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**Alienation of ‘The Other’ and Female Madness in Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea***

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**Abstract**

The voiceless madwoman in the attic in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha, is the main protagonist of Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which she is named as Antoinette Cosway. This novel tells the story of this ‘other woman,’ named Antoinette Cosway, and how her identity was oppressed, eventually leading to complete madness and loss of self. Rhys disagreed with Bronte’s depiction of Bertha Mason and generated a post-colonial story which portrays Bertha’s background and the various situations leading to her ‘doomed marriage, loss of identity, and madness’. The major characters in this novel are mostly expounded by their separateness from the cultural groups. Antoinette and her family, though white, do not belong to the dominant class of the white Jamaicans due to numerous reasons including local disapproval of her mother, Annette Cosway’s behaviour and appearance, as well as the family’s poverty after the death of Antoinette’s father, Alexander Cosway. The idea of women being shut up is repetitive in the novel and history is being repeated through two generations. It may be noticed that Edward Rochester is actually never named in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but in this paper he will be referred to as Rochester figure, according to the story of *Jane Eyre*. The novel therefore, focuses on binaries of ‘otherness’ and ‘madness’, which include not only the colonizer-colonized, male-female and mother-daughter relationships, but also the repression coming from ‘the Self’, together in a patriarchal and colonial society, leading to the complete abjection of Antoinette and a loss of her identity. Hence, this paper aims to delve into the diametrical issues of the alienation of the feminine other and female madness in Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

**Keywords:** Culture, Dislocation, Identity, Insanity, Isolation, Oppression, Patriarchy.

**Introduction**

The novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys was written in 1966 and a sort of a prequel to the Victorian novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte which was written in 1847. The story opens in

1839, post- emancipation Act of slaves in British Empire. In Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre*, Edward Rochester’s first wife, Bertha Mason, is described as a Jamaican madwoman locked up in the attic of their house in England because of her violent insanity. She has always been subjected to racial conflicts and non-acceptance by her own husband. The narrative progresses to unfold the various reasons for the insane condition and madness of this locked up woman in the attic. The novel predicates Rochester as a victim who was tricked into marrying the ‘lunatic’ Bertha, “whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing” (*Jane Eyre* 303). It consists of shift of many narratives but starts and ends with ‘she’ narratives of a mother and a daughter. The narrative is not linear and the time (past and present) makes the novel a retrospective narrative. When Rochester arrives in Jamaica to marry Antoinette, he is frequently disoriented and disabled by his failure to comprehend Caribbean culture and custom. Throughout the novel Rhys incorporates various symbols to divulge the concept of “the Other” along with themes of social and cultural identity, entrapment, and eco-criticism to contemplate the psyches and experiences of the characters. Teresa F. O’Connor observes,

Rhys, herself caught between places and cultures, classes and races, never able to identify clearly with one another, gives the same marginality to her heroines, so that they reflect the unique experience of dislocation of the white Creole woman (*Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels* 9).

Antoinette explains to her audience that her own story begins with her mother, and therefore, she is defined by her mother. She repeats the story of exploitation that she and her mother had faced both by the surrounding community as well as from their husbands. Both the females tried to make their husbands aware of the surrounding discomfort which was endangering both Antoinette and Antoinette’s mother. Their husbands did not listen and as a result, this led their wives to insanity. Mr. Mason, Antoinette’s step-father clips the parrot’s wings, in the same way the Rochester figure metaphorically clips Antoinette’s wings of freedom and desire. Antoinette and her mother, both undergo the same traumatic experiences. Arrogance of the male dominance is eminent in the novel due to the ignorance of Antoinette’s husband and Mr. Mason about their

wives' insecurities. It can be noticed that, Antoinette was exploited by Grace Poole's bad behavior and her mother Annette was also exploited by her male servants 'sexually'.

Mad women were always left alone unprotected to exploitation. Patriarchy, colonialism and female madness are the central issues in Rhys' novels. Mr. Rochester is portrayed as the stereotypical man who prefers to uphold his colonial dominant position of power in every sphere and Antoinette as just the opposite of Rochester, submissive and weak. Geert Hofstede defines "The male stereotype as active and strong while the female stereotype is passive and weak" (*Masculinity and Femininity: The Taboo Dimensions of National Cultures* 109). Mr Rochester is the ultimate patriarchal figure who intentionally propels Antoinette to madness by alienating her from her own culture and separates her from her own identity. According to Foucault, madness can be defined in various ways relating to the varied cultural norms of the society. Mr Rochester regards Antoinette to be "mad" as she does not behave like a Victorian woman. She behaves and reacts beyond the normative frameworks of a Victorian society and protests for her husband's oppressive treatment on her. Rhys uses the concept of mirrors in particular throughout the novel to symbolize Antoinette's double identity, madness, and ultimately deteriorated selfhood under a system of patriarchal oppression. *Sargasso Sea* and the mirror vividly tell a difficult way of identity loss and reconstruction. Mirrors significantly play a large part in Antoinette's chaotic childhood to portray her double identity and fluidity between social groups. When Antoinette and her family finally get out of their burning home, she alludes to mirrors as she runs toward her childhood friend Tia and says:

When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 45).

As Antoinette's madness advances, mirrors reflect her alienation from a sense of identity. The consequences of alienation become increasingly isolating and intense as the novel progresses. Annette, driven by her family's exclusion from white society, is driven to seek remarriage to the wealthy Mr. Mason, a union that ultimately brings about the tragic loss of her son, her home, and her sanity. The racial hierarchy in 1830's Jamaica is shown to be complex and strained, with tension between whites born in England, creoles or people of European descent born in the

Caribbean, black ex-slaves, and people of mixed race. The resentment between these groups leads to hatred and violence. Antoinette Cosway and her family are repeatedly referred to as ‘white cockroaches’ by members of the black population, and are eventually driven from their home by a mob of discontented former slaves. Over the course of the novel, the family is drawn apart, and by the end, Antoinette is alienated even from herself.

Daniel Cosway, the mixed-race and the illegitimate child of Alexander Cosway, is obsessed with avenging his marginalized existence. His exclusion from the Cosway family leads him to write a series of letters to Rochester maligning Antoinette and her family. These letters disturb Rochester, and form the catalyst for his ultimate distrust and distaste for Antoinette. Rochester’s naming Antoinette as ‘Bertha’ had triggered her madness and has reminded her of her mother’s insanity. Scientifically a genetically inherited madness comes into existence when it is triggered as an effect of a traumatic past. Antoinette undergoes the same stage like Lady Macbeth, who undergoes guilt and unfortunately kills herself in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. In England, Antoinette undergoes a physical, emotional and racial dislocation. Emotional deprivation, racial tensions, political circumstances all combined drives her to madness. She used to believe England to be something like ‘Garden of Eden’ but later she finds it to be just like a human world filled with treachery and guilt. She undergoes a total ‘state of denial’ as she does not find England the way she thought because England was an ‘imaginative construct’ in her mind. Antoinette is unable to recognize her brother when she goes mad just like her mother who is not able to recognize her. Antoinette’s attack on her brother is a replica of her mother’s knife attack on Mr. Mason. Antoinette undergoes betrayal in her life many times first by Tia, gradually by her mother, her brother, her husband and ultimately, she is betrayed by England. Also, Daniel’s letter alienates Antoinette as it poisons her husband and triggers non-acceptance deprivation towards Antoinette.

The reason behind Antoinette’s memory loss is because the mind tries to shut down the traumatic experiences. Annette was always pre-occupied emotionally with her sick boy child and had no time for Antoinette. Antoinette was starved of maternal affection and this constant rejection by her mother leads to her to an emotional starvation. Because of this rejection, she then tries to seek solace first from Tia and then in Rochester. However, the death of her brother ushers her mother to the edge of insanity. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar investigated the

relationship between women and madness and they also found that it had layers of meanings in their critical book called *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* and in this book they commented,

There were social and psychological reasons why women might go, or be considered, 'mad': women led restricted lives, their ambitions were often considered 'mad'. Their lives were in the hands of their husbands and male relatives. They could be locked up, divorced and deprived of their children and money if they were diagnosed mad (49).

Rhys demonstrates how Antoinette's identity is so levelled through her oppression and entrapment that when she looks in the mirror in the significant and traumatically poetic scene she does not quite recognize her reflection. Sargasso Sea, because of the geographic location and the physical properties, stands as a symbol denoting the embarrassment of our heroine. The Sargasso Sea is the only sea without shores. It is physically defined by the 'floating sargassum weed' and 'a tremendous stillness'. Sargasso Sea relates to such an embarrassing situation of Antoinette as she had no shores to harbor and no particular culture or identity to pursue. She drifts between two cultures or identities like the Sargasso Sea. This drifting experience of her is caused by the European colonialism and the problems left due to colonialism. Sargasso Sea remains a perfect image for the unfathomable and depressing problems of the dark voyage between West Indies and Europe. B.M Gilbert comments,

Antoinette is the Sargasso Sea that is an image of feminine searching for autonomy and identity: although she struggles so hard, the woman never free herself from the insidious and invincible tentacles of exploiter and the patriarchal conditioning that cling to her as to try to find her way to herself (*Post-Colonial Criticism* 40).

Antoinette takes Tia as her best friend who according to her, is the only person who understands her. But communities are polarized. Friendship is fractured. Antoinette's mother was always busy with her son who was physically challenged and was also called 'crazy' by neighbors. The neighbors thought the whole Cosway family was mad. During her childhood, Antoinette was once chased by two kids calling her mad. Insanity can be inherited. Annette and Antoinette both went mad after marriage under different circumstances. The young boy might also have undergone the same mental problem if he would have been cured and alive. Aunt Cora and Christophine are substitutes of Antoinette's mother in Antoinette's life. Christophine belongs to

a class that is exploited and oppressed. She is a 'grey character' but contrary to Annette, she is rebellious and undaunted. She is a symbol, standing for the native blacks and fighting against the domination and oppression and is a wedding gift to Annette by Antoinette's father. The name of Christophine is a symbolic one which indicates she is a Christ-like figure to Antoinette. She is the only person who does not betray Antoinette and she is proud to retain her individuality as she did not adopt the culture of the Jamaicans. Being a black woman, she is enough courageous and also questions Rochester. She was Antoinette's only savior but with the uptum of society during their time, made this relationship problematic. Rochester was somewhere scared of Christophine. He took Antoinette away to England. That time, it was very easy to 'document' a woman 'mad', a single document from any doctor could do this work. That single document did not only shut the woman away from the world, but many went mad and killed themselves like Antoinette. M. Humm comments, "All women characters in Rhys's fictions are mercilessly exposed to the financial and gendered constraints of an imperial world" (*Third World Feminisms: Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea* 187). Alienation can be one of the driving factors for Antoinette's psychological breakdown due to her non-belonging sentiment and her dissociation from her own identity.

However, the novel poses a question whether Antoinette's madness is intrinsic or just a consequence of her poisonous treatment and history. It can be seen that Annette, Antoinette's mother, constantly looked at her own reflection in the mirror. Antoinette also adopts this part of her mother due to their shared need to be understood in a world that neither invites nor accepts them. When Rochester puts Antoinette in the attic, he further intensifies her madness by making her segregated and disconnected. In the novel, the narrative constantly jumps between the past and present and Antoinette explains her mirror-less prison when she says,

There is no looking glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us – hard, cold and misted over with my break (182).

Hence, by calling Antoinette in the wrong name and not giving her mirror, Rochester seeks to erase her most elemental sense of existence. Mirrors served as a means to reflect Antoinette's deteriorated, colonized self as a result of patriarchal oppression. Her identity has undergone an

irrevocable split, which is evident in the third part of the novel, when she escapes from the attic and mournfully examines Thornfield. She describes her encounter with a mirror in a dream-like trance:

I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a guilt frame but I knew her. I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of the tablecloth and I saw flames shoot up. As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me, Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped (188).

Antoinette had been locked away in one way or another and silenced by the people, whom she thought loved her. However, she finally gets her freedom back and she is the one to finish her own traumatic story by taking on a flamed parrot-like plunge to her death. H. Tiffin observes:

Wide Sargasso Sea reinvests its own hybridized world with a provincially authoritative perspective, but one which is deliberately constructed as provincial since the novel is at pains to demonstrate the subjective nature of point of view and hence the cultural construction of meaning (*The Postcolonial Studies Reader* 24).

Rhys repeatedly presents the idea of minority being considered as ‘the other’ through the theme of isolation and alienation of her characters and how isolation and alienation influence on the formation of the character’s identities. Postcolonial critics have discussed Antoinette’s ‘otherness’ as a result of colonial rule, while feminist theorists (for example, using the texts of Irigaray and Kristeva) have often emphasized the patriarchal aspect of the society and the connection between madness and the mother-daughter relationships of the book. The destruction of Thornfield is highly symbolic. Since Thornfield is the place where Antoinette is imprisoned by Rochester and it is also the symbol of Rochester’s power and wealth. Thornfield Hall can be compared to the patriarchal system that stifles Antoinette spiritually. In burning down Thornfield, Antoinette breaks out of patriarchal system. The destruction of Thornfield is significant, because it is the way that leads her back to her identity. Before she jumps from the roof, Antoinette sees the images of Tia. Calling Tia, she jumps to reunite with her. Thus it can be interpreted as her returning back to the local culture of West Indies. In destroying the tyranny of the patriarchal society, she has taken revenge on the patriarchal society and her white oppressor, and achieved her self-identity.

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