'Hysteria' and 'Madness': Gender, Illness and Narration in Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea

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ABSTRACT

This paper analytically discusses female hysteria in connection with Caribbean literature. It seeks to provide the interconnection between hysteria and medical humanities. It examines the character of the mad woman in Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea. The character Antoinette Mason's madness does not occur at a single or in a particular situation. She undergoes various kinds of abuse from her childhood to her womanhood and thus it resulted in female hysteria. This article attempts to compare Bertha Mason from Jane Eyre with Wide Sargasso Sea's Antoinette Mason and seeks to find out the reason behind their hysteria. To examine critically this article follows Sigmund Freud and Foucault's views on women's madness and female hysteria.

KEY WORDS: FEMALE HYSTERIA, MENTAL ILLNESS, CARIBBEAN WOMAN, MAD WOMAN, WIDE SARGASSO SEA.

INTRODUCTION

The postcolonial novel Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) by Jean Rhys is a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. Wide Sargasso Sea is about the narration of the protagonist Antoinette Cosway who is a Creole woman and becomes mad at the end of the novel. Though her madness has so many reasons, Antoinette's husband Rochester connects it with her genetics. This paper analyses the main factor behind her madness other than genetics and it critically follows the views of Freud and Foucault to know the medical factors, therefore to understand the text better.

Factors for her madness also includes the loss of her identity that is she is neither black nor white, isolation or otherwise alienation, nostalgia and Rochester's attitude being misogynist. Her mental illness is the result of colonialism and patriarchy. Nancy Harrison explains the purpose behind Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea that is, "Rhys' novel was to give Bertha, the protagonist of Jane Eyre, a life as she was only depicted as a mad ghost in Bronte's novel (128). The novel Wide Sargasso Sea has three parts of narration and each part is narrated by three different

characters. The first part of the novel is narrated by the female protagonist Antoinette living in Jamaica during nineteenth century which is under British colonization. Rochester narrates the second part of the novel. The final and the third part is again narrated by the female protagonist while she is in England and affected by hysteria. The novel ends with Antoinette dreaming that she has burnt the house and she is committing suicide.

It is difficult to provide the exact definition for madness. It has various interpretations and connotations. Madness is nothing but mental illness caused by cultural and social pressure. Foucault defines madness in these words: "one does not go mad but is driven mad by others" (Foucault viii). This is the same situation of Antoinette. To prove the above mentioned factors behind Antoinette's madness it is mandatory to study the history of female hysteria which has been discussed for centuries.

Hysteria: A Brief Survey: Madness is a theme used as a human condition in the early dramas of ancient Greece and Rome. Then it was related to women's witchcraft. Most of the women were found to be witches than compared to men due to societal pressure and women were become scapegoats. In the book Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture, Carol Thomas Neely describes the condition of being witch as, "regendering of madness, eventually mad or hysteric" (6).

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Until nineteenth century patients of hysteria were considered nothing more than animals, and the large number of mad people was treated inhumanely. In *Madness and Civilization*, Michael Foucault describes the situation of women at Salpêtrière Hospital which was located at Paris (it is a notable asylum for many insane and women who were incurable). Mad women were being crammed into the cells, enduring wet, cold and being kept in unsanitary conditions and being attacked by rat swarms at the end of the eighteenth century. These are the situations of quite maddened. For very violent inmates, Foucault writes, "Madwomen seized with fits of violence are chained like dogs at their cell doors, and separated from keepers and visitors alike by a long corridor protected by an iron grille; through this grille is passed their food and the straw on which they sleep; by means of rakes, parts of the filth that surrounds them is cleaned out" (7). In the same way Bertha Mason has been locked in the attic in Rochester's house which is totally inhumane.

Neely explains both melancholia and love sickness as "Melancholy as a specifically female disease gained traction during this period and linked women's madness with disordered female wombs and genitals" (69). The explanation of Neely in Freudian terms can be called as either "penis envy" or the "wetness of female womb" which leads to hysteric conditions. Hysteria in Greek which means womb is a characteristic of a female condition has become a classic disease in England and Europe in both eighteenth and nineteenth century. In a female body it is said to be that the controlling sources are uterus and ovary. In the essay, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and the Role Conflict in 19th Century", Carroll Smith Rosenberg describes the hysterical attack as,

Mimicking an epileptic seizure, these fits often occurred with shocking suddenness. At other times they came on gradually, announcing their approach with the general feeling of their depression, nervousness, crying or lassitude... It began with pain and tension, most frequently in the uterine area. The sufferer alternately sobbed and laughed violently, complained of palpitations of the heart, clawed her throat as if strangling and at times lost the power of hearing and speech. A death like trance might follow, lasting hours, even days. At other times violent convulsions-sometimes accompanied by hallucinations- seized her body (661). The above mentioned Smith's explanation for madness and fits can clearly be viewed in the character of Antoinette Mason. Thus this study will enclose Freud and Foucault's views on the female protagonist of the novel. Elaine Showalter in her *Malady* fixes the situation gynecology whereas Freud thought it is psychology. So in twentieth century hysteria is said to be psychodynamics.

Mad Woman In The Attic: Jane Eyre And Wide Sargasso Sea: Rhys' narration of Bertha is focused on the marital fiasco between Antoinette Cosway and her husband. Bronte shows the single side of the novel and left Bertha being voiceless. Jane Eyre is a bildungsroman which narrates the life of a young orphan till her adulthood.

When Jane is at the age of eighteen she is employed as a teacher by Rochester in Thornfield hall. Bronte describes that Rochester's first wife Bertha, a Caribbean woman who has been locked up in a room since their arrival to England due to her lunatic behavior. As Jane Eyre being a classic literature and a novel which carries proto-feminism, there raise a necessity to re-read the text in the aspect of contemporary. Thus writers give importance to Bertha Mason and her liminality in the upcoming texts. As Spivak suggests that, "there are many reasons for such a re-reading of this classic text". While Jane Eyre being a strong feminist Bertha is put down to the subaltern position. Bertha Mason, in contemporary literature in both postcolonial and feminist theory has given broad focus due the character's potential ability of both gender and race.

Gilbert and Gubar in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic* acknowledges that, interpretations regarding feminism on Jane Eyre being an exclusive and everlasting protagonist or heroine will, "depend upon the dehumanization of Bertha Mason Rochester, the Jamaican Creole, whose racial and geographical marginality oils the mechanism by which the heathen, bestial other could be annihilated to constitute European female subjectivity" (Gilbert and Gubar, xxxvi). So Gilbert and Gubar considers Bertha Mason as an avatar of Jane Eyre itself because Bertha actually materializes whatever anger that Jane carries during her time in patriarchal society.

Bertha Mason Vs. Antoinette Mason: The first point of discussion for her madness is connected with her identity crisis. As a postcolonial text it explains the struggle of colonized people and their search for identity. This will result in long term psychological issues of the affected persons especially female because of their double colonization. Because of Antoinette's suffering through identity crisis and it ultimately leads her life to madness and paranoia. In Leary's words identity can be defined as:

The person can be defined with traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships. Identities can be focused on the past what used to be true of one, the present what is true of one now, or the future the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become. (Leary et al. 69) Being the Creole woman, the female protagonist Antoinette lives at the estate of Coulibri in Jamaica, which is an English colony. Though she considers herself black, she is not embraced by the native people because of her close connections with the white slave master. She is left alone and never gets appreciation from the people living around her. So here Rhys words describe the emotions of Antoinette at a particular occasion, "They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping dogs lie. One day a little girl followed me singing, 'Go away white cockroach, go away, go away'. I walked fast, but she walked faster. White cockroach go away, go away. Nobody wants you, go away" (Rhys 13).

By having a black friend Tia, she thought she could make herself home with blacks even after the rejection from them. But opposite to her thoughts her friendship also does not work. She is slowly getting rid of her identity by trying to change her originality. Antoinette's inner feeling can be conveyed through the conversation with her brother, "And how will you like that I thought, as I kissed him. How will you being made exactly like other people" (Rhys 22). So these lines prove that she is not allowed live her life according to herself rather, she has to act and live according to others interest which is ultimately against her true self and thus it leads to her first step for madness or mental illness because rejection affects the brain and thoughts, thus in the result of psychological issues. The rejection from both blacks and whites made herself confused and throughout the novel she is conscious about her origin. She confused herself between either she is black/white, Jamaican/English. So throughout her life in Jamaica she suffers from this problem and she couldn't get rid of that. Through her conversation with Christophine her uncertain behavior being revealed, "So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (61).

In Jamaica, Antoinette feels a sense of fragmentation and displacement so she asks her husband Rochester that "is it true, that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so" (47). Because of the native people's inquisition she thinks that, "I will be a different person when I live in England and different things will happen to me..." (66). So she thinks if she can live in England she does not want to face the alienation or rejection that she continuously faces in Jamaica. Even the dream of living in England does not come true. She is not comfortable in living in England even after her marriage with Rochester. Hence England becomes the nightmare in her life because where she becomes mad and has been locked by Rochester in an attic. To her England is a dark and cold place so she burns the house and commits suicide.

Double Colonization: Patriarchy and colonization were also yet another reason for Antoinette's madness and thus societal issues were the reason behind her psychological issue. Here it is found that Antoinette is being doubly colonized that is the first kind of colonization is Jamaica under British power and second is kind of patriarchal colonization, Antoinette being colonized by Rochester. Foucault in his analysis says that political dissidence is the main factor for the cause of "sluggish schizophrenia".

The novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* explains the crucial circumstance of Jamaica just after their rule and abandonment. The blacks were in full hatred of white people. Because of close connections with white people she is being rejected by the native people and she feels alienated. Rochester's dominant attitude and being misogynist directly resulted in Antoinette's madness. But in Bronte's *Jane Eyre* the character Bertha is shown as an evil person and Rochester has been affected by

her. Bertha is never allowed to talk in *Jane Eyre* and so there is no chance to know the reality. Here Rhys actually gave voice to the voiceless Bertha Mason. Being a misogynist Rochester always displays a male domination towards Antoinette. Through Maria Olausson it is easy to understand patriarchy, according to her, "patriarchy is a social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in class of family in both domestic and religious functions, the legal dependence of wives or wife or children and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line" (102). So Maria's statement also proves that women were always submissive because of patriarchy and thus madness sometimes becomes their genetic issue. As they try to cut their web they were just named as mad and their psychological tolerance will get affected and thus being a reason for their 'mental illness'.

Antoinette gives importance to love whereas Rochester implies on materialism. That's why Freud said women know love and loving only in his *Studies on Hysteria*. Rochester marries Antoinette only for money and not because of love. He not only enjoys her property but also he makes her as his property. She does not have any power to leave him and live her life. I tell you she loves no one, anyone. I could not touch her. Excepting has the hurricane that will touch the tree and break it. You say I did? No. That was love's fierce play. Now I will do it. She will not laugh in the sun again. She will not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking glass. So pleased, so satisfied. Vain, silly creature. Made for loving? Yes, but she will have no lover, for I don't want her and she will see no other. (Rhys 99) The above quotation stands as an example for Rochester's thoughts and attitude towards lovable Antoinette. Though she is beautiful, he doesn't want to love her, and he does not allow her to leave him. In that case he will be deprived of all her properties. He is not ready to care or love her and he feels that he should never trap himself in Antoinette's love. Still he feels attracted towards her.

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 loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it. (103) As he knows that she likes sunshine and so he locks her in the dark attic. The above statements are also gives an insight that Rochester is also psychologically affected who does know to be happy. His patriarchal attitude made him to hate Antoinette. He wants her to be his slave and he wishes to govern her and order her. She always let her to be a colonized person. So here again there is an evident proof that loneliness created sorrow for and thus she became mad by societal and cultural pressures.

Antoinette is so desperate and to her best her actions are in a way to get Rochester's love and so she demands a love potion from Christophine and she mixes it into his beverage. The influence of love potion does not work

long. So he thinks, "I woke in the dark after dreaming that I was buried alive, and when I was awake the feeling of suffocation persisted" (82). Only in order to control her she sleeps with a black maid. On seeing this once again Antoinette's mental health gets affected. Here it is understood that she is affected by lovesick illness and melancholy. Therefore lovesick illness is the main cause of Antoinette's hysteria so Freud says, "women became hysterics because they, fearful of their sexual impulses, converted that energy into psychometric illness and this is said to be conversion hysteria or psychoanalysis, hysterical symptoms can be neurosis or anxiety disorder" (653).

Nostalgia and Alienation: Alienation is yet another reason that has contribution for her madness. From the beginning to end of the novel she always feels that she has no belongings or relations. In the beginning she is totally isolated in her own town. She worries that she does not fit anywhere as Rachel Carson describes, "like the Sargasso Sea, fluid and uncertain of its definite location, so is Antoinette", she has a confusion regarding her origin and ultimately this leads to alienation.

Another reason is that her mother never loved her like her brother. She always cares only for her son and not about Antoinette. This situation might have traumatized Antoinette in her childhood. Antoinette says, "My mother never asked where I have gone or what I have done" (14). So here it is understood that her mother had no interest on her. In another occasion, she says, "I will not stay at Coulihri any longer, my mother said, it is not safe, it is not safe to Pierre" (20). So her mother's concern is only for her son and thus it further alienated Antoinette from her surroundings. The final reason is that her husband tries to take her identity away. Though her name is Antoinette he calls her Bertha. Rhys explains Antoinette's view on names, "names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass" (107). Another factor for her madness can be her past memories. As she hates her present life she always revisits her past memories where she lived happily with her father in Coulibri estate. Her present life is full of pain due to Rochester's behavior. This certainly stands has an example for her hysteric actions.

Hysteria As A Legitimized Mental Illness: "Moral insanity" is a concept introduced by James Prichard in the year 1835 which considers madness as a socially accepted behavior rather than to be a lack of reason. For women, it is actually a "bestly behavior" which includes sexual promiscuity and making loud noises. As women's reproductive system is interfered with their emotional, sexual and rational control, they are more vulnerable to insanity comparing to men. In Jane Eyre, the vulnerable Bertha is characterized as the inmates at the asylum which is animalistic. In Bronte's novel, the protagonist Jane Eyre while living in Thornfield hall hears "curious laugh", "eccentric murmurs" and slow "ha ha". Bertha is said to be a creature that speaks 'gibberish' and as a savage face. Bertha is said to be a 'vampyre'.

In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette is shown as a daughter of white plantation owner who doesn't get love from her mother and hated by the neighbours and she is often left alone. At her marriageable age, her stepfather arranges her wedding with a weak Victorian Englishman Mr. Rochester. When a distant relative mentions that Antoinette mother was mad and may be Antoinette is also mad and sexually promiscuous, Rochester begins to hate her and he copulates with a black maid. Due to this, Antoinette 'weeps and yells' at Rochester for his attitude. Bertha's behavior in England is same in both Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea where she cries and wails and as an eerie laugh and also she fights with David Cosway. But Rhys's Bertha is understood by the readers and her behavior is legitimized and thus she is protected from the cruelty of patriarchy, from the hands of Rochester.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the novel Antoinette carries a candle and her figure appears as a ghost to her and so she burnt the house. Freud and Foucault certainly say that social pressures, patriarchy and isolation were the main cause for mental illness or hysteria. Freud's Character Dora can be compared with Antoinette in few ways. That is Dora has been abused by her own father and because of the absence of paternal care she become hysteric whereas Antoinette doesn't get love from her husband as in the words of Freud woman being a wet body can also be a reason for her madness. Finally Foucault's "power and Knowledge" is also another factor as Antoinette is doubly colonized in terms of both gender and race.

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