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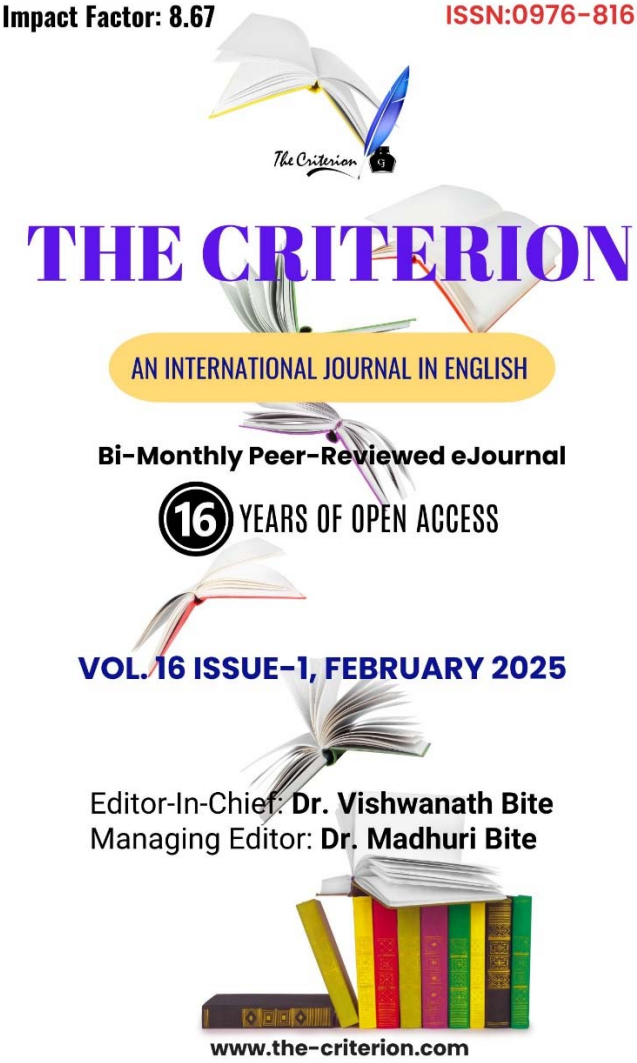

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From Possession to Possession: Custody and Invisibility in Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*

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Abstract:

Life is feeling. It is a subjective interpretation of the self in corroboration to what is considered the norm at large by a particular society. Thomas S. Szasz in his essay, "The Myth of Mental Illness" has stated that, "The concept of illness, whether bodily or mental, implies deviation from some clearly defined norm" (113). Thus, it is evident that the self which is categorized as being a "deviation" from acceptable identities in society, is pushed to the outskirts and considered *un-able* to subscribe to the normative by itself. This leads to a form of custodianship to emerge from the others surrounding this self, which at the start may arise for positive reasons, but in finality, may end tragically, a notion that will be explored in this essay, which attempts to analyse the custody, or possession, of the mentally-ill self (which is considered a form of mental possession) by others, stripping it from any attempts at self-advocation and agency, in Joanne Greenberg's (born 1932) fictionalized autobiography, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (published 1964).

Keywords: Invisibility; custody; mental illness; possession.

Introduction

The constitution of reality is dependent upon what is considered the "correct" interpretation of the world, in accordance with the perceptions of the majority. Szasz has

grappled with the question of what is considered a "deviation" from the normative, furnishing two possible answers to the same:

> (a) It may be the person himself (that is, the patient) who decides that he deviates from a norm. For example, an artist may believe that he suffers from a work inhibition; and he may implement this conclusion by seeking help for himself from a psychotherapist, (b) It may be someone other than the patient who decides that the latter is deviant (for example, relatives, physicians, legal authorities, society generally, etc.) In such a case a psychiatrist may be hired by others to do something to the patient in order to correct the deviation. (115)

Thus, one must mark a certain deviance within themselves, or have it identified by others; however, the world is an ephemeral place with its own shifting, horrifying qualities that may be stranger than fiction. The reality of our world is also dependent upon its acceptance at large, and the rejection of the laws set in place socially is threatening to the constructed order and structure, making mentally ill individuals who deviate from the same, outsiders. Even Deborah identifies the world to be a horrifying place, questioning the verity of her reality: "After months of therapy, Deborah began to learn that there were many reasons why the world was horrifying to her" (Greenberg 97). The title of the novel is highlighted and emphasized in a session Deborah has with Dr. Fried, or Furii, as she addresses her in her mind, wherein the same notion of the world being its own form of madness is stated; for it is true that reality is mere perception, and it is not a beautiful escape from the prison of the mind, "'Look here,' Furii said. 'I never promised you a rose garden. … I never promise lies, and the rose-garden world of perfection is a lie... and a bore, too!'" (Greenberg 109). Thus, for the mentally ill, they are trading one form of reality for the other, *choosing* to subscribe to the normative, the "truth" over their own perceptions and constructions of the world.

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I. The Familial

The mental is not physical; therefore, it cannot be visually grasped by others. A tangible manifestation or something concrete is required according to Deborah's parents, the familial universe acting as a microcosm of the general associations formed by individuals towards the mentally ill. Yr is a coping mechanism for her, it was "a kind of neutral place… there was no emotion to endure, no past or future to grind against. There was no memory or possession of any self…" (Greenberg 3). She is in possession of Yr, and she is aware of her disconnection with the rest of humanity; however, since mental illness has no physical symptoms that may pointedly highlight the deterioration of the mind, her disease is glossed over, unnoticed and diminished, "I had known all those years and years how sick I was, and nobody else would admit it" (Greenberg 152). Even though Deborah was able to recognize the "deviance" within herself, lacking the physical symptoms, she was not diagnosed by doctors; she is in possession of the "others": the doctors, her family, society at large, which refuses to accept her difference. It is only when these custodians are met with physical consequences of Deborah's mental anguish, that is, "the 'suicide attempt', the cry of a mute for help…" (Greenberg 18), is she *allowed* to seek aid.

Therefore, there is an obvious inability of the "others" to even accept mental illness as a sickness, to the point where Deborah's father refuses to accept that she is ill, labelling her as being merely "unhappy", reducing the gravity of her situation: "'Sick,' Esther said. 'Unhappy!' Jacob shouted and left the room" (Greenberg 23). Another important facet to note is how Esther is "grateful" for the violent act of wrist-cutting, which should be a cause of immense concern, irrationally reduced to "silly" and "theatrical" (Greenberg 8); however, finally allowing Deborah to indicate that she is asking for help. Thus, it is clear that the illness needs to be visible in order for the others to accept it as being real.

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In some aspects, Deborah desires someone to take charge and help her, which is indicated through the repetition of her sentiment to be recognized, "I told you the truth about these things – now are you going to help me?" (Greenberg 10). She is rendered invisible and labelled a fraud, which is another form of possession of her being: she is forced to conform to what society, doctors and her family require her to be, simply because they refuse to accept her illness; she cannot even take charge of her self and identity,

> The home the school and all of the doctor's offices ringing with the joyful accusation: *There is Nothing The Matter With You***.** Deborah had known for years and years that there was more than a little the matter – something deeply and gravely the matter, more even than the times of blindness, intense pain, lameness, terror, and the inability to remember anything at all might indicate. They had always said, '*There is nothing the matter with you, if you would only…"* Here at last was a vindication of all the angers in those offices." (Greenberg Pg 17; emphasis added)

Deborah is "accused" of criminal lies about her state of being, and the others' remedy of ignoring her problems is labelled joyful, as it is easier to believe that nothing is the matter with one's child, friend, an individual as a person, when everything is physically perfect; the mental is invisible, even her illness does not belong to her. The cutting was a way for Deborah to prove that what she was feeling was real, what she was going through was real, and not merely a figment of her mind, of her active imagination; she wanted to take control, she wanted to be seen.

Moreover, Deborah's parents are unable to fathom how she could be mentally distressed when she supposedly had a wonderful upbringing, "It seemed like a good life – a very good life she had. Now they say it wasn't. We gave love and we gave comfort. She was never threatened with cold or hunger…" (Greenberg 22). In addition to this, Esther contrasts her daughter's struggles with her husband's – the latter's being tangible and something that can be

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explained, grasped, understood – something which is not built off of quiet and invisible experiences; it is akin to the hardness of trauma, the sharpness of a physical wound, "And Esther remembered then that Jacob, too, had an immigrant past; had been cold, wet, hungry, and foreign. How he must have sworn to keep those wolves from his children!" (Greenberg 22). However, there is a certain resilience which is born within the mentally ill, which allows them to survive in an environment that refuses to believe them, and rather dons on the role of becoming a dictatorial custodian of their mental being, barring them from dismantling the illness in their mind, "… Pinel was not sure at times that he was dealing with sick people; he often marveled at their unbelievable endurance of physical hardship, and often cited the ability of schizophrenic women to sleep naked in subfreezing temperatures without suffering any ill effects" (Barchilon vii).

Madness seems to be a "social disease" (Greenberg 157). There is a certain guilt that the patient carries with regards to "inconveniencing" the others, and there is a helplessness that the custodian of the possessed feels as well, "A sudden, *helpless* anger leaped into Esther's head, and her eyes burned with it for a moment. Deborah! Deborah – what has she done to us all!" (Greenberg 26, emphasis added). Esther's outburst is indicative of her suppressed emotions and the frustrations she carried against Deborah, in spite of trying to be understanding of her condition. Thus, there is an isolation that envelops the mentally ill person, as others are unable to forge any form of relatability with the individual: "I had known all those years and years how sick I was, and nobody else would admit it." (Greenberg 152)

There is a division that cleaves the mentally ill individual from the others, a sense of unknowing: "We who have never experienced this sickness firsthand can only guess what horror and loneliness there must be" (Greenberg 112). The guilt goes both ways, as even Deborah's custodians cry out in confusion, of desiring normalcy within their family lives, since, there is an interconnectedness with the ones we surround ourselves with, a social response to

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life, and the idea of having a "sick" individual within the fold, who seemingly does not have anything physically the matter with them, is a difficult notion to grapple with, "'Is it wrong to want a child like anyone else's?' Jacob asked. 'I... I mean is there a cure, really, or will she stay here and have to be placated and comforted ... always?' He heard how cold his words sounded" (Greenberg 111). In fact, there is a difference in how humans treat people who are physically ill, versus the invisibility faced by the mentally ill, rendering their symptoms mere make-believe. Deborah's family finds it difficult to cope with an "invisible" illness which seems to have no specific cure, and this way of thinking has made the diagnosis and subsequent treatment of mental illness, in contrast to physical illness, much more difficult, as can be noted in Szasz's essay, wherein he states, "Mental illness, of course, is not literally a 'thing'—or physical object—and hence it can 'exist' only in the same sort of way in which other theoretical concepts exist" (Szasz 113). However, it is a manifestation within the self which makes the body of the individual a site for physical reflection of the disease, whether it pertains to deviations from the norm socially, or even the corporeality of the person.

The possession that Deborah's family wields over her can be stated to be not solely for her benefit, but clearly for their own desired machinations as well: "Many parents said – even thought – that they wanted help for their children, only to show, subtly or directly, that their children were part of a secret scheme for their own ruin." (Greenberg 27) This leads to resentment to brew within the family members who wish to mold Deborah into the perfect daughter, sister or granddaughter: "It was the second spring that she was gone, and how much closer was she to the modest, obedient, womanly being that his heart cried out to have as a daughter? No closer. There had been no improvement at all" (Greenberg 155). Moreover, Deborah's illness takes a toll on the family, who feel anger towards her for upsetting the workings of their lives because of her ineptitude to get better, especially since they believed that, "but in her somewhere, and by some mistaken magic, the family happiness and peace

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

rested" (Greenberg 226). One may ponder, is not the family's worry and unwillingness to see the truth about Deborah's condition too, a form of deluded madness? However, one must realize that, "we see the anguish not only of Deborah but of those around her: no one is guilty here; all are suffering" (Self). There is a desire to pin her as the tortured, but brilliant daughter, which can be seen is the outburst between Suzy and Esther, "'Don't you see, you stupid girl,' Esther said almost savagely, 'I don't have to! Praising you is bragging. Praising Deborah is—excusing—'" (Greenberg 229). Her artistic side, thus, becomes an acceptable explanation for the whole family:

> To the whole family it suddenly seemed to explain all the sickness and sensitivity, the sleeplessness, the intensity, and the sudden looks of misery, covered quickly by a blank hardness of the face or the bitter wit's backthrust. Of course ... she was special, a rare and gifted spirit. (Greenberg 34)

Her father's love is another form of possession that is exercised over Deborah. Jacob's love towards his daughter is marred with a sense of ownership; "Jacob's warmth and pride, pathetic and vulnerable, flowed toward her as she saw her sitting again at his table. 'I'll bet they don't serve a piece of meat like this at That Place'" (Greenberg 226), not only is there a stigmatization of her past, she is being inadvertently labeled, and one can note how the good qualities of being warm and proud, are painted with a pathetic and vulnerable wash. Moreover, there is emphasis placed on the institution through the capitalization of "That Place", which cannot be named, that indicates a sense of shame associated with Deborah's condition. The father's selfishness and possessive qualities can be witnessed in the way that he speaks of his daughter, how he believes "It's my[his] right" (Greenberg 112), and how he would rather have Deborah with him, broken, than away being associated "with all those…those screaming women" (Greenberg 227), at the institution, "She had been unsure and wretched, but she had

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

been theirs – unsure, to be guarded and planned for; wretched, to be cheered and mothered" (Greenberg 112).

Furthermore, Deborah feels an obligation to get better towards her family; a guilty conscience is born from being indebted, without her assent to the so-called "favours", meant for her own good: "As she reeled and pulled on the endless, vertical cliff, she felt that every favor, every easing, was an unpaid debt heaped upon her by loving tormentors and weighing like lumps of lead" (Greenberg 227). Her family's frustration towards her condition, and Deborah's own inability to bridge the gap between herself and the rest of the human race, seems to be exacerbated by her family's inability to understand her, yet still wishing to keep possession of her, but the truth is "Many parents said – even thought – that they wanted help for their children, only to show, subtly or directly, that their children were part of a secret scheme for their own ruin. A child's independence is too big a risk for the shaky balance if some parents" (Greenberg 27). There lacks any intimacy of being understood.

II. The Social

"*Forever, crazy girl! Forever, lazy girl!*" (Greenberg 15)

Socially, there are a plethora of stereotypes which are associated with the mentally ill, the cruelest being an othering of their selves from the rest of society. Even the mental institution, rather than being seen as a place of healing, is labelled a form of "imprisonment", with family members being apprehensive of the space, "'They call it a mental hospital, but it's a place, Es, a place where they put people away. How can it be a good place for a girl – almost a child!'" (Greenberg 3). Difference is weaponized and considered a fault, even though Debroah begs, "my difference is not my sickness" (Greenberg 168), it falls on deaf ears as it is not for her to decide who she is, but rather the others around her, who are in custody of her identity and being.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Moreover, there is a requirement for intense reform within the hospital system as well. Even though the staff have been professionally trained to deal with mentally ill individuals, their cruelty and uncompassionate behavior is startling, morphing into physical violence and assault as well. Michel Foucault has stated in his work *Madness and Civilization* that "The principle of fear, which is rarely decreased by insanity, is considered as of great importance in the management of the patients" (245). Deborah "knew that none of the workers liked her. People never had." (Greenberg 14), she had faced bullying and "cruelly antisemitic" (Greenberg 32) rhetoric on the outside of her stay at the hospital; however, she is still othered within the institution, and treated almost like an object to be fixed, over a person with human emotions, feelings and experiences by the people around her, except for Dr. Fried, who truly wished to understand her condition. It is evident that "Fear appears as an essential presence in the asylum" (Foucault 245) within the institution, where the caretakers are "…running in terror from the whip of subtle similarity between the madwomen's uttered thoughts and their own unuttered ones" (Greenberg 103). The violence which is inflicted upon the patients is also a form of possession over their physical beings, which is demonstrated in the way Helene is assaulted when she was strapped in the pack, until she conformed to what was expected of her:

> Then he straightened a little, riot angry, only deliberate, and began to hit her in the face. The blows landed sure and hard. She spat up at him, a diffused and angry spray, and Deborah, watching, saw what would be to her forever after the symbol of the impotence of all mental patients**:** the blow again, calm and accurate and merciless, and the spitting back again and again. Helene did not even reach him, but after every attempt he met her at the end of his arm with full force. There was no sound except the pursing sputter of the now dry lips, her labored breathing, and the blows falling. They were both so intent that they seemed to have forgotten everything else. When he had slapped her into

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

> submission, he took her pulse and Deborah's and left. When he went out, Helene was coughing a little on her blood. (Greenberg 106-107)

This episode emphasizes the inhumane treatment meted out to the mentally ill, who refuse to submit to the will of the others; for the staff, "He was no longer on the job, no longer being tested by the patients, and he was now looked upon by them and himself as merely custodian of things, some of which were still alive" (Greenberg 129). Stripped of individuality, agency and their own identities, the patients at the institution are hammered into a box, a box which is considered the norm at large, and refusal to mold themselves to what is expected, leads to dire consequences that, in the long run, harm them, not just mentally, but also physically. The patients are then, "victims", not only of their own minds, but also those who are taking possession of them, and they are reduced to imbecilic individuals, stereotyped to have tainted mental capacity, which is illustrated in the disbelief and lack of faith shown to Deborah's testimony of the witnessed violent episode, by the director of the institution,

> "We are interested in stopping any brutality going on around here, but we can't take something without proof. You were in pack because you were upset, you know. Something perhaps you believe you saw ..." … He was clearly giving her what Lee Miller called Treatment Number Three: a variety of the old "fine-fine," which went, "Yes, yes, of course," and was meant to placate without changing, silence without comprehending, and end friction by doing nothing. As she looked at him, Deborah thought about her sedative order." (Greenberg 108).

Thus, no helping hand is extended. A realization washes over Deborah, that owing to her mental state, she will be dogged with prejudiced opinions, "And then it struck her: here it was – what Doris Rivera had faced and what Carla might soon face – the World. She fainted" (Greenberg 147). However, she wants to live.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

It is of interest to note that Foucault has stated with regards to institutionalized patients, "The maniac was sensible of the kindness of his treatment. He promised to restrain himself" (246), which is indicative of the sound mental capacity of responding to a treatment of equality and kindness by the mentally ill who have been institutionalized. It is clear that the mentally ill wish to be in possession of themselves, and desire to be their own persons, "'Sure,' Carla answered. 'I see my doctor tomorrow. I just had to be alone, that's all, not led or taken'" (Greenberg 234). However, in reality, "...the doctors who used their prestige and a certain sense of private ownership of reality to separate themselves from their patients" (Greenberg 215). There is a refusal to forge a sense of relatability, a refusal to accept that the doctors and the patients that are being treated are made of the same substance – that of being human, flesh and soul. Prejudice is nurtured and bred, "Too many incidents and frightening tales had bred fear and contempt in most of the town's people" (Greenberg 244), and ultimately, ostracizes them from the fold of society, labelling them as potentially harmful, or worse, invisible, especially since no one "really want[s] to look at us[them]" (Greenberg 175).

Conclusion

"Men are so necessarily mad, that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness" (Foucault ix). Nobody can claim suffering as their own, everyone owns a share of it, and this sentiment is resounded in *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* as well, "What makes you think you have a corner on suffering?" (Greenberg 203). Madness is, to an extent, a social construct as well. This can be seen in the way Deborah draws parallels "between psychotics and religious fanatics" (Greenberg 93). The majority outlines the perceptions of the world that are rendered the truth. Even though there exists prejudice within society, there are also "people on the outside [who] make you feel honored to share the name 'person' with them" (Greenberg 215). The supposed custodians of mentally ill individuals possess the power to change the life

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

of the person, for better or for worse; this can be illustrated in the ward patient Carmen, whose father pulls her from the institution, ultimately leading to her tragic suicide. Deborah's family gave her freedom, they gave her a chance, and it was "her parents who had bought this fight for her. They could have cut her off from it the minute that she failed to make their progress. They had kept faith with a future which might never sing their praises" (Greenberg 237). There are realizations which need to be made, wherein people must accept that mentally ill individuals are not inanimate objects, lacking feelings and the ability to think, or "crazies", but rather, real people, something which Deborah's father too realizes in due course: "It had never occurred to Jacob that the screamer who still haunted his dreams might just be a person, someone named Lucy, and the realization eased him a little, but he hugged Deborah hard when he said good night" (Greenberg 227). The prejudice may break away slowly, but it is evident that the mentally ill don't need to be controlled; they are asking for help, they are not to be "deprived of air and liberty" (Foucault 242), but treated as real persons, who are just like anyone of us.

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