



Reading Oppression and Repression in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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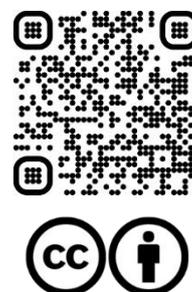
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Abstract— *Annette and Antoinette were unwelcomed by all. They “were not in their (the white people’s) ranks” and “The Jamaican ladies never approved” (Rhys 3) of them. As Creoles, they had no root. Being of colour and not belonging to the prevalent binary structure, they never fit in. Neither the whites accepted nor the blacks. Throughout they were mistreated and suffered in the hands of both. While Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1847) represents the unfit monster in Bertha, Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) re-presents the story leading to Bertha’s present state. The journey from innocence to madness was forced onto the ‘monster’ of Bronte’s Jane Eyre through various means and Rhys’ counter to the gothic romance provides an opportunity to re-read the disregarded characters in their ‘natural’ habitat, far from the cold and gloomy London. Their marginalization is realized through Rhys. The plot arouses the curiosity of the reader, illuminates the unheard story of the Creoles and brings into light the possible reasons for their ‘downfall’. This paper is an attempt to make an inquiry of the oppression faced by the ‘Others’, its impact on their psyche and the repression that led them to the doorstep of insanity. Through the means of a discursive study, it delves into the reasons for their degraded physical and mental state. The study employs the theoretical lens of Edward Said’s “Other” and Sigmund Freud’s “Trauma” to reach the desired analysis.*



Keywords— *Oppression, Others, Repression, Re-reading, Trauma.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Jean Rhys wrote her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a “reinscription” (Spivak 244) of Charlotte Bronte’s celebrated novel, *Jane Eyre* and re-presents the ‘chained’ life of the Creoles of the Caribbean. Her narration upholds the life of the ‘monster’ of *Jane Eyre* during her early days in her ‘homeland’ along with that of her mother, Annette. There is a depiction of the varied stages before and after her marriage eventually ending with her suicide.

It may be noted that throughout the journey the duo possess minimal liberty. Being neither pure white nor black, Creoles lack identity and suffer from the absence of a base. Hence, though a part of white families both before and after marriage, there was least acceptance of their ambivalent Creole character. The ill feeling towards them is evident from the beginning itself. That is why the unfortunate death of Mr. Cosway forces the family to live in constant fear for half a decade. The earlier bubble of safety bursts and an

unknown danger looms over their lives. The so-called friends and family stops visiting them and the ‘slaves’ perceive them in a disgusted manner. They were abandoned until the remarriage of Annette to Mr. Mason.

The suspicious death of Annette’s beloved horse was a warning of the upcoming hostility. The burning of the Coulibri estate house, Tia’s violence and the demise of Pierre were other indicators of their perilous future. Anette’s undisclosed expiration and Antoinette’s unquestioned marriage were forced actions with these women having least control over their own lives. Submitting to the authority, suppressing their individual desires and devoid of humane treatment, they were psychologically affected.

Earlier critics have viewed the numerous areas of the text through varied perspectives. From the lens of imperialism, feminism to that of madness, a majority of exploration has taken place. Although the prospect of madness has been touched by critics and described as a

method and a tool used against women by men or 'patriarchy', there has been less focus on the connection between the constant domination and its effect on the psyche. Oppression isn't limited to male dominance in this text but goes beyond to include the idea of the 'Other'. Hence, though for most part it is men who has been seen as the sole authority, the oppression in the text is not limited to the male personas, the feeling of difference also plays a crucial role. The Creoles being abnormal invited hatred.

In this paper there has been made an attempt to engage in an intensive study to locate the connection between the continual dominance and the collapse. Thus, it delves into the relationship between oppression, repression and its effect on the human psyche. The loss of sanity in the family, specifically amongst the Creole women in *Wide Sargasso Sea* was not hereditary but forced due to the excessive subordination, both physical as well as mental. Their psyche was stirred with being targets of discrimination penetrated towards them.

II. DISCUSSION

"Oppression is a situation in which people are governed in an unfair and cruel way and prevented from having opportunities and freedom" (*Cambridge Dictionary*) while repression is "the process through which certain desires... are pushed into the unconscious so that they do not influence our daily lives and our conscious mind" (Nayar 65). In this analysis these two aspects have been studied through the theories of "Othering" and "Trauma". In varied patterns the plot dives into psychoanalysis. It drives the message of the power of hatred and prejudice. A saga of never ending rejection eventually leads to tragedy.

The term "Othering" was coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak but it was further elaborated by Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* (1978). The 'Other' is the result of the binary. It is the counter to the 'Self'. It refers to one who doesn't belong to the normative societal structure. In case of *Orientalism*, the Orient i.e. the non-western section of the world was viewed and treated as inferior, lacking and contradictory by nature. While the West, specifically Europe, was seen as civilized, rational and modern, the non-Europeans were characterized as exotic, wild and backward. Occident was the centre and Orient, the insignificant periphery.

In case of the novel there is triple marginalization, as a non-white, a non-black and a woman. The 'native' blacks jeered at them, called them "white cockroaches" (Rhys 8), envied them, spread lies about them and engaged in attempts to physically hurt them. The whites too never approved of them.

The betrayal of the so-called friends like Mannie and Tia leave a deep impact. The extreme inhumanity and the loss of her son Pierre drive Annette to lose her mind. Although she continuously raises her concern prior to the catastrophe, nobody paid heed to her warnings but called her anxiety irrational. The sight of Coco's death can be interpreted both as a symbolic representation as well as a traumatic experience. These women were related to the hapless bird and had a fate similar to it.

Michel Foucault's idea "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 95) can also be traced in the plot. The rebellious action of the blacks after the reversal of power and the resistance on the part of the mother-daughter duo in different stages of life though not fruitful, indicate the presence of the power relations in the most explicit manner.

John Greusser in his essay, "'Say die and I will die': Betraying the Other, Controlling Female Desire, and Legally Destroying Women in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Othello*" reads the character of Antoinette as "a colonized Other destroyed by a person from the metropolitan center whom she trusted" (Greusser 100). He examines her "in-between status and the vulnerability that accompanies it" (Greusser 101) while emphasizing on the lack of agency and space.

M.M. Adjarian reads the novel as that of "oppositions" (Adjarian 202). She makes an inquiry into the idea of madness present in the two novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Studying the "inbetweenness" (Adjarian 204), symbols like that of fire, the Emancipation Act have been explored. The fire, in her analysis, becomes the metaphor of freedom and fight against oppression. She comprehends Rhys' novel not only from the perspective of the colonized but also the colonizer.

The "Trauma" theory originated with Sigmund Freud who conceived the idea under the influence of Jean-Martin Charcot, "the greatest neurologist of his day" (Macey 143). It refers to the assumption that "the origins of hysteria are sexual in nature and that hysterical symptoms are a somatic reproduction of the repressed memory of a traumatic sexual event. Repressed in childhood, the memory is reactivated, with traumatic effects, at puberty" (Macey 144). Even though Freud didn't pursue it further, the theory re-emerged during the post-colonial era to refer to the repressed colonial traumas and the reactivation in later stages of life. At present it has developed into a discourse.

Madness has been used in literature as a 'tool' and a 'trope' against the undesired. Along with the application of the animalistic terminology stressed on by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), instability is seen easily associated with the non-European counterparts. An

example can be cited of the 'monster' of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein Or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Although it is Victor Frankenstein, the cowardly genius whose curiosity invites chaos, it is the creation which is blamed and represented as an entity intoxicated by 'unnatural' prowess. Bronte too constructs her 'monster' presumably influenced by the similar note. Bertha is the cold hearted villainess who comes from the uncivilized regions and thus, there's seen associated a tone of mysticism with the place and its people. Rajeev S. Patke in his paper, "Method and Madness in *A Question of Power* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*" reads this aspect in depth. Employing Foucault's idea of madness he lists the actions leading to the ultimate outburst of Antoinette.

Apart from this, illness or diseases also were made specific to these zones of wilderness inhabited by savages, 'creatures' way below the civilized Europeans. Edward Rochester falls sick as soon as he arrives in the unknown turf and gets entangled with its people. He finds it hard to adjust to such a wild place, full of unfamiliar ideas like that of vampire, obehah. Antoinette goes through these similar uprooted emotions in the cold London but there is no escape for her. The pair was odd and incompatible which M.M. Adjarian relays through the words,

both have their attractions...
What Rochester deems
"uncivilized," Antoinette views
as familiar and comfortable and
what Antoinette deems
lifeless...Rochester sees as
perfectly proper. The even-
handed perspective Rhys
offers...is departure from what a
reader encounters in *Jane Eyre*.
(206).

The euro-centric attitude of Rochester is apparent and traumatic as while Antoinette puts efforts to make him feel comfortable, he chains her like a beast in the attic. The end of St. John Rivers, the cousin of Jane who leaves for India to preach God's ways but meets with an unfortunate death coming in contact with the 'unsuitable' non-European environment not only refers to the non-habitable nature of the non-western lands which turn people sick, mad and are capable of stripping them off life but also establishes Bronte's biased stance. These instances accentuate the problematic outlook of the colonizers towards the colonized other as wrong, unknown, indescribable and mystical.

Lana F. Rakow describes in her essay "Feminist Approaches to Popular Culture: Giving Patriarchy its Due" that "popular culture images are for the most part men's images of women" (Rakow 203) and that it "has constantly

portrayed [white] American women as 'housewifely, passive, wholesome, and pretty'" (Rakow 203). The women of colour had negligible presence in the popular culture of the time. It was the representation of the ideal white woman which was not only dominant but also considered to be of significance. Thus, the growth of insecurity, the urge to become white, sophisticated and civilized along with the fascination towards England was a common characteristic present amongst those of colour. The marvelous 'mythical' stories fed to them blinded them with illusions about the land of the self-proclaimed superior, the Whites.

Here in comes the idea the 'mimicry' as enunciated by Homi K. Bhabha. It refers to a phenomenon when "colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to 'mimic' the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values" (Ashcroft 125). This not only justifies Annette's constant efforts to appear civilized and pleasing amidst dire poverty but also stresses on the 'need' to follow the 'trend'. The façade was her way of 'leading' her family up to the Whites' standard. The imposition of this 'lifestyle' on Antoinette was more for her sake than Annette's. Nonetheless the constant effort was taxing and exhausted them. As a consequence, in the later part of the novel they are seen in a careless fashion, unbothered by the appearance as they accept their fate as the 'Other'. The attempt to hold on ultimately makes them lose themselves.

Regarding oppression, the novel has incidents of both physical and mental dominance. From the poisoning of Annette's horse, the burning of the Coulibri estate house, blazing Coco, Tia's violence towards Antoinette, Pierre's death, the traumatizing sight of the harsh treatment meted out to the 'unable' Annette, to the carnal satisfaction by Rochester, the novel is full of varied occurrences. Antoinette faces threat from bullies at the convent and at home the servants like Amélie or the caretakers of Annette show not the least respect. M. M. Adjarian adds that it is Daniel Cosway's letter that leads to the "tension in the relationship between Rochester and Antoinette" (Adjarian 207) but it was the needed excuse following which Rochester renames her "so that he can dissociate not only his wife but himself from Annette Cosway and the mental illness she represents" (Adjarian 207). Not even once does he ask Antoinette for an explanation. He chooses a stranger over his wife as he was already searching for a loophole to evade the relationship and the responsibility. She was yet again betrayed by her trusted.

Antoinette continuously craves for comfort but this desire remains unfulfilled. Having witnessed her mother go downhill with no care or love from her husband instills a fear in her. She pesters Christophine to help her with her

marriage. The indifference breaks her loving heart. She was so desperate for an emotional bonding that she willingly opts for obeh. Overlooking all warnings she forces Christophine to practice obeh which in turn distances him further. With the failed outcome she drowns herself in alcohol and allows her repressed unconscious to emerge.

Rochester remains unaffected and indifferent. To him, the relationship was a "play" (Rhys 55). He hardly ever tries to understand her and abandons her easily after the satisfaction of his lust. This distrust in her affects her so much that it triggers the repressed emotions in her. These drive her to another dimension without a care in the world. These show how the 'white cockroaches/white niggers' were embraced by none.

Mental oppression can be noted from the very beginning with the looming fear during the five long years after the death of Mr. Cosway. The circulated 'stories', the open hatred, lack of agency, unheard protests, the set decorum, 'unquestioned' marriage, unavailability of financial stability and finally, the loss of self were all signs and results of oppression. Mr. Mason was barely present for his sick wife. Instead of being by her side, he leaves her at the mercy of people who not only despise her but assault her. She was probably forced to embrace death which was accepted in a very indifferent manner. Antoinette also didn't receive any support. There was no pity but blame on her plate even after her death. They were victims of all and for long. All these traumatic experiences were inscribed on the mind of the little girl who barely understood the idea of fear and was nonetheless afraid.

Young Antoinette was so terrified that she held onto her "stick... a narrow piece of wood, with two nails sticking out at the end" (Rhys 20) in her sleep to provide herself with some protection and comfort. Rochester "tries to make her more knowable-and thus threatening-by renaming her "Bertha"" (Adjarian 206). He "coerces his wife to subsume her identity and all the cultural and personal associations that go along with it into one he has constructed for her" (Adjarian 207). This loss of self snaps the last link with sanity.

All these traumatic memories were repressed, locked away in their unconscious but the agitation by her husband, his distrust, ruthlessness towards her throws her off the edge. The marriage was an unwanted institution. When she confesses her insecurity in front of Rochester he deceives her with false promises of "peace, happiness, safety" (Rhys 57). Eventually her doubts prove right and she is destroyed by him. There was no love, nor trust in their relationship. He expresses it himself, "I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who

did not think or feel as I did" (Rhys 69). This also underlines his finding her to be the other, one who isn't like him.

Christophine is one practical figure who tries to help Antoinette. She advises her to flee, "pack up and go" (Rhys 82) but the latter discards the idea. When disillusion takes place and she realizes her folly, it becomes too late to flee as the English law leaves her with nothing. The heiress was turned penniless after her marriage. She was left with no recourse and no 'stick' to protect her anymore and hence, so young, exotic and 'happily' married a girl drowns in the sea of hopelessness.

The continuation of atrocities in the third part with the 'chaining' and 'imprisonment' of her with a caretaker, Grace Poole in the attic of Thornfield Hall puts her at the edge. She is filled with extreme depression and loss of self. The bouts of insanity resulted from the triggered traumatic experiences. The accidents with Richard and Rochester were acts of her seeking either assistance or revenge. Both fail her and in her way she tries to either punish them or hold onto them. Thus, these questionable 'accidents' were repayment of all the traumas gifted to her by them. With no genuine care but continued criticism and betrayal, she finally breaks free in the end and gives into the frailty and ambivalence of lunacy.

Albeit witnessing her faltering condition, the heart of her 'oppressor' doesn't melt. It hardens faster, so fast that he fastens her to attain freedom for himself, to live according to his wishes, while she suffers silently in the windowless attic. The eternal cold of England adds to her agony and changes her. Her prediction "I will be a different person when I live in England and different things will happen to me..." (Rhys 84) becomes a reality.

The hope to live a better, happier life ends with the unfortunate deaths of both Annette and Antoinette. The colour of their life turns pale with the loss of the exotic summer. In and out of consciousness, witnessing the affairs of the household Antoinette chooses to die for the second time like her mother. Her first death takes place at her forceful arrival to England, her soul is crushed when she leaves her 'home' and with the burning flames it is her body that dies. Like Coco, she lives a life with clipped wings and hence, her destiny too was meant to end engulfed by the angry fire. Setting fire to the 'prison' she 'escapes'. She ultimately attains freedom from her oppressed life with no need to have repressed emotions anymore.

It is worth noting that the third phase of women's writing began roughly from the latter part of the twentieth century where women writers advocated "their own perspectives" (Habib 129) as elaborated by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977). Thus, belonging to the early stages phase, Rhys' re-presentation

of the forgotten is commendable but being a continuation of a Victorian Novel, her work had pre-imposed limitations.

III. CONCLUSION

Annette and Antoinette both live a life of subordination horrified by the swinging dual daggers. The trauma generated by the brutality of the people and the heart-wrenching image of the pleading helpless bird with clipped wings reaches its culmination. The women were without sympathetic relationships. Neither their partners nor their 'friends' held them with warmth. They were taken to be spiteful, crazy but exotic creatures. The treatment of Annette in the house bought by Mr. Mason and Antoinette in England were both dehumanized. They were never consoled but blamed. Every action led to the outburst and an end with which they were liberated from all worldly shackles.

Thus, through the analysis of the text, it may be concluded that the ideas of oppression and repression appear intertwined. Both of these are responsible for the ultimate tragic ending of the 'Other(s)' and prove that "There is no phoenix in this fiction" (Patke 189). Suffering throughout they eventually cut ties with the 'normative' sanity and transcend, mentally as well as physically.

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