

Madness as a Cross-Racial Predicament in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract:

Madness as a theme is very recurrent in the Caribbean literature. However, the term madness is not as simple to be defined particularly with reference to the Caribbean texts written in English between 1959 and 1980. These texts relate madness to more than one meaning. In this connection, Jean Rhys's novel Wide Sargasso Sea (WSS) presents a superb example, relating madness to various types of dilemma and delirium in a cross-racial Caribbean context. For this purpose, first of all, the related literature was reviewed on the concept of madness in light of the notions of three eminent critics and theorists, such as, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, and R. D. Laing. Next, the relevant discourses and incidents from WSS were analysed and interpreted in light of the aforementioned views on madness. On the basis of the analysis and discussion, it was concluded that, in WSS, Rhys relates madness to deep and varied meanings, that is, the search of identity, alienation, and split self (i.e., schizophrenia) on the part of Creole female colonized, the vengefulness, bruised nationalistic spirit, and collective delirium on the part of the Blacks, and the estrangement, schizophrenia, and an obsession of oppressive behaviour on the part of the White colonizers from the conservative, patriarchal Victorian culture of England.

Key words: Caribbean, Colonized, Creole, Discourse, Double Colonization, Female, Madness, Oppressive, Patriarchy

1. INTRODUCTION

Madness has been one of the recurrent themes in so many literary texts, such as, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, but it has a centralized significance in the Caribbean literature written in English between 1959 and 1980. While *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (9th ed.) defines *madness* as "the state of having a serious mental illness" suggesting "a more clinically accurate term" (Donnelly 6), the term is not, however, as simple as to be defined, particularly with reference to the Afro-Caribbean and Creole texts in English by various writers, such as, by Jean Rhys, Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul, Erna Brodber, and Sylvia Wynter. These texts relate madness to more than one meaning, presenting it differently with respect to different causes and causalities. "Madness can be viewed as both a disorder of the brain and a social phenomenon" (Tennholt 4).

More pertinently, in *WSS*, Rhys (1966) does not restrict the concept of madness only to its denotative and conventional meaning as aforementioned; rather, it appears varied in scope, incorporating psychological, neurological, as well as social connotations, more in accordance with the various concepts of madness held and expounded by various theorists and thinkers, such as, the ones selected for the purpose of this study like Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), and R. D. Laing (1927-1989). With this backdrop of conceptual framework, this paper aims to deconstruct the various meanings and connotations of madness as illustrated by *WSS* while exposing the varying mindsets and behaviours of the colonizer Whites from the England of the Victorian times, and the colonized Creoles Blacks of basically French and African origins respectively on the basis of the relevant discourses and incidents from *WSS*.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This section includes the views on madness as held by Michel Foucault, R. D. Laing, and Frantz Fanon.

2.1. Fanon's Ideas of Madness

In his *Black Skin White Masks* Fanon embodies his practical view of the very much existing experience of anti-black racism in post-war France. In his view, pervasive exploitation develops racialized Manicheanism (i.e., violence/madness). This results into a loaded binary opposition. "The racist in a culture with racism is . . . normal" (Fanon 108). Fanon's discourse thus anchors around identity, race, and violence.

2.2. Foucault's Views on Madness

In his *Madness and Civilization* Foucault views madness as a social phenomenon. According to him, it has been of great concern in different historical ages. In the Middle Ages, first lepers and then the mad persons were excluded by the society. In fact, mad people were sent away in ships in the fifteenth century. The same punitive approach towards madness continued up to the seventeenth century.

Foucault further explains that to avoid a scandal, mad humans were despised and disowned; animal features were attributed to them. "The animality that rages in madness dispossesses man of what is specifically human in him" (74). Accordingly, the solution devised for the treatment of the mad people was that "unchained animality could be mastered only by discipline and brutalizing" (75).

Later on, in the eighteenth century, madness was considered as antithetical to reason. Therefore, those who did not follow and act in accordance with the norms of the general society, were often thought of as "madmen". Foucault questions such normative frameworks of society.

Finally, Foucault also expounds his ideas of “Hysteria”. To him, hysteria is considered as a disease of the female humans, identified with a state of heightened emotions, “in which women invent, exaggerate, and repeat all the various absurdities of which a disordered imagination is capable” (138-139).

2.3. Laing’s Ideas of Madness

Ronald David Laing, a Scottish psychiatrist, was a prolific writer on mental illness, particularly psychosis. His description of the changing aspects of “schizophrenia” provides a useful framework for interpreting madness in a different manner. In his first book *The Divided Self* (1960), Laing describes the person, who lacks “ontological security”, develops a fundamental split to make his or her identity as acceptable to others. In the views of Abel, “this division [split] between a real internal self and a false external one that complies mechanically with the desires of others gradually intensifies. The real self becomes increasingly associated with the mind and the false self with the body” (158). Ultimately, this split of the self, further results into a divide between the genuine self and the world around, that is a two-dimensional stage setting, through which the body wavers and vacillates.

3. INTERPRETATIONS OF MADNESS IN WSS: A MULTIPLE VIEW

In light of the views of the great thinkers and theorists, as discussed above, the concept of madness in terms of its multiple views applicable differently on the three different racial classes of characters in WSS, that is, the English colonizers, the West Indian Creole female colonized, and the Blacks is analyzed and interpreted in the sections following as under:

3.1. Madness and the White Colonizers in WSS

In WSS, while Mr. Rochester calls Antoinette “Bertha” to affirm her madness, reminding us of her monster-like depiction, that is, a “mad ghost” (Harrison 128) by Charlotte Bronte in her famous novel *Jane Eyre*, both with respect to cultural differences as well as split self, it is ironically Rochester who is himself schizophrenic and abnormal in both ways. Although he is charmed by the exclusive Creole beauty of Antoinette, his patronizing Victorian upbringing always drives him away from her, rather impelling him to exercise his coercive power and control. He resists all temptations to fall to her exquisite fascination. The impelling status-quo in his favour keeps him right on his typical track to subjugate and oppress her rather than to get a slave to her domineering and captivating beauty.

However, in spite of all deliberation and design to marry Antoinette all for money, Mr. Rochester unconsciously develops a split self from two respects. First, despite the fact that he finds himself so much attracted towards her enchanting beauty and the heaven-like Caribbean world all around, he goes against his real self and behaves schizophrenically by denying all fascination he feels then. He expresses such state of delirium on his part in the following frantic manner:

I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour. I hated its [Caribbean] 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. (Rhys 172)

As depicted by the quote above, Mr. Rochester also feels utterly estranged and wonder-struck in an alien world where the sky is, so untypically, bluer than the blue and the green nature is vividly greener.

Secondly, as O'Connor points out, Mr. Rochester, as per his upbringing as a male in the conservative Victorian English culture, is supposed to be superior by all respects to her colonized wife. But he develops an inferiority complex when he is confronted with the superior knowledge of his wife who tutors him about the beauty of the West Indies and almost convinces him rather than being tutored and convinced about the superiority and power of the industrialized England. This creates a sheer feeling of paranoia in him regarding the subversion of his role as a male, likely to impose on him a female identity (148-49). He expresses this in the following way: "Her [Antoinette's] mind was already made up. . . . I could not change them [her fixed ideas] and probably nothing would. . . . her fixed ideas would never change" (Rhys 94).

3.2. Madness and the Black Colonized in *WSS*

While Rochester's behavior, as typical of the colonial mindset, represents his abnormality in terms of schizophrenia, that is, a split self, the Blacks demonstrates what we call *Collective Delirium* as a result of their suppressed national identity by the White colonizers who subjugated and oppressed them by establishing a status-quo based on the impression that the Blacks were more less civilized, less developed, and inferior (Tennholt 7).

In Fanon's views, it is the oppression and anti-Black racism that impels the black population towards counter-violence and vengefulness. This is quite evident in *WSS*. We are told at the start of the novel about the Emancipation Act of 1833 which has abolished the slavery in all the British colonies. However, this act has caused a great unrest in the Caribbeans such that the newly-emancipated Blacks of African origin turned their violent vengefulness towards the Creoles, who were the descendants of the French slave-traders.

In an act of aggression, as for example shown in *WSS*, the Coulibri Estate, where Antoinette and her mother lived, is

put to fire by a vengeful mob of the Blacks. In this mishap, Antoinette's mother gets mad, her paralyzed brother Pierre dies and she herself is severely wounded by her own friend Tia, a black girl. At this occasion, Rhys highlights the violence and collective delirium of the Blacks through Antoinette's heartbreaking remarks about Tia and her friendship with her when in an effort to win over Tia's support and consolation, Antoinette rather finds her rolling a heavy stone that hits and bleeds her: "We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Life in a looking glass" (Rhys 45). Thus, we see violence and delirium obliterating the bond of friendship between Antoinette and Tia.

3.3. Madness and the Creole Female Colonized in WSS

"Scholars have often investigated the relationship between madness and colonialism; in particular, much attention has been paid to the psychological disorders affecting colonized people" (Gramaglia 8-9). In WSS, the madness of the Creole female colonized can be interpreted in so many ways. First of all, taking the Foucauldian conception of madness as a deviation from the normative framework of a society, we see that in a colonial and patriarchal social setup, such as, in WSS, women are considered as deviating from the patriarchy-ridden social norm investing all power in man. Rather, in such an extreme patriarchal social setup, such an eccentricity as the superior knowledge of a woman, is regarded as doubly deviating from the norm, hence nothing but a state of delirium or madness on their part. "Power is distributed unevenly in Rhys's world. The significant men in her novels have jobs, money, and consequently the power to appropriate women and discard them" (Abel 170). In other words, women are treated as the outcasts in a power structure based on patriarchy, thus being vulnerable and fragile than men.

WSS evidences the deviation on the part of Antoinette from the patriarchal, colonial norm so markedly through her

behavior to her husband with an additional identity of being a colonizer at the same time as well. As such, even in the beginning of their relationship, when Mr. Rochester, who is a newly arrived alien from conservative, strictly gender-based English society, finds her enjoying superior in knowledge, though it is about the West Indies and its beauty, he takes to carry an annoying thought, perceiving himself as weak and inferior for being tutored by a woman. So, in reaction, he tries to teach her about England, but she annoys him by continuing to be convinced of the West Indies' greater beauty compared to the industrialized England. Rochester gives his detesting remarks about her, calling her variously as "stupid", "obstinate", whose "mind was already made up", and expressing the belief that "her fixed ideas would never change" (Rhys 94). In other words, Mr. Rochester conceives a negative image about Antoinette, considering her as mad because she is so unlike the Victorian women of his patriarchal English society.

Consequent upon Mr. Rochester's estrangement and repulsion from her, Antoinette is never reciprocated with appreciation and love she seeks so desperately from Mr. Rochester as her husband. So, she speaks aloud her bruised emotions hysterically, cursing and crying at her husband for ignoring her and instead getting sexually involved in the Black maid Amelie so openly and deliberately. Over this rightful protest by Antoinette as a faithful wife, Mr. Rochester rather proceeds so arrogantly to associate animality to her. He treats Antoinette so disparagingly and ruthlessly by trying to throw away her identity as a human, disposing her rather to such a behavior as is worthy of animals, thus dragging her on the painful track leading ultimately to a complete loss of identity and self, that is, "a consequence of oppression in society, such as patriarchal oppression" (Tennholt 4). In other words, "one does not go mad but is driven mad by others" (David Cooper, as cited in Foucault, viii). This is what exactly happens to Antoinette in *WSS* (Tennholt 4).

In Part Two of *WSS*, when Antoinette protests in the stronger terms about her Mr. Rochester's immoral and sexual involvement in Amelie, he reacts by degrading her human figure and form, associating her every act to madness in terms of animality, describing her in the following terms: "Her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen. Her feet were bare" (Rhys 146). Ultimately, such behavior leads Antoinette to complete alienation and loss of identity.

In fact, Mr. Rochester dehumanizes Antoinette in order to justify his own arrogant and cruel behavior towards her. From this, it becomes very evident that madness is not always and merely a clinical or purely neurological concern; rather, even the underlying cause of certain mental disturbances, dilemmas, delusions, and deliriums is insinuated by the cruel elements around, that is, one can be made mad by the cruel actions of others. For example, by calling Antoinette "Bertha", Mr. Rochester takes away even her identity, turning her into a monster-like creature that she cannot accept to reconcile with. Later on, he takes her along to England and imprisons her there, bringing about her complete alienation and loss of identity.

Accordingly, in her desperate effort to restore her identity in Part Three of *WSS*, Antoinette protests in the following mesmerizing manner: "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" (Rhys 180). This pitiable, frantic condition clearly shows that she has gone mad. She even fails to recognize herself by her reflection in the mirror anymore. She has completely lost her individual identity. In a nutshell, "Antoinette is driven mad the cruel behavior of her husband. However, it is equally significant to notice that *WSS* ultimately ends with madness but this time in relation to self-realization on the part of Antoinette, who echoes this in the following

expression of complacency and self-fulfillment: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (Rhys 190).

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that in *WSS* Rhys relates madness to deep and varied meanings, that is, the search of identity, alienation, and split self (i.e., schizophrenia) on the part of Creole female colonized, the vengefulness, bruised nationalistic spirit, and collective delirium on the part of the Blacks, and estrangement, schizophrenia, and an obsession of oppressive behaviour on the part of the White colonizers from the conservative, patriarchal Victorian culture of England.

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