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Feminist Concerns in Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea: An Analysis

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Abstract

The Feminist writers believe that “the personal is political”, everything in this world involves power. Structures of power operate to impose gender stereotypes. Canons are shaped by power corridors. Jean Jacques Rousseau, Rene Descartes and Sigmund Freud whose theories revolutionized the world, perceived women to be incapable of rising above their bodies due to their reproductive functions. Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Three Women’s Texts and Critique of Imperialism” calls *Wide Sargasso Sea* as “reinscription” of Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. Jean Rhys’s protagonist are left alone in the sea of cunning and callous society. Antoinette Cosway, the protagonist of WSS is facing acute identity crisis. Rhys reveals that in her case madness is not genetic but her circumstances lead her to take extreme steps. Michel Foucault in his work *Madness and Civilization* argues that madness is located in society and culture rather than in mind or body. Colonial mindsets are not able to recognize the cultural differences and measure everything with yardstick of British morality.

Keywords- Patriarchal, Canon, Re-visioning, Creole, Premonition, Reinscription

Introduction

The Feminist writers believe that “the personal is political”, everything in this world involves power. Human relations are interpersonal so the ‘personal is political’. To read a canonical text in a feminist way is to force that text to reveal its patriarchal ideology, which takes for-granted men superior and women inferior. Structures of power operates to impose gender stereotypes. Canons are shaped by power corridors. There is nexus between canon and power. Patriarchy shapes the text, even the texts written by women. We have to understand Patriarchy mindset. We have to interrogate and question this mindset. The historical master narratives project women either as Cinderallas or as the Lady Macbeths women are portrayed either wearing holes or horns.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, Rene Descartes and Sigmund Freud whose theories revolutionized the world perceived women to be incapable of rising above their bodies due to their reproductive

functions. Dale spender notes in *Women and Literary History* that there are; “One hundred good women novelists of the 18th century and together they were responsible for almost six hundred novels... all disappeared”.

Not only the opportunity but the female writers also had to face the lack of acceptance, this could be proved by the fact that female writers had to write under masculine names to get acceptance in society like Bronte Sister Mary Ann Evans and Contemporary writer Joanne Rowling. Therefore, Feminist theorists try to take over canon and rescue it from patriarchy and helping the readers to scan genres which were concealed to this time-lyrics, novels, short stories etc. They are unearthing and at the same time rewriting it and also revisioning the text. Andrienne Rich in her essay “when we Dead Awaken: writing as Re-vision”. Says;

“Revision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes,
of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for us
more than a chapter in cultural history, it is an act of survival.”

In rewriting the old canonical text *Jane Eyre* Jean Rhys is revisiting the history and gives voice to Bertha Mason in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Wss represents Rhy’s attempt to move the madwoman, in Gilbert and Gubar’s words;

“From the liminal zone of the third storey in which
Nineteenth century artists had sequestered her to the
First story in which her own story could become central”.

In the parent text, Bertha is described as having “pigmy intellect” and she stands for sexual excess and represents Freud’s “Id” but Jean Rhys gives her a background, a life and justifies why she burns the house of her husband in England.

Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) one of the exceptionally brilliant novels deals with various basic themes such as race, colonialism, gender discrimination, alienation and search for identity. Since its publication the novel in subjected to multiple interpretations-some stressing its feminist explorations while others its colonial aspects. All Rhys’s novels are marked by the fact that their protagonists are women put in circumstances that Rhys herself had to undergo. Rhys says;

“It is in Myself What is?
All good, evil, love, hate, life death, beauty, ugliness And in everyone?
I do not know everyone. I only know myself. And others?
I do not know them. I see them as tree, walking” – (Rhys, *Smile Please* P-161-3).

Rhys protagonist are left alone in a sea of cunning and callous society-which is patriarchal. Rhys provides us the missing link in Bronte's *Jean Eyre*. She gives voice and background to Bertha Mason-a creole woman. Rhys in an interview with Vreeland said:

"When I read Jane Eyre as a child, I thought, why should she think creole
Women are lunatics and all that? ... I immediately thought I'd
write the story as it might really have been.

She seemed such a poor ghost. I thought I'd try to write her a life."

Antoinette Cosway, the protagonist of WSS is facing acute identity crisis. Born as Antoinette Cosway, brought up as Antoinette Mason and married as Bertha. Throughout her life she suffered identity crisis. Her madness is not genetic but she is driven to it by the people and the circumstances surrounding her. Michel Foucault in his work *Madness and Civilization* argues that madness is located in society and culture rather than in mind or body. Antoinette is deprived of the love and care of her mother in her childhood. Her mother is always concerned about her son Pierre. We see her unsuccessful relationship with her mother and absence of a father figure in her life which leads to improper identity formation. Antoinette says; "My mother never asked me where I had been or what I had done".

After her mother's insanity she is sent to convent, where she has to follow all rules and regulations. In the convent certain roles are assigned to her and these roles are set by the patriarchal society for a female. In the second part of the novel Antoinette says;

"We have no looking-glass in the dormitory once
I saw the new young nun from Ireland looking at
herself in a cask of water, smiling to see
if her dimples were still there". (WSS P-30-31)

Being women society does not expect them to reveal their sexuality. Revealing of sexuality later in Antoinette's life becomes a problem for her husband. Rochester always compares her with Victorian yard stick of morality, according to which female should not reveal her sexual desires. Antoinette is equally ruined and driven to madness by her brothers- Daniel and Richard. Daniel poisons the ears and mind of Rochester by writing a letter full of lies to him. Richard gets her married to an English gentleman against her wishes. When Rochester asks Antoinette.

"You don't wish to marry me?"

She replies, "No' ... I'm afraid of what may happen.". WSS (P-48)

Antoinette always finds herself split and fragmented. She is always searching for some emotional anchor and her search moves from Tia, to the garden and river in Coulibri and to

Christophine, a kind of a surrogate mother. But everything fails to give her an identity. As a creole-English hate her and Jamacians call her “White Cockroach” and a “white nigger”. Antoinette is trapped at what Lacan calls the “mirror stage” of infancy, when a child starts to recognize his image in the mirror. The novel makes use of mirrors to suggest her search for psychic unity which she never found. Antoinette Says;

“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.”

Antoinette’s failure to identify herself and her undetermined sense of identity as she is called as “white nigger”, “white Cockroach,” “Beke”, “Marionette” and “Berth” is what leads to her madness. These multiple signifiers confuse her and she fails to identify herself. Thus her madness is induced and not genetic as Daniel Cosway makes Rochester believe. Antoinette is not able to make the fragments of her personality cohere. She is straitjacketed within the patriarchal codes.

Antoinette is emotionally and economically bankrupt. It is English law that after marriage whole property of wife goes to her husband. English law did not recognize women as independent entities at all until 1839. Nobody can help her even the law of the country (England) is against her. She is pushed to wall by circumstances and loses her identity. She is economically powerless and also emotionally vulnerable, whatever she loves is taken away from her-childhood memories, Coulibri’s scenic beauty, desire for her husband. Antoinette says to Christophine,

“And you must understand I am not rich now,
I have no money of my own at all
everything I had belongs to him”. (WSS P-69)

Jean Rhys strips her heroine of every privilege-rich heritage, culture, educational background, religion, country, family, friends and property and reveals her is her naked reality with all her fears and inhibitions. Rhys breaks open the taboo and talks about sex, which till date was a male domain exclusively. “She shows from inside” what it feels like to be a rebel, a “subverter of values”. Rhys lays bare the power structures in the society. In a patriarchal society the standards of female chastity and morality are set by the males. Rhys explores the shallowness of terms like equality, justice and freedom of woman. Walter Allen sums up Rhys’s heroines in the following words,

“She is a young woman, generally creole in origin...
who is hopelessly and helplessly at sea in her relations
with men, a passive victim, doomed to destruction.”

Rochester takes Antoinette to England, only to be confined in an attic. WSS we see a male dominant society. Males in the form of fathers, step-fathers, brothers and husbands shape and circumscribe the future of females. Initially Antoinette shows some resistance on calling her Bertha she says to Rochester, "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else". (WSS P-94)

But Rochester replies "Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha." (P-86) finally she gives up before her sexual passion for Rochester and says, "As you wish". (P-87) Antoinette is reduced to nothingness and her predicament, her suppressed feelings take refuge in dreams. Her dreams are the premonition of her future life-which is disastrous, Her fears, her insecurities come true after her marriage. Rochester added fuel to fire by making love to a servant girl. This act drives Antoinette mad. On learning about a possible affair with sandi, he takes her to England, only to be locked in an attic.

At the end of the novel it is the 'Cardboard world' of artificial restraint, where "everything is colored brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it." Antoinette lets herself out of this world, with a lit candle in her hand the flame that she carries symbolizes her spirit, which has been reawakened.

Rochester also suffers in his own ways. He too is rejected childlike Antoinette. He is not able to resolve his 'pre-oedipal' longings and holds a grudge against his father who is epitome of the English Inheritance Law. He says, "I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain?" (WSS P-42) Both Antoinette and Rochester are victims of the English patriarchal laws. Rochester's housekeeper says, "I knew him as a young man. He was gentle, generous, brave. His stay in the west Indies has changed him out of all knowledge". Even Christophine does not have a completely bad opinion of Edward as a person. She says, "The man not a bad man, even if he loves money, but he hear so many stories he doesn't know what to believe." (WSS-P-114)

Both Antoinette and Rochester live a life of denial, they are egocentric and their only fault is the inability to support each other. The two absent patriarchs, one dead, Antoinette's father, and one in England, her husband's father constantly intrude into their children's lives, just as on the colonial rapacity. The postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "*Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism*", argues that we cannot understand 19th-Century British literature without considering the fact that literature written during that period was to support British imperialism. *Jane Eyre* is one of the typical examples to vindicate this point. Spivak sees *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a "reinscription" of *Jane Eyre* in which Rhys tries to recreate Bertha Mason as intelligent like Ariel rather than Caliban on whose nature nurture cannot stick. Spivak dares to

feminist theorists who saw Jane Eyre as their ideal. She challenges that feminist theory cannot just talk about women's oppression: it has to see also that one women's happiness (Jane's) cannot be built on the tears of others.

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