

# ULUSLARARASI SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR DERGİSİ THE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

Cilt: 12 Sayı: 68 Yıl: 2019  
www.sosyalarastirmalar.com  
Issn: 1307-9581



Volume: 12 Issue: 68 Year: 2019  
www.sosyalarastirmalar.com  
Issn: 1307-9581

Doi Number:  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17719/jisr.2019.3818>

## CROSSING THE BORDERS OF SANITY IN THE HOMESMAN\*

Fatma KALPAKLI\*\*

### Abstract

Glendon Swarthout's novel *the Homesman* (1988) is made into a movie in 2014 and draws attention to the lives of the frontier women in USA in 1850s. It raises the question of where and when one's identity and sense of self is shattered and broken; that is the border for most of the frontier women to lose their mind and their sanity. In other words, what is the border between sanity and insanity; what drives women into madness in the New Continent and what should be done to improve the life standards of the frontier women to preserve their identity and integrity is questioned in *the Homesman* (2014). Thus, "the border(s) of (in)sanity&the female identity" will be explored with regard to the female characters in *the Homesman* (2014).

**Keywords:** Glendon Swarthout, *The Homesman* (2014), The Frontier Women, Border(s) of (in)sanity, Identity.

### INTRODUCTION

Glendon Swarthout<sup>1</sup>'s novel *the Homesman* (1988) questions the border between sanity and insanity through the lives of the frontier women in the Midwest USA in 1850s. It scrutinizes "where and when one's identity and sense of self is shattered and broken?; what drives the frontier women into madness in the Midwest and what should be done to improve the life standards of the frontier women to save their lives and their identity?". Therefore, in this study, the border(s) of (in)sanity & the female identity will be explored with regard to the female characters in the film version of the novel; in *the Homesman*<sup>2</sup> (2014).

Insanity is defined as "madness; the state of being mad" (615) in *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* and is further explored in an article entitled "Insanity and Responsibility" in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary*

\* This study is an extended version of the paper presented at BAKEA Conference on 21 Nov. 2019.

\*\* Assoc.Prof.Dr., Selcuk University, Department of English Language and Literature, fkalpakli@selcuk.edu.tr

<sup>1</sup> Glendon Swarthout, author of "Bless the Beasts and Children" and other novels set largely in the West, died ... [at the age of ] 74 [in his house in 1992]. Mr. Swarthout, a Michigan native who left a teaching post at Michigan State University in 1959 to move to Arizona, had suffered from emphysema for two years ("Glendon Swarthout, Novelist, Dies at 74", *The New York Times*).

<sup>2</sup> "Tommy Lee Jones and Hilary Swank bring the stark reality of the Nebraska frontier to life on the big screen in the beautiful and brutal drama *The Homesman*", (Wilkinson, 2014,"*The Homesman*").



*Journal of Philosophy* as “[a] mental makeup which renders one (who would not normally be so) substantially incapable of rational conduct constitutes insanity” (Fingarette, 6). In *the Homesman* (2014), we witness the lives of the frontier women and their oscillations between sanity and insanity. Ironically enough, we, the audience, begin to see that there is a kind of rationality behind their irrational conducts and behaviours. The more we dig into their lives, the more sympathy we have for their efforts to cope with the problems they encounter, whether sane or insane.

### THE CLAIM-JUMPER

The movie starts with three women’s going “insane over the hard winter [in Nebraska]. When none of the good-for-nothing local men prove willing or able to do their rightful duty” (Hampton, 2015, 47) an ex-teacher from New York named Mary Bee Cuddy “impulsively takes it upon herself to repatriate the trio back to Ohio and [to] the semblance of civilization” (Hampton, 2015, 47).

She takes the three women on her horse carriage and heads towards the East to a Church, where, in Hebron, in Iowa, they have a place for the mentally ill women. On her way to Iowa, Mary Bee Cuddy “comes across a man with a noose around his neck - a claim-jumper<sup>3</sup> left to hang by squeamish vigilantes who figured his horse would eventually bolt and do their dirty work, so left him to his fate - Mary Bee accepts this as an opportunity she might be able to leverage” (Hampton, 2015, 48) and makes him an offer; she saves his life, but in return he should accompany her in her way to Iowa until she makes sure that three ill women are carried to the Church safe and sound. What is more, she would pay him 300\$ as a reward for his service.

The claim-jumper, named Briggs accepts her offer and they become travel companions<sup>4</sup>; actually title<sup>5</sup> of the movie is also related to this responsibility, to this task. *Homesman* refers to “the task of taking immigrants back home” (“*The Homesman*”) and Mary Bee Cuddy and Briggs begin to head towards the East in her wagon, which will be “a five-week trek back east to Iowa” (Horton, 2014, 67).

### THREE MAD WOMEN

Meanwhile, we are given the stories of the three women and learned that “three married women have been driven stark mad by the endless toil and horrifying privations, physical and mental, of life on the prairie [in the frontiers]. Each suffered precipitating events of peculiar horror: one mother lost her three young children to diphtheria [and stores the corpses of her stricken children in the hay (see Hampton’s, 2015, “Spooky Action at a Distance”, 48)], while another is undone by a loveless marriage and [by the sexual abuses of her husband<sup>6</sup>], the death of her elderly mother, and the sheer bleakness of the endless winter wastes (Carson, “The Cruel Theology of *The Homesman*”) in “the empty dirt plains of Nebraska” (Horton, 2014, 67).

The third woman commits an unspeakable act [according to Carson; that is she throws her baby into latrine due to the shortage of food] and loses her reason as a result. The women all suffer from what we would today call severe PTSD<sup>7</sup> [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] appear dissociated from reality, and are essentially mute (see Carson, 2015, “The Cruel Theology of *The Homesman*”).

Interestingly enough, music of the movie is also used to reflect the psychological situation of the women and the austerity of the environment and the life conditions, they are in. Director of the movie, Tommy Lee Jones told *The Homesman*’s composers that he wanted the music of *The Homesman* “to be folksy, but surrounded by madness<sup>8</sup>” (Grieving, “Music Interviews-In *The Homesman*, Wind is the Sound of

<sup>3</sup> He has been left to die “for claim-jumping another man’s homestead (Horton, 2014, 67)

<sup>4</sup> William Baker defines them as “perhaps the most unlikely companions imaginable” (1989, 107).

<sup>5</sup> Titled *The Homesman* and set in 1855, it refers to a man hired to escort women home “back east” who had failed to adapt to frontier life in the Nebraska Territory (see Carson, “The Cruel Theology of *The Homesman*”). However, another critic claims that “The Homesman” may sound like a title conferred on a man, and George Briggs may be driving the wagon. But it is Mary Bee’s persistence and prayers that carry the women, and the film, flawed as it sometimes is, home” (Sharkey, “Review: Harsh land and raw, maddening emotion test “The Homesman”).

<sup>6</sup> The threatening of the borders of her private space again and again ends up in loss of her sanity.

<sup>7</sup> Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault (see Parekh’s “PTSD: What Is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?”)

<sup>8</sup> Jones met with the composers more than a year ago to start thinking about a score that would help tell the story of three pioneer women who lose their minds in the bleak and unforgiving Nebraska territory.



Insanity") since the winds in the Midwest "would even make people crazy" as stated by one of the composers, named Marco Beltrami. Music composers of the movie "first took inspiration from the music of the nature so prevalent in the film's setting" and Beltrami says: "You know, wind was a factor for a lot of these women [in the territory of Nebraska], and just everybody in general there". And he adds "[t]he wind would even make people go crazy, besides the disease and all the hardships. And so we were thinking, 'How can we channel that?'" (Grieving, 2014, "Music Interviews-In *The Homesman*, Wind is the Sound of Insanity"). And they have managed to do it and especially, "[i]n one scene, the woman [character named Mary Bee Cuddy], who volunteers to transport the women back east, played by Hilary Swank<sup>9</sup>, gets lost and ends up nearly losing her own mind" (Grieving, 2014, "Music Interviews-In *The Homesman*, Wind is the Sound of Insanity"). And her mood is expressed so clearly through the music and the sound there "meant to evoke the characters' unsteady grasp on sanity" (Grieving, 2014, "Music Interviews-In *The Homesman*, Wind is the Sound of Insanity") expresses the composers in an interview. We, as the audience, very strongly feel that Mary Bee Cuddy is on the border, in the thin line between sanity and insanity and the wind becomes a kind of mediator to express the women characters' inner feelings and "help[s] tell the story of three pioneer women who lose their minds in the bleak and unforgiving Nebraska territory" (Grieving, 2014, "Music Interviews-In *The Homesman*, Wind is the Sound of Insanity").

### THE FRONTIER WOMEN

Let us do have a close look at the frontier women characters in *the Homesman*. The protagonist, Mary Bee Cuddy is a spinster, ex-teacher from New York and tries to start a life in the West in Nebraska. She is a member of the Methodist Church and fond of playing piano and singing songs, but due to very austere life conditions, she cannot play a real piano, but carries a cloth with the design of ivories and pretends to press these ivories while singing. She sings "Prarie Flower", which might be a perfect metaphor for herself in the territory of Nebraska and says "I can not live without real music<sup>10</sup> much longer", which might be foreshadowing her loss of sanity and her suicide towards the end of the movie as her hope of marrying one day die and as she does not conform to the gender patterns in the 1850s Midwest. In one scene, she expresses that in her very own words, "I live uncommonly alone" (*The Homesman*). From beginning of the movie to its end, we see her trying to start a family, but rejected again and again by different males on the ground of being "plain and too bossy" (*The Homesman*). She informs us that she has a sister in New York, whom married to a doctor and having a 6 years old son and having a baby on the way, whose life is the idealized one for the females at the time. Mary Bee Cuddy seems to be longing for that kind of life, too.

In addition to these, she misses the trees and the music and the civilized life in New York, where she has grown up. She suffers from a sort of "emotional hunger" in the prarie and when she learns that three mentally ill women are in need of care and their husbands are unwilling to help them, she decides to take the issue into her own hands and intends to take them to the Church in Hebron. A critic defines her as "a spinster-angel" (Hampton, 2015, 46) due to her altruistic nature and deeds. And the Reverend in Iowa says "You are a godly and good woman, but God gave them [to the three insane women] more than they bear!" to Mary Bee Cuddy. She visits the wagon maker and gets a wagon to put the women in to transport them to the East; the wagon maker shows her the wagon and the extra pieces he adds to the wagon so that Mary Bee Cuddy should tie these women during the trip. She seems reluctant to have these pieces at her wagon, but the wagon maker warns her that she might have to lock them and tie in order to prevent them from running away. And in this scene, he lets the audience to have a glimpse into his society by commenting on his community's views about sanity and insanity. He expresses that "people do talk about taxes, but when it comes to the crazy, they just hiss" (*The Homesman*). Thus, they do put pressure on them rather than helping them.

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"We certainly didn't want 'crazy' music, the kind of music you hear when the giant ants appear after the flying saucer crashes," Jones says. "We didn't want effects music. We wanted to do something original, and that was reflective of the country and the way the country sounds. We both knew what the movie sounded like. We just had to find it." [And as the music composers state Jones' way of giving directions guides them during this process since] Jones usually gives direction in broad strokes, saying something like, "I want it to be folksy, but surrounded by madness." (Grieving, 2014, "Music Interviews-In *The Homesman*, Wind is the Sound of Insanity")

<sup>9</sup> The role appealed, Swank said, because Cuddy "has fortitude, she has good morals. I think we've lost a lot of our virtues in our world today, so it was nice to play a character who has strong values." As she explained it, the movie asks one basic question about the Western settler's plight: "Ultimately how much can a person take? We're talking about a time that was extreme in every way. It was a hard, hard place to live." (Wilkinson, 2014, *The Homesman*)

<sup>10</sup> Music plays an important role in the lives of the Methodists, and of Mary Bee Cuddy since the Methodists are "known for their rich musical tradition" (see, "Ten Things Everyone Should Know about the Methodist Church").



The first woman character, Gro Stevendsen is a “Northern woman” (Hampton, 46), most probably from Germany or Denmark, she is in her 30s and she is abused by her husband sexually and psychologically; he wants to have a son, but being unable to make her get pregnant, he turns her life into hell. As time goes by, she begins to scream at her husband and the other people around her just like an animal. Moreover, she begins to show masochistic tendencies and her “attempts at self destruction goes unobserved” (Roth, 1988, 1168) like putting her finger on the candle fire, scratching her skin with needle and hitting her head to the walls and making bleed her own head and so on. And after the death of her mother, things get worse and she is tied by her husband and kept locked at home, “until [her] spirit is crushed and [her] mind reduced to incoherence” (Roth, 1988, 1168).

The second woman character, Arabella Sours is a 19 year old woman and mother of three children, but she lost all of her children to diphtheria in three days. She begins to hear baby cries everywhere. She cannot accept their death and replaced her children with baby dolls and she keeps holding the baby dolls on her lap and sits in a chair and looks at the window in her house with blank eyes all day long.

The third woman character, Theolise Belknap is in her 40s and she cannot breastfeed her baby; their animals die on their barren lands. The nature is not very welcoming in Nebraska/in the Frontiers and Theolise expresses it in a scene in the following words; “The wind blown over all the corns. The wheat, the crops are death” (*The Homesman*). She has two daughters<sup>11</sup> and a husband, three more mouths to feed and eventually, she cannot endure her little baby’s suffering from hunger and throws the baby into latrine. Crossing the borders of sanity, she goes mad and she cannot carry out her daily routine and at the end, her husband has to tie her into the bars of the bed at home.

The only sane women, who also guides and protects them during the trip, seems to be Mary Bee Cuddy. However, later we see that she has “suicidal tendencies” and she oscillates between the borders of sanity and insanity, just like her other companions in the wagon.

Her breaking point might be the moment, when she loses her dignity in the eye of Mr. Briggs and her experiencing of how it is like to be “an undesirable woman” again.

Even after sleeping with Mr. Briggs, she sees the impossibility of starting a family and a new life and when her Christian mission of delivering the insane women to the Church is over, she might have not found a reason to hold onto life and losing her place and “her dignity in the eye of the Mr. Briggs” might be the last straw and might have become unbearable for her and she might have decided to give an end to her life.

Previous to her death, “31 years old. I am in good health and capable of child bearing and you are not getting any younger”, she says to Mr. Briggs. In this scene, we are informed that Mr. Briggs was in the American squadron once, but left it. He shares this piece of information with Mary Bee Cuddy to explain that he is “not the marrying type”. And he adds, “I am attached to nothing, just me!” (*The Homesman*).

If we do have a close reading of their conversation; her words before sleeping with Mr. Briggs were “Spare me my dignity, Sir” (*The Homesman*), and having exposed to a very mechanical, emotionless sexual union with him and being in a very pitiful situation; being obliged to beg for sexual union with an old claim jumper and afterwards having no prospects for a future, then her spirit might have been crushed and eventually she has crossed the borders of sanity and she has hanged<sup>12</sup> herself.

In the following scene, Mr. Briggs, not being able to face the role and responsibility, he might have had in her disappointment, immediately begins to scream at the three women and says “God damn Lunatics! You do not know anything about this world. If you would stay sane and steady, she would be at home! She could not die!” (*The Homesman*).

However, a short while after Mary Bee Cuddy’s suicide, Mr. Briggs feel guilty and he makes sure that she at least have a grave marker, as she deserves it. On the grave marker/headstone of Mary Bee Cuddy, Mr. Briggs gets the following words written; “God Loved Her & Took Her Home Into Him” (*The Homesman*).

Afterwards, he finds Altha Carter, played by Meryl Streep, who is the Minister’s wife in Hebron, Iowa. She welcomes the insane frontier women into parsonage and tries to understand what is their condition and if there is any improvement in their health. Though, Meryl Streep’s role as the Minister’s wife is very short, it forces us to think and raises many questions in the mind of the audience. Why all these

<sup>11</sup> Mary Bee Cuddy visits them at home and suggests to Theolise’s daughters to help their mom and dad and “to get as busy as bees” (*The Homesman*), which is a very significant character trait of herself as it is reflected in her name as well.

<sup>12</sup> As a critic states “man is unique among all creatures in having the capacity to be his own executioner by an act of will” (Roth, 1988, 1168) just like Mary Bee Cuddy does in the movie.



women cross the borders of sanity and go insane<sup>13</sup> or what is the problem in the newly emerging settlements in USA?

### CHILDLESSNESS

Interestingly enough, "childlessness" seems to be at the source of their insanity; Arabella lost her three children to diphtheria; Theolise lost her baby to famine; Gro Stevendsen cannot get impregnated; Mary Bee Cuddy, being a spinster, cannot have her longed for children. Considering the century and the geography they live in, being a mother and "motherhood seems to play a great role in the establishment of female identity" and in the preservation of their happiness and dignity. All of these frontier women endure hunger, hard labour, sexual and psychological abuse, but when they lose the hope of being good mothers, they cross the thin border between sanity and insanity and go mad.

And ironically enough, by going insane, maybe for the first time in their lives, they gain control over their lives. For instance, Mary Bee takes the control over her life; when and where to die. Theolise refuses to be an unprotecting and insufficient mother, who cannot breastfeed her baby and by going insane and by killing her baby, she manages to protect her baby from hunger. Gro Stevendsen takes the control over her body into her own hands and sort of rebelled against her husband and derives pleasure out of masochistic deeds, without having any need for a man. Arabella through her doll babies and the baby cries in her mind continues to live with her children; though in a different dimension, she still has "the autonomy" and "the integrity" in her life. Moreover, her shooting of the vagabond who kidnaps her and saving Mr. Briggs' life shows that she is aware of what is going around herself and she is able to differentiate who is good or bad. And she decides to get in touch with the outside world, only at times when she wants to do it, she creates a brave new world for herself and her lost children in another dimension of the universe.

All these four women endure hunger, hardwork, but not childlessness. We see in one scene, Mary Bee Cuddy eating hay with his horse in the prairie, Theolise's breasts go dry as a result of the shortage of food. Poverty and famine have not broken the integrity of these women, but the loss of children or losing the hope of having one in the future has broken their nerves and eventually their integrity.

Besides, "childlessness" might symbolize that there is no hope, no future for them even in the new settlements as they also have very strict patriarchal structures. And this idea is strengthened more and more through "the infertile lands" and the austere environment in the movie.

Mr. Briggs, towards the end of the movie, as a last generous act, warns a 16 year old girl maid at the hotel, where he stays, about "not to marry someone who heads West" (*The Homesman*). He says, "I got a good piece of advice for you. Stay here. Don't marry someone headed West!" (*The Homesman*) so that he could at least save one person from following in the footsteps of the frontier women<sup>14</sup>, whom *the Homesman* is dedicated to, especially to the Nebraska frontier women, who are both physically and mentally on the border.

<sup>13</sup> Why all these women go insane or what is the problem in the newly emerging settlements in USA? Here, it might help us to refer to Foucault's and his followers' views:

Before the development of bourgeois society, folly and "madness" had been allowed a platform and a voice in society at large. There had been a dialogue between reason and unreason. This became an impediment and a threat to the kind of social order required by the new masters of society. The insane were swept from the streets, along with the poor and the vagrants, and locked away in institutions during the "great confinement" in the seventeenth century. In the asylums taken over by the psychiatrists towards the end of the eighteenth century they were submitted to newly devised constraints and brutalities. [Through] "new and more sinister forms of mental and physical control", [and these new] forms of "treatment" [might be]... euphemisms for physical torture and terror [since]...[i]n the new institutions [and in the charity units of some Churches] patients were disciplined and instructed in a manner modelled on the power relationships between father and children in the bourgeois family. (Roth, 1988,1165).

And if we apply this to *the Homesman*, we might suggest that mental hospitals or mental care houses are established to "mask the true character of a cruel" society just like the one in the territory of Nebraska. And in the Church in Hebron, three women characters most probably will be treated within the strict patriarchal roles based on "the power relationships between father and children" (Roth, 1165). And relying on the assumptions that the ones who think and act out of the box would be a threat to the masters of the society, the power owners will try to make sure that most of the nonconformists, just like the frontier women characters in *the Homesman*, should be conformed to the rules of the patriarchal society sooner or later. Otherwise, they are doomed to be labelled as "Lunatics or mad" (see also Gilbert&Gubar's, *Madwoman in the Attic*) as they are called by Mr. Briggs in one of the scenes in the movie.

<sup>14</sup> In an interview, Jones states that unfortunately, every woman has exposed to "trivialization or objectification" because of her "gender" at some point in her life (see Carroll's "Interview" in *The Guardian* and another article entitled "A Window Beyond the Western" in *New York Times*) and "the trivialization of women" reveals to be one of the prominent issues in *the Homesman*.



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the violation of frontier women's privacy and dignity forces them to live on the border of in/sanity as illustrated very vividly in the beautiful scenario of *The Homesman*. And whether sane or insane, these women characters gain the admiration of the audience thanks to their struggles and defense mechanisms under extreme life conditions on the borders and through drawing attention to the issue of the violation of frontier women's dignity *The Homesman* makes clear that women need to be shown respect to preserve their sanity and integrity. Thus, the movie becomes a call for the improvement of the frontier women's status and rights in American society.

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Image 1: *The Homesman*.