



RESEARCH PAPER

**Tracing the links between Womanhood, Enslavement and Madness in
Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: A Feministic Study**

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to discover the linkage between womanhood, enslavement and madness in Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The role of various social factors like patriarchal oppression, physical confinement and financial dependence in pushing the female characters towards ultimate madness, has been focused in the present study. The study is unique in the sense that along with close analysis of the structure of language, it probes into the textual discourse of the novel as well to find out the undercurrents contributing in the ultimate madness of the female characters in the novel. So far as the theoretical framework is concerned, it is drawn initially by defining the arena of Gender Studies illustrating the terms 'Womanhood' and 'Madness' as taken up by feminist theorists under the notions of patriarchal tyranny, social confinement and ultimate madness of females. The study is predominantly qualitative in nature as the data is based on the text of the novel. To achieve the targeted objectives of the study, textual analysis is selected as technique for data analysis. The findings bring forth the causal linkage that is present inherently between womanhood, enslavement and madness.

Keywords: Enslavement, Gender, Madness, Patriarchy, Textual Analysis, Womanhood

Introduction

Wide Sargasso Sea has been the object of several postcolonial and feminist critical readings. Culminating Jean Rhys's career, fusing together the themes of all her other novels and bringing them to their highest form, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is the perfect conclusion of a life of writing spent in the attempt to exteriorize and exorcise inner demons and struggles.

Rhys wrote this novel as an answer to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; Rhys wanted to give the female character Bertha, Mr Rochester's foreign wife, a life since Bertha was only portrayed as a "mad ghost" in Brontë's novel (Harrison 128). Rhys's main female character is named Antoinette, but she is a representation of Brontë's Bertha. Before her arrival in England to her husband Mr Rochester's estate, Thornfield Hall. The first and the second parts of Rhys's novel are set in the British West Indies of the early nineteenth century, and the third part is set in England. The first part is narrated by the main female character, Antoinette, in which she describes her tragic childhood with rejection and racial conflicts. The second part is told by her husband, Mr Rochester, in which he uses his patriarchal power to dominate, control and diminish his wife who finally goes mad. The third part is once again told by Antoinette, now "mad" and locked up in the attic of her husband's house in England. The story ends with Antoinette dreaming that she burns down his house and commits suicide.

The present study is significant in a way that it tries to probe into the structure of the language and textual discourse of the novel to find out the ways in which womanhood,

as presented in it, has been projected as victim of patriarchal enslavement and having madness due to emotional and sexual exploitation. The research emphasizes the fact that masculinity is generally assumed to be a monolithic unproblematic entity, with patriarchy attaining a universal status as the single cause of the oppression of women, while it is not as simple as it seems.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Mr Rochester is described as a man who wants to stay in control and keep his patriarchal and colonial position of power, while Antoinette is described as an innocent being who seeks love and appreciation. Geert Hofstede in his *Masculinity and Femininity: The Taboo Dimensions of National Cultures*, defines the male stereotype as active and strong while the female stereotype is passive and weak (109). Hofstede's study shows that a masculine society is tough and aggressive; men are focused on material success while females are considered to be modest and tender beings concerned with the quality of life (6-7). Hofstede's ideas can be applied to both Mr Rochester and Antoinette; several critics have discussed how Mr Rochester is more active than the passive Antoinette. Antoinette's innocence has even been discussed as the reason why her marriage to Mr Rochester fails. Mr Rochester, although he is named nowhere in the novel; the reader only knows of his name because of the connection to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. I will discuss and question these critics' views of the two characters in my analysis of the novel. In this paper I focus on the themes of patriarchy and madness since I find their connection particularly interesting in Rhys's novel. Patriarchal domination and control of women reduces female self-esteem and can, as *Wide Sargasso Sea* suggests, lead to madness.

Literature Review

A strong linkage is observed between Patriarchal construction of womanhood and enslavement resulting in social madness of women. Both are interconnected and here the focal point is to highlight this interconnectivity. For this purpose, this section briefly defines the arena of Gender Studies, Womanhood and Madness. Citation of gender studies in this paper is important as to understand the system of social constructs about patriarchy and womanhood.

First of all, the basics of gender studies are discussed. According to Healey (2003), "Gender Studies is a field of interdisciplinary study which analyses race, ethnicity, sexuality and location". Gender study has many different forms. One view exposed by the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1949) said: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one". This view proposes that the term gender should be used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities, not to the state of being male or female in its entirety.

Gender as a technical term is much younger than the technical term sex. It was introduced as a reaction to the essentialist way of thinking that femininity and masculinity are biologically determined and thus fixed by nature. Being born male or female has far-reaching consequences for an individual. It affects how we act in the world and how the world treats us (Talbot, 1998 cited in Hussain, 2003). It is thoroughly embedded in our actions, our beliefs, our desires and in our institutions. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) observe:

It is deeply embedded in every aspect of society- in our institutions, in public places, in art, clothing, and movement. Gender is embedded in experience, in all settings from government to games. It is embedded in the family, the neighborhood, church, school, the media, walking down the street, eating in a restaurant, going to restroom. (P.33)

It is so thoroughly embedded in all aspects of our lives that it seems to us to be completely natural (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

Glover and Kaplan (2000, p.1) define womanhood as a 'set of attributes ascribed to biologically sexed females'. Stereotypically feminine attributes include being emotional, demure, affectionate, sympathetic, sensitive, soft-spoken, warm, tender, childlike, gentle, pretty, willowy, submissive, understanding and compassionate. These feminine attributes are expressed through female gender roles. So womanhood is concerned with the constitution of women's subjectivities and organization of their lives. Talbot (1995) elaborates the same point in this way, 'it is a particular structuring of social space that spans across institutions and that is a key factor in the constitution of women's subjectivities. It discursively organizes women's lines, even impinging on their bodies' (p. 144).

Jane Eyre was written in the mid-1800s, a time in which women's roles were slowly changing, but were still rigorously defined. The Victorian woman was expected to be "The Angel of the House," a phrase taken from the title of a Victorian poem by Coventry Patmore. In the poem, Patmore describes the ideal Victorian wife as a woman who is docile, subservient and always devoted. The poem also states that the purpose and pleasure of women is to please men. Women were responsible for the happiness of men and it was assumed that this responsibility was pleasing to all women (Patmore). This general attitude toward women affected many aspects of Victorian life and is relevant to the analysis of Bronte's novel, *Jane Eyre*.

Material and Methods

The study is based on qualitative paradigm because of its research friendly nature that always allows the researchers to have an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under a particular investigation (Kumar, 2014). Meanwhile, Jean Rhys's work entitled *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been chosen as the source of data within the purpose to explore its feministic perspective under the lens of Simone de Beauvoir (1949) feministic notion discussed in her book *The Second Sex*. As far as the sample of the study is concerned, the researcher has selected forty paragraphs from the particular novel with the use of purposive sampling technique. Hence, textual analysis is selected as a technique for data analysis. Textual analysis is a technique for collecting and analyzing contents of the text. When it is applied on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most probable interpretations that might be made of that text. This method of analysis goes back nearly a century. At the first meeting at German Sociological Society, in 1910, Max Weber suggested using it to study news (Krippendorff, 1980). Textual analysis, an element of close reading, is described by Rockwell (2003) as exploring, 'the question of the relationship between how we represent texts, how we see them, and our theories of textuality' (2009). Generally, textual analysis seeks to recognize patterns within the text, such as concordance or unity, meaning and truth. Within a given text lie many opportunities for elucidation or analysis. Close reading is a fundamental element of the Textual Analysis. It reveals much about context, meaning or use of language within it. The text has a great deal to state about the argument the author is making and why the argument becomes convincing. It needs only the time to delve into the content of the text to look at the structure and the organizing schemas or discourses in which the argument is framed.

Results and Discussion

The novel illustrates, that it is impossible to categorize women, and that doing so leads to their inevitable destruction. Even today, this is true. The lives of men and women are determined by their sex, which is an inevitable fact of birth. But the truth lies in Rhys' text: these generalizations are destructive to the realization of the woman's true nature. When Rochester and Antoinette are first married, they are relatively happy, as Rochester is intrigued by his wife, whom he does not understand. It is only when he begins to force his own expectations upon her when things go wrong. After receiving a letter from Daniel Cosway that outlines Antoinette's insanity, Rochester begins to think of her as insane. It is then that her indefinable nature begins to seem malicious and evil. Rochester's own

preconceptions drive Antoinette to insanity—it is nothing in Antoinette herself that does so. But there is one aspect of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that sits uneasily with modern readers: Antoinette's victimization. Antoinette is powerless to stop her fate and Rochester deceives and exerts power over her. At the end of the novel, before Antoinette burns down Thornfield, she states, "now at last I know why I am here and what I have to do" (Rhys 190). Antoinette's fated actions bring about her own destruction, and she is helpless to stop them. Unlike Jane, Antoinette is trapped by her anger at her past. Where Jane is able to overcome her hardships, Antoinette or Bertha is imprisoned by them. As artist Paula Rego stated, while *Wide Sargasso Sea* is about Antoinette, the victim of male society, *Jane Eyre* is about an independent woman who overcomes her surroundings. Both characters were surrounded by negative environments, but Jane was able to use her intelligence and common sense to survive (qtd. in Talairach-Vielmas 129).

Following selected lines with illustration will support the validity of my hypothesis that madness of women is usually foregrounded by social factors including patriarchy, oppression and social enslavement by the males of the society.

"But then I looked round for my mother I saw that Mr. Mason, his face crimson with heat, seemed to be dragging her along and she was holding back, struggling. I heard him saying, 'It's impossible, too late now.'"

Here, authoritative nature and inflexibility of Mr. Mason's attitude is quite obvious. Stereotypical image of male is present in form of physical dominance by dragging Annette along and she is struggling back. Woman is also being dealt stereotypically as an object instead of a human being. Struggle on her part as initiative to save herself is a bit encouraging and showing spark of life in her.

Our parrot was called Coco, a green parrot. He didn't talk very well, he could say Qui est là? Qui est là? And answer himself Che Coco, Che Coco. After Mr. Mason clipped his wings he grew very bad tempered. . . . I opened my eyes, everybody was looking up and pointing at Coco on the glaciis railings with his feathers alight. He made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching. He was all on fire.

Theme of captivity and imprisonment is highlighted by drawing comparison between Annette and the bird whose wings are clipped. Like this bird she is unable to pursue her own desires and fully depends on her husband. Their mutual relation is more of a master-slave, dominant-dominated, independent-dependent rather than of husband and wife. Experience of womanhood is quite put in discussion. Theme of patriarchal tyranny is embedded in the act of clipping the wings in order to imprison the bird (symbolic for females).

Along with numerous other allusions to birds and captivity, these lines act as forewarnings and serve to draw parallels between a highly symbolic natural world and the characters who inhabit it. Annette's poisoned horse, left to rot and swarming with flies, provides the first in a series of images that prefigure Antoinette's tragic abandonment and violent death. Coco, Annette's beloved parrot and the only possession that she attempts to rescue from the fire, emerges as a key symbol of women's captivity within the novel.

Unable to "talk very well," the parrot mirrors the inability of women to gain voice in a patriarchal society. When he does speak, the parrot uses a French patois that aligns it with a female world embodied by Christophine, Martinique, and natural magic. His repeated question, "Qui est là," translates to "Who is there?" and underscores the paranoia, persecution, and issues of identity that trouble both Antoinette and her mother. Responding to itself, "I am Coco," the parrot repeatedly asserts its own name and fixes its own identity, reciting a mantra that, like an incantation, works as protection. Mr. Mason's unexplained impulse to clip the bird's wings indicates the white, male, English need to control.

She experiences, perhaps, an unconscious feeling of her own final moments, falling from the burning battlements of Thornfield Hall. In the dream that precedes and inspires her death, Antoinette thinks back to Coco, picturing herself as a wild incarnation of the tropical bird: *"The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones."* Just as the gathered servants point and stare at the flaming bird, generations of readers have imagined the ghoulish image of a Creole madwoman and watched her death with a nosy complacency.

"It was very unlucky to kill a parrot, or even to see a parrot die"

Annette's comparison with bird having clipped wings is going on here that makes an effort to get rid of the clutches of patriarchal imprisonment but fails in her escape. As parrot is described fell screeching so does Annette being dispensed from mainstream power and quite helpless.

"None of you understand about us" (p.30)

This comes from Antoinette after she tries to explain to Mr. Mason why her Aunt Cora could not help Annette. Aunt Cora had no money of her own because females had no financial rights. This quote shows that Antoinette sees Mr. Mason's misconceptions about the English male's superiority over white Creole females. He did not see it because he did not experience the oppression, but Antoinette did.

"He gave me presents and we parted, sweets, a locket, a bracelet, once a very pretty dress, of course I could not wear"

He bribed and bought her love through presents to make up for the fact that he drove her mother crazy.

"Italy is white pillars and green water. Spain is hot sun on stones, France is a lady with black hair wearing a white dress because Louise was born in France fifteen years ago, and my mother, whom I must not forget and pray for as though she were dead, though she is living, liked to dress in white."(p. 55)

"I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it." (p. 172)

Here, Antoinette's husband is trying to regain control of his surroundings along with controlling Antoinette. He hated Antoinette/Bertha now because she was part of the mystery and magnificence of Spanish Island. He hated how she was not pure white and that she was partially Creole. His hatred evokes from his inability to understand and find comfort in nature as Antoinette and the other West Indian people do. He is afraid and refuses to be taken in by the beauty and abundance around him, especially Antoinette's beauty. He seeks to punish and dominate Antoinette, longing *"--for the day when she is only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend."* (p. 172)

Spoken by Rochester, these lines appear at the close of Part Two, at the point when he plans to leave the Caribbean and decides to bring Antoinette with him. His sudden and largely unexplained decision to render his wife lifeless and mad—to *"force the hatred out of her eyes"*—makes Rhys's Rochester a more complex and psychologically interesting character than his Brontë prototype. Rochester's willingness to believe Daniel Cosway's sensational stories and his need to confirm his misgivings prompt him to reflect, on receipt

of the first incriminating letter, that *"I felt no surprise. It was as if I'd expected it, been waiting for it."*

Like Antoinette, Rochester suffers from paranoia, suspecting that everyone, including his father, Richard Mason, and his own young bride, are laughing at him. The nagging suspicion that he stands on the outside of a well-kept conspiracy drives Rochester to self-contempt, hatred, and an irrational need to regain control. Turning this anger on Antoinette, he seeks to assert his power by becoming her puppeteer, a godlike tyrant who can kill her with his words alone. Rochester symbolically enacts her death at the end of this section of the novel, covering her with a sheet "as if [he] covered a dead girl."

Rochester's hatred of the natural landscape stems from his inability to read it or commune with it. Feeling bombarded by its beauty and excess Rochester sees it as an alien, while his servants and his wife find an abundance of meaning in their surroundings, Rejecting its elaborate contours and intricate meanings, he speaks of the *"mountains, and the hills, the river and the rain,"* refusing to color these nouns with adjectives and descriptions. He returns to simple nouns, adopting a sparer language and holding the landscape's secret at a safe, controllable distance. His wife's beauty, like that of her home, lurks to bewitch and ensnare Rochester. These lines expose the logic, however despicable, of his cruel need to gain dominance.

"We are no longer in the forest but in an enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall and the trees are different trees"

Images of enclosure foreshadow her being taken to England by Rochester and his locking her away and concealing her. It seems like she was doomed for all this and echoes of upcoming destiny is present in these lines.

"a wild place, not only wild but menacing. Those hills would close in on you."

Though the surrounding was superb in its serene beauty but it is significant to find such use of adjectives like wild, menacing and closing with the natural objects which are source of calmness and joy for others.

"I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet..." "All is well and has gone according to your plans and wishes"

It seems that Antoinette is being implied as the devil perhaps. It also shows how his father had a massive input in their marriage and set it up. The girl is beautiful but he has his doubts about her and almost doesn't want to believe that she is "bad blood from both sides"

In the letter from Daniel Cosway he tells Rochester that Antoinettes' mother and father were both mad and died.

"There are always two deaths, the real one, and the one people know about"

Implying that people die before they actually stop living, possibly become zombi-like like her mother when she went mad.

"My name is not Bertha, why do you call me Bertha?" 'Because it is a name I am particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha."

Rochester is beginning to steal her identity. He wants to change her real being according to his own whims and wishes

"She lifted her eyes. Blank lovely eyes. Mad eyes. A mad girl."

It was the discovery that Antoinette drugged his wine that sent Rochester over the edge. For the first time she actively did something to him. After this act he started asserting his power more openly by calling her a lunatic, alienating her from her culture and changing her name. Resultantly Antoinette became totally dependent on him. Rochester achieved whatever was his goal of possession and control over her. *"I'll take her in my arms, my lunatic. She's mad but mine, mine."* She had become mad now, like her mother mad because of Mason.

"I lie watching the fire go out...I have seen it before somewhere, this cardboard world where everything is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it...they tell me I'm in England but i don't believe them. We lost our way to England...this cardboard house where I walk at night is not England"

She is isolated, withdrawn, identity less, alien and other. She does not think that England would be like this. She feels dislocated and disillusioned. Having snatched her identity by her husband, her life time dream to see England and all fascination associated with it seems turned into ashes of hatred and jealousy of her husband.

"I heard them laughing and talking in the distance, like birds"

They were free like birds.

"That afternoon we went to England. There was grass and olive-green water and tall trees looking into the water, This, I thought, is England. If i could be here, i could be well again and the sound in my head would stop". She believes that she couldn't possibly be in England locked away. "But I cannot go. He is my husband after all."

The rumours I've heard— very far from the truth. But I don't contradict, I know better than to say a word. After all the house is big and safe, a shelter from the world outside which, say what you like, can be a black and cruel world to a woman. Maybe that's why I stayed on...Yes, maybe that's why we all stay— Mrs Eff and Leah and me. All of us except that girl who lives in her own darkness. I'll say one thing for her, she hasn't lost her spirit. She's still fierce. I don't turn my back on her when her eyes have that look. I know it. 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 breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?

This passage, narrated by Antoinette in Part Three, reflects several significant themes regarding her captivity in Thornfield Hall. Delivered in the present tense, these lines suggest the immediacy of Antoinette's situation and place us within the attic alongside Rhy's heroine. While Antoinette is unable to follow the passage of time, she remains acutely perceptive about her immediate surroundings, maintaining a lucidity that often breaks the surface of her madness. For instance, she notices the absence of a mirror, as it would provide her with a reflection of herself and a reassurance of her existence. An important motif throughout the novel, mirrors underscore the important questions of identity that pull at Rhy's central characters. Annette, Antoinette's mother, constantly looked for her own reflection—a habit adopted by her daughter, and one that indicates their shared need to be visible in a world that neither accepts nor invites them. By putting Antoinette in a mirrorless prison, alone save for a taciturn guard, Rochester exacerbates her feeling of disconnection. He has already deprived her of her name, calling her Bertha and effectively erasing her existence as Antoinette. Without a name, she does not know what to call herself; without a face, she becomes a ghost. As a child, Antoinette tried to kiss her reflected image, uniting the

two halves of her split cultural identity, but she came up against the hard, separating glass. Antoinette's lifelong desire to close this gap—to become a visible, accepted member of any community—informs this passage and accounts for her inability to grasp and master reality.

Conclusion

The analysis of the text brings forth the menace of entrapment and captivity as entwined. Besides the relation between blacks and whites, many other relationships are found in the novel which are formed solely on the basis of enslavement. For instance, after the death of her husband, Annette feels imprisoned and helpless at Coulibri Estate repeating the word "marooned" again and again. Similarly, Antoinette is also found totally dependent upon her husband being encircled by her love for him. Most of the female characters appear as dependent on their husbands or fathers like children conveying a figurative sort of slavery leading to physical captivity of Antoinette. Another aspect of slavery is financial or legal dependence of women in the novel on the men around them. Even the second marriage of Antoinette's mother is basically an opportunity to get rid of the kind of life she was leading at Coulibri. Dependence on the nearest man was essential to survive though it be father before marriage or husband after marriage. And this dependence led Antoinette and her mother towards madness gradually resulting in their death. The present study highlights the problematic and unfair relationship between men and women, especially as in regards to the women's forced dependency on men. The analysis of the selected text illustrates Antoinette's mother's life depended on the men with whom she was married. She needed Antoinette's step father for a better life (instead of devastating poverty). However, Antoinette's mother was unhappy for the majority of the marriage, and she ended up going insane (or being pushed to insanity) and dying tragically. When reflecting on her mother's relationship, Antoinette seems destined to follow a similar path. Antoinette, once she marries Rochester, is unable to leave him or choose her own life. Her marriage ends unhappily as well, with a similar insanity to her mother's being pushed on her until it was true. This shows how women were unable to escape their prescribed destinies, no matter how hard they fought. In both time periods, women's independence was taken away, and they were stuck in a generational dependency on men through no fault of their own. "Wide Sargasso Sea" by Jean Rhys reflects the progressive opinions of the time it was written through an unheard story from "Jane Eyre". The novel draws parallels between the rights of women in the 1800s and the second wave feminism movement in the 1960s and 70s.

The current study shows how women were unable to escape their prescribed destinies, no matter how hard they fought. In both time periods, women's independence was taken away, and they were stuck in a generational dependency on men through no fault of their own. The power dynamics of colonialism intersect with gender, particularly affecting Creole women of color, like Christophine, who face double oppression due to both their gender and race. The study offers a poignant exploration of the psychological distress and instability faced by female characters, particularly Antoinette, as a consequence of their marginalized position and the constraints placed on them by society. The complex interplay of gender and power highlights how women are disempowered and oppressed in a patriarchal and colonial society and emphasizes the importance of examining the intersections of gender, race, and colonialism in understanding the characters' experience.

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