese American protagonist Candace Chen cannot afford withdrawal, aimlessness, or refusal. Her alienation is instead internalized through routinized labor, corporate discipline, and cultural displacement. By situating the catastrofemale within the intersecting dynamics of race, migration, and global capitalism, the chapter demonstrates how racialization fundamentally alters the political stakes of the archetype. What appears as a voluntary rejection of productivity in white catastrofemale narratives becomes, for Candace, a compulsory condition of endurance that is ultimately transformed into a precarious strategy of survival amid social collapse.

The final chapter examines Raven Leilani’s *Luster* (2020), further expanding the catastrofemale model through Black female subjectivity. Focusing on the protagonist Edie, the chapter traces madness across three

interconnected dimensions: structural embeddedness, corporeal embodiment, and intergenerational inheritance. Whereas white antiheroines may experience withdrawal or failure as forms of resistance to neoliberal demands, Edie's distress is intensified by racialized precarity, inherited trauma, and the constant requirement to perform emotional self-regulation and social palatability. The novel therefore reveals how the burdens imposed by racial capitalism reshape both the experience and the representation of madness. Rejecting narratives of healing, respectability, or maternal redemption, *Luster* instead foregrounds artistic creation, relational vulnerability, and the embrace of material abjection as alternative modes of survival and self-definition.

Ultimately, this dissertation demonstrates that contemporary catastrofemal narratives depart significantly from the fatalistic trajectories historically assigned to literary madwomen. Rather than culminating in punishment, death, or complete reintegration into dominant social structures, these novels transform madness into a site of critical consciousness through which protagonists acquire insight into the systems that shape their suffering. Across the corpus, madness emerges not as a mark of individual failure but as an embodied, embedded, and politically generative response to contemporary conditions of precarity. By tracing the evolution of the catastrofemal from privileged white antiheroines to racialized and Black female subjects, this study reveals how contemporary fiction increasingly understands mental distress as inseparable from broader structures of power. In doing so, it establishes the catastrofemal as a crucial literary figure for understanding the affective, political, and material contradictions of twenty-first-century life, while simultaneously demonstrating how contemporary representations of female madness imagine alternative forms of agency, relationality, and posthuman becoming beyond the limits of neoliberal subjectivity.

Key-words: Catastrofemales; Literary Antiheroines; Female Madness; Posthuman Feminism; Intersectionality; Twenty-first-century North American Literature.