



# Gender Oppression and the Consequent Madness in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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**Abstract**— *Jean Rhys, through her ground breaking novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, portrays the journey of a French Creole woman Antoinette from a troubled childhood to her eventual culmination into madness. This novel is a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's novel Jane Eyre and was published in England in 1966. Jean Rhys's protagonist Antoinette is the representation of the character "Bertha" in the novel Jane Eyre. Through this novel, Jean has given Bronte's "Bertha" a chance to tell her side of the story of how she ended up in the attic alone and mad which finally ended up in her demise. Madness is an inherent theme which plays an important role and also acts as a consequence of gender oppression. This paper intends to study the inherent gender oppression that the protagonist Antoinette faces from her husband and the consequent madness that follows from this oppression in Jean Rhys' novel Wide Sargasso Sea. Through a detailed analysis this paper tries to investigate how Antoinette's husband Mr. Rochester, by his patriarchal male supremacy and domination, oppressed Antoinette to the point that she not only lost her identity but also slipped into madness. The main motive of this paper is to show how Antoinette's culmination into madness is not just a result of mental illness but also the result of long repressed scars of her traumatic upbringing which are exacerbated by her husband's rejection and cruel behaviour of her which completely erodes her self-esteem ultimately culminating into madness. This paper attempts to prove that Antoinette's abusive patriarchal husband drives her "mad" on purpose and his view of Antoinette as "mad" is the result of her not living up to his Victorian standards of restrained sexuality.*

**Keywords**— *gender oppression, , identity, madness, patriarchy, sexuality.*

Gender oppression refers to the arbitrary or severe use of power or control, as well as mindsets, events, or actions that perpetuate gender stereotyping of social roles. Femininity is seen as being meek, submissive, courteous, emotional, and dependant, whereas masculinity is related with being physically powerful, aggressive, logical, and competitive. Females are confined to the home, where they are responsible for their family's needs. According to Susan Kent: "men possessed the capacity for reason, action, aggression, independence, and self-interest [thus belonging to the public sphere]." Women are assigned feminine attributes such as submissiveness, dependence on male family members, non-aggression, emotionality, and selflessness. They are supposed to be perfect women who never scream or act impatiently. Men, on the other hand, are

permitted to have several partners and are naturally considered as the family's head. There are multiple examples of gender oppression in the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This is clear from the beginning of the narrative until the very end.

The condition of Antoinette's mother, Annette, exemplifies gender oppression in terms of economic disparity. After the death of her husband she became economically poor and had to remarry in order to feel safe both economically and physically. It shows marriage as a means of security which the women felt during the Victorian era. Maria Olausson argues that "Annette signifies the gender-ideology in the patriarchal economic system, since she needs to be provided for by men. She uses her beauty as

her only means to compete with other women in search for English protection and economic support” (Olausson 103). Even in the case of inheritance of property, the women were not allowed to inherit anything. Everything belonged to the male heir. In Antoinette’s case also, Mr Mason’s son Richard inherited the property. He also fixed Antoinette’s marriage with Rochester. The rampant gender oppression can be witnessed here as the females were merely treated like objects which were the sole property of their male family members. The whole property of Antoinette which consisted of thirty thousand pounds was given to Rochester leaving Antoinette completely dependent on him. As a woman she had to ask his approval for spending her own money due to the stereotypical gender roles assigned by the society. Mr Rochester signified the typical Victorian male who wanted to subjugate Antoinette from her own identity. From the moment he started his narration, one can sense his patriarchal attitude towards Antoinette when he said that “And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me. I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks” (Rhys 42).

Antoinette and Rochester belong to two culturally different backgrounds. She was a French Creole and he was from England. There were differences of opinion between them. However, one can sense his disliking towards the place from the moment he arrived in Massacre. It is evident when he says that “Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near” (Rhys 42). Mr Rochester has the sensation that not just this area, but also the black community and Antoinette, are terrifying and strange, and that there is something cryptic hidden that he is unaware of. He felt anxiety and uneasiness in the island and found his wife nothing more than a stranger. After receiving the letter from Daniel Cosway, he was sure of his mysterious feeling towards both Antoinette and the place. It was as if he got a license to an already made up opinion in his mind.

Rochester did not consider the place and Antoinette as a part of his life. He represented the typical Victorian male who did not like to be tutored by his female counterpart. She told him everything about her place and herself but it never impressed him nor made any difference in his perception. He considered both Antoinette and the place as savage. He ignored the beauty and charm of the place as well as his wife. When he used to tell her about England, Antoinette's admiration and preference for the West Indies as being more beautiful than the industrialised England irritated him. It can be witnessed when he says that:

If she was a child she was not a stupid child but an obstinate one. She often questioned me about

England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made much difference. Her mind was already made up. . . . I could not change them [her fixed ideas] and probably nothing would. Reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality. It would be only a mistake, a misfortune, a wrong path taken, her fixed ideas would never change. Nothing that I told her influenced her at all. Die then. Sleep. It is all I can give you... (Rhys 58).

Rochester believes that his wife is wiser and more informed than he is. It bothers him, and he gets the impression that she is attempting to dominate him. Rochester, who was born in a male-dominated England, could not stand it. He felt as if he was losing control of his relationship. In this situation, Antoinette seemed to be the husband and he the meek wife. The marriage of Antoinette and Rochester is just a bargain for him. One can see it when he wrote a letter to his father saying that: “The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without any question or condition. I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain?” (Rhys 42).

When he met Antoinette to persuade her for marriage even at that time he called it a bargain. “I’ll trust you if you’ll trust me. Is that a bargain?” (Rhys 48). His business like talks were noticeable before their marriage but Antoinette, completely oblivious of her disastrous future ignored it all. His calling of her name as Bertha is like a premonition to her dark future.

Antoinette is oppressed by Rochester on two levels. This is because firstly, he oppresses her as a Victorian male who tries to change her identity and wants her to act according to his ideas of a perfect Victorian woman and on the other hand as he is British, so he also symbolized British colonialism. Antoinette's Creole ancestry, along with her gender, makes her doubly oppressed by Mr Rochester. He saw her personality, her habits savage. He was troubled by the way she laughed and drank alcohol, as well as her free-spirited character. As a Victorian man, he anticipated his wife to be subservient, obedient to her home, less sociable, and devoid of rage or a loud voice, but Antoinette lacked all of these attributes. He began to regard her as the "other." It began to raise doubts in his mind, which were confirmed by Daniel's message.

Antoinette's quest to reclaim her husband's affection had reached the point where she needed Christophine's assistance. She spiked his drink with a love potion, making Rochester even more enraged with her. He couldn't stand the fact that Antoinette, as a woman could make him adore her without his consent.

He recognises that Antoinette, as someone who is more familiar with the island, may wield more power than he does, putting his relationship at jeopardy. "I feel very much a stranger here...I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side" (Rhys78). Mr. Rochester recognises that Antoinette's capacity to use Obeah is a strength that she possesses and that he will never be able to control or master. It offended his macho ego that she could rule him. Olausen argues "Antoinette's hunger for sex, showing sexual emotions, and craving sex also becomes a crucial point in labelling Antoinette morally mad" (Olausen 60). He decides to cheat on her with Amélie, their maid, to punish her act. He did it on purpose since he knew Amélie and Antoinette had a quarrel a few days before and that it would aggravate her wrath. Even though he was aware that Antoinette was present and listening to everything he was doing with Amélie, he continued to do so. "I had not one moment of remorse. Nor was I anxious to know what was happening behind the thin partition which divided us from my wife's bedroom" (Rhys 89). It reveals his stone-hearted angry personality, which had been hidden until now. As a guy in a patriarchal culture, he has the freedom to be disloyal and respond to his sexual desires, but he denies women the same liberty. Despite the fact that he is perfectly aware that his acts may hurt Antoinette, Mr. Rochester obviously leverages his colonial power for his sexual desires. Thomas Staley argues that this is why he takes revenge on Antoinette by sleeping with the black servant girl, Amélie. He believes this brings back his patriarchal manliness and his ability to dominate and destroy Antoinette. (114)

The term "madness" can be commonly defined as having a major mental condition, engaging in highly absurd behaviour, or being unable to behave in a sensible manner. These are the ideas that people generally have about madness. Michel Foucault, on the other hand, had a different take on it. Throughout *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault emphasises that madness is not a static, natural phenomenon, but rather a product of the culture in which it occurs. The way madness is understood and experienced in a particular culture is determined by a variety of cultural, intellectual, and economic systems. Society shapes its experience of lunacy in this way. Michel Foucault believes madness to be an invented disease and therefore a disease of our civilization (Foucault viii). Those individuals who do not act like the mainstream are often thought of as "mad". Women were not a part of the patriarchal power structure and so in a way they were also not the mainstream. In the case of Antoinette she was also a victim of this invented disease.

Mr Rochester dismisses Antoinette as "mad" based on their cultural differences rather than fact. He was an Englishman, and he was taken aback to witness her rage at him and her openly exhibiting her sexuality by wooing him in the case of the love potion. As she behaves outside of Victorian society's conventional bounds, he begins to label her "mad". Rochester's perception of Antoinette as "mad" stems from her failure to meet his Victorian norms of repressed sensuality, and by giving her a new name, he attempts to distance her from her own identity and culture. When Antoinette discovers her husband's adultery, she becomes inebriated and enraged. Mr Rochester feels sorry for himself as he considers his poor choice of wife: "Pity. Is there none for me? Tied to a lunatic for life- a drunken lying lunatic-gone her mother's way" (Rhys 106). Foucault's idea of madness as dependent on the society and being located in a certain cultural space is pretty evident here as Rochester labels her "mad" based on the cultural difference existing between them.

Phyllis Chesler has also researched and examined women and madness in patriarchal culture in the nineteenth century. In the book *Woman and Madness*, Chesler argues that in a patriarchal society, women who break from conditioned female behaviour are deemed "mad". Chesler concludes that defining women as mad is caused by male domination in a patriarchal society (Chesler 56).

Rochester has problem with her appearance and behaviour as well. He described her as: "Then she cursed me comprehensively, my eyes, my mouth, every member of my body, and it was like a dream in the large unfurnished room with the 19 candles flickering and this red-eyed wild-haired stranger who was my wife shouting obscenities at me" (Rhys 95). Rochester expected Antoinette to not react or question him for his infidelity as it was not accepted from a woman to scream or raise voice against any injustice perpetrated against them. He could not accept the fact that she expressed her inner anguish and sadness on his betrayal. He did not want his wife to be so vocal and "unfeminine." Symptoms of madness in Antoinette are seen as she did not confirm herself as a passive woman who he expected and wanted. The rage Antoinette shows in response to her husband's mistreatment is viewed by Rochester as a reaction of her "madness". Chesler maintains that in a patriarchal society, men assign features of madness to women when they do not act and behave according to "one's sex-role stereotype" (Chesler 57).

His unloving and unpleasant demeanour, as well as the sense of non-belonging, aggravates her alienation from him. Her "madness" stems from a patriarchal society that oppresses women. Patriarchal society tolerates and supports Mr Rochester's behaviour despite the fact that he rendered

her emotionally vulnerable. Cultural differences aided Antoinette's suffering since they allowed Rochester to regard his thoughts as superior to hers and label her "mad."

Mr Rochester makes an attempt to attribute animalistic characteristics to his wife. He attributes animal like qualities to her in order to justify her absurd behaviour. "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 93). He did not try to understand the pain she was withholding after his infidelity rather he judged and mocked her emotions by attributing such qualities to her. Describing them with uncombed and dull hair, inflamed, staring zombie eyes and bare feet. These are not considered to be appropriate features of a human being; they are more animal like. "By turning "madmen" into animals, their human identities are removed and can only be re-established by discipline and brutality. Mr Rochester dehumanizes his wife in order to defend his own cruel behaviour towards her" (Tennholt 19).

In her life, Antoinette has always been rejected. Her first rejection as a youngster came from her own mother, who never gave her any compassion or love and always regarded her son as her own child. The residents of the island were the next ones to reject her. They couldn't accept her since she was a female Creole and the daughter of a former slave master. "Antoinette Cosway belongs to no place and, in the final analysis, to no one: she is powerless, in terms of her own self definition/ determination. Antoinette's destiny is locked within an imposed narrative of exile: racial, spiritual and cultural. She is labelled as "white nigger" by Tia; declared "mad", and to have "zombie" eyes" (Forrester 34). She couldn't handle her husband's final rejection. She became quite sensitive as a result of the numerous rejections she received. Her dream of living a happy life with her spouse was crushed as well. Rochester's ignorance and patriarchal behaviour exacerbated her sensitivity to the point that she was unable to recover. He not only emotionally tortured her, but he also attempted to erase a part of her individuality by giving her a new name. He did not give any proper reason for calling her "Bertha", rather he simply tells her "It is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha" (Rhys 86).

He gives her the name "Bertha," which might indicate one of two things. First, by calling her "Bertha," he may have intended to force his colonising mindset on her because it was an English name, and by doing so, he felt that he was conversing with someone of his own calibre and group. Second, he intended to create a new woman in her that he could manage by giving her a new name. Antoinette did disapprove of her new name when she said that: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone

else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too" (Rhys 94).

In some ways, he wished to transform Antoinette from her Creole identity into a weak and submissive Victorian English woman. "Moreover, he causes a split of her identity by calling her 'Bertha' in order to reject her origins and ignore her family's supposed illness" (Rhys 86). She is deprived of both her identity as well as sense of place by Rochester. He gives her another identity and then attempts to separate her from her native place where she felt happy and secure. As a result she had nothing left. It definitely created scar in her adding to her mental instability. Rochester perhaps also wanted to break Antoinette's connection to her mother by imposing her with a new name and identity. In a way he tried to break their link and also suppress both of them. "Consequently, the name Bertha can be considered as suppressing both, mother and daughter" (Blais 98-118).

Teresa F. O'Connor argues that "the "mad" females in *Wide Sargasso Sea* turn their "madness" inwards" (197). Antoinette becomes quiet after all these incidents. She withdraws herself from everything and do not talk or share her feeling anymore. Earlier she used to share her feelings with Rochester but now she becomes too passive. She becomes inherently passive and it adds to her insanity.

Rochester never valued Antoinette or her place. Once his motive of acquiring her fortune got fulfilled, he started to ignore her and began to see her actions and habits as insane. When they were leaving for England, he felt regret for her for a little period, but as soon as he saw the hatred in her eyes, he reverted to his tyrannical and patriarchal posture.

If I was bound for hell let it be hell. No more false heavens. No more damned magic. You hate me and I hate you. We'll see who hates best. But first, first I will destroy your hatred. Now. My hate is colder, stronger, and you'll have no hate to warm yourself. You will have nothing. I did it too. I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness. Say die and I will die. Say die and watch me die (Rhys 110).

This quote demonstrates Rochester's tyrannical and ruthless attitude, as well as his loathing for Antoinette after witnessing her disdain for him. He was enraged because he couldn't control her thinking like he controlled her identity. M.M Adjarian opines "[That is] part of the reason behind Rochester's intense wish to possess Antoinette even *after* he has gained her wealth. By controlling her, he controls what

Antoinette comes to represent for him the island, its inhabitants and the threat they pose to him and his self-perception as an all-powerful, all-knowing European" (206). Antoinette is not given the opportunity to clarify her position or convey her feelings. She was labelled insane simply because she did not conform to Rochester's expectations of a submissive, demure lady. He made no attempt to speak with her about the situation or to find a solution. He only took her to England and locked her up in the attic. He added to her inner anguish, which she was experiencing as a result of her husband's adultery and the rejections she had had throughout her life. Rochester, who only cared about her money, shattered her fantasy of sharing a happy and satisfying life with her spouse. He married Antoinette for her money which was visible to Christophine as well when she said to him that:

Everybody know that you marry her for her money and you take it all. And then you want to break her up, because you jealous of her. She is more better than you, she have better blood in her and she don't care for money-it's nothing for her. Oh I see that first time I look at you. You young but already you hard. You fool the girl. You make her think you can't see the sun for looking at her . . . You make love to her till she drunk with it, no rum could make her drunk like that, till she can't do without it. It's she can't see the sun any more. Only you see. But all you want is to break her up. (Rhys 98).

Mr Rochester utilises his patriarchal influence to make Antoinette feel falsely safe by claiming to adore her at the start of their marriage. She felt estranged and his rejection perhaps led her into the verge of "madness". Antoinette does not know how to deal with her dilemma since she has never experienced genuine love, whether from family, friendship, or romantic connections with men. She "turns her hate for Rochester into hate for her beloved island and hence for herself" (O'Connor 154). It would have perhaps not affected her if Rochester committed the adultery in some other place, but the very fact that he did it all in her own place crumbled her sense of belongingness towards her place. She perhaps felt as if her own place rejected her as well as cheated on her.

Rochester treats her as if she were a toy, with little regard for her mental health. He didn't pay attention to her and didn't see her as a human being. As a result of his actions, Antoinette appeared to be on the edge of going mad. Rochester succeeds in breaking Antoinette's final link to reality and reason by imprisoning her in England, where she loses Christophine's support, her last support. Sisterhood, according to feminist scholars Carole Ruth McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim, is a resistance to patriarchal tyranny.

Sisterhood is a concept that men do not grasp. Sisterhood poses a challenge to men's status in patriarchal societies. "Women are not hierarchical but egalitarian...Men want to dominate and separate; women want to communicate and connect" (McCann, Kim 434).

Rochester did not like Christophine. He has always been sceptical about her behaviour and appearance. He did not like Antoinette's relationship with her and even warned Antoinette of the same: "Christophine is an evil woman and you know it as well as I do,...She won't stay here very much longer" (Rhys 94). In some ways, he saw their connection as a challenge to his strong position. He understood that Antoinette could defeat him if she teamed up with Christophine. The proposal of separation and divorce which she gave to Antoinette was alarming to Rochester since it may result in a major controversy which he never wished. As a result, he was continuously trying to separate them, and when he took Antoinette to England, he was eventually successful. Olinder comments that "many Europeans thought that putting away mad people is a civilized way of controlling and dealing with the Caribbean people who showed signs of madness" (Olinder 156).

Antoinette's final culmination into madness occurs when Rochester locks her up in his attic in England. She isn't allowed to come out nor does he come to her. She was left completely alone along with a caretaker Grace poole. Antoinette did not even get the chance to figure out what has just happened to her. She was in a vulnerable state of mind with all her childhood rejections, loss of identity and all these were brought up in her mind again with the final blow of rejection by her husband. All these emotional factors made her completely passive and vulnerable which made it easier for Rochester to slip her into madness. He keeps her locked up in the attic without any connection with the outside world which finally erodes her sanity. With nothing left by her side, Antoinette slips into insanity. When she was a child she used to look at the mirror and brush her hair and talk to her reflection as if it was a different person, but now Rochester did not even let her have a mirror turning her completely alone. She had no idea how she looked now which is evident when she says that:

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? (Rhys 117).

When she sees herself in the mirror, she could not recognise herself. She thought her to be the ghost everyone was talking in that house. "It was then that I saw her – the ghost" (Rhys 123). It portrays her mental condition which was finally culminating into madness. She was kept alienated from the outside world and without any interaction it was very likely that she would lose her mental sanity as a person cannot live completely alone confined in a room for so long. Her already vulnerable state was exploited by Rochester which finally pushed her to the periphery of madness. She sees a dream of burning the mansion down and then she realizes what she has to do now. She remembers all the injustice perpetrated to her and realizes that it's time for her to break the shackles of injustice and free herself of all the pain and suffering. "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (Rhys 124).

As a result she burns down the Thornfield mansion. Even though this action serves as an act of rebellion and an escaping, it is also fatal, since Bertha sacrifices her own life as a result of wresting authority from her husband: "Then I turned around and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it... I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames" (Rhys 123).

Antoinette has visions of flames devouring the home and her liberation from the existence she has there, and she feels it is her purpose to bring the vision to fruition. She exits her room and lights a fire after waking up from her dream. She chooses death over a confined existence to leave the cruel world behind. It does, however, demonstrate Antoinette's desire not to be dominated and have someone else decide her fate; by committing suicide, she takes control of her own fate.

Thus, Jean Rhys through Antoinette, has portrayed how madness can be a result of not only mental illness but also a result of societal norms. She is driven to "madness" by her patriarchal husband Rochester and also the society. The rejection she faced from the people of her island as the daughter of an ex-slave owner and as a French Creole in her childhood along with the cold treatment from her mother made Antoinette very vulnerable. All she wanted was love and acceptance throughout her life. Her dream of having a happy marriage with Rochester was also shattered with the cruel way in which he behaved with her. Mr Rochester uses his patriarchal power to make Antoinette feel falsely protected at the outset of their marriage by appearing to cherish her. As a result of his rejection, she becomes increasingly enraged. Her sense of alienation was perhaps a major factor leading to her "madness". Her habits were seen as savage by Rochester. He was troubled by the way she laughed and drank alcohol, as well as her free-spirited character. As a Victorian man, he

anticipated his wife to be subservient, obedient to her home, less sociable, and devoid of rage or a loud voice, however, Antoinette lacked all of these attributes. He began to regard her as the "other." Rochester perhaps dismisses Antoinette as "mad" based on their cultural differences rather than fact. He was an Englishman, and he was taken aback to witness her rage at him, openly exhibiting her sexuality by wooing him in the case of the love potion. As she behaves outside of Victorian society's conventional bounds, he begins to label her "mad". Rochester's perception of Antoinette as "mad" stems from her failure to meet his Victorian norms of repressed sensuality, and by giving her a new name, he attempts to distance her from her own identity and culture. When Antoinette discovers her husband's adultery, she becomes inebriated and enraged. He took her to England and locked her up in the attic. He added to her inner anguish, which she was experiencing as a result of her husband's adultery and the rejections she had had throughout her life. Rochester, who only cared about her money, shattered her fantasy of sharing a happy and satisfying life with her spouse. He gives her another identity and then attempts to separate her from her native place where she felt happy and secure. As a result she had nothing left. All these incidents definitely created scars in her soul adding to her mental instability. Rochester perhaps also wanted to break Antoinette's connection to her mother by imposing her with a new name and identity. In a way he tried to break their link and also suppress both of them. Antoinette's final culmination into madness occurs when Rochester locks her up in his attic in England. She was in a vulnerable state of mind with all her childhood rejections, loss of identity and all these were brought up in her mind again with the final blow of rejection by her husband. All these emotional factors made her completely passive and vulnerable which made it easier for Rochester to slip her into madness. He keeps her locked up in the attic without any connection with the outside world which finally erodes her sanity. With nothing left by her side, Antoinette slips into insanity. At the end she remembers all the injustice perpetrated to her and realizes that it's time for her to break the shackles of injustice and free herself of all the pain and suffering. As a result she burns down the Thornfield Hall. She chooses death over a confined existence to leave the cruel world behind. It does, however, demonstrate Antoinette's desire not to be dominated and have someone else decide her fate; by committing suicide, she takes control of her own fate.

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