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The Other Bertha: Revisiting Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract:

No story is singular. There is always another story adhering to it. The story of Bertha from *Jane Eyre* also does not exist in isolation. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the story told not by Bertha, but Antoinette. This paper shall look into the dilapidated relationship that existed between Antoinette and her mother Annette which leads to the hindered identity formation of the former. The concept of madness is deconstructed and incarceration as a solution to it is questioned. It shall also probe the cause of male domination as seen in the not overtly mentioned Rochester. Also, does the society view independent women as a threat that it tries to restrict them? This paper won't pit *Wide Sargasso Sea* against *Jane Eyre* since both are path breaking feminist texts in their respective way. But few instances will be picked up from *Jane Eyre* to highlight the madness as an aberration in Antoinette.

Keywords: Identity politics, Madness, Incarceration, Patriarchy, Feminism.

What *it* was, whether beast or human, one could not, at first sight, tell: *it* groveled, seemingly, on all fours; *it* snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but *it* was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid *its* head and face.

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Italics mine)

This 'it' is Bertha Mason as described by Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*. But as Antoinette says 'there is always the other side, always' (Rhys 82). This bestial description of Bertha has been disputed by Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (published in 1966) where Bertha is, in fact, Antoinette and the latter has been portrayed as a human whose descent into madness has often been questioned as curbing her voice and freedom. The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her path breaking Ted Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" asserts the presence of

certain power structures in framing a singular story; who tells the story and how the story is told. She further outlines the drawbacks of narrativizing a single story. It creates stereotypes, and 'the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story'... (Danger, 00:00:14- 00:19:16) 'that it robs people of dignity. It makes the recognition of our equal humanity difficult' (ibid 13:45). She further states that all stories matter... 'Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity' (ibid 17:36). It is ultimately by rejecting the theory of a single story that multiple narratives can flourish and multiple identities can coexist. A similar single story is encountered in *Bertha Mason*. It was only in 1966 that Jean Rhys took it upon herself to provide a newer identity for the vexed Bertha by rechristening her as Antoinette. The reversal of Bertha's debasement was meticulously presented by Rhys, thereby according her with her individuality and celebrating a liberal feminism.

Wide Sargasso Sea negotiates the space between ... 'sanity and madness, expectation and fulfillment, acting and being' (Smith vii). Kenneth Ramchand rightly points out that Antoinette's narrative in the text shows the 'masculine and materialistic thrust of their own ethos and their inevitable marginalization of women's priorities and sensibilities' (qtd. in Wilson-Tagoe 227). The wishes and desires of Antoinette and Annette seem inconsequential as compared to Mr. Mason and Mr. Rochester's.

Antoinette's relationship with her mother is devoid of warmth. She does not seem to have developed a distinct identity. This can be traced to what Nancy Chodorow says in "The Reproduction of Mothering" where the mother sees her 'daughter more as an extension of herself than as a separate person' (qtd. in Young 23). This impedes the identity formation in Antoinette. Annette favors her son Pierre more than her daughter. The solace that Antoinette finds is in the wild garden, often compared to the Garden of Eden. She places her cheeks against the cool soft moss and that paradoxically offers her the much required warmth. This mother-daughter duo doesn't share any conversation. Even when Antoinette tries to smooth Annette's forehead, she pushes her away, 'not roughly but calmly, coldly without a word' (Rhys 7). Annette did not seem concerned with Antoinette's activities. But 'fatalistically' they share the same fate where they end up in madness (Carriere 34). Both wed Englishmen, they question their sense of

belongingness and both are unable to fulfill the requisite role expected of them. Antoinette was also called ‘look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother’ behind her back (Rhys 27).

Antoinette finds a mother like figure in England and she desires to strike a relationship with her but it fails like in Annette and later in England. But she has other surrogate mothers in the figures of Aunt Cora and Christophine. The former fixes the broken shards of her life after their house is set on fire by the unruly natives and the latter counsels her prudently to handle her marriage that is falling apart and dissuades her from using obeah on her husband.

Christophine is aware that Rochester will not love her but lust her. Annette was also left unheard, unvoiced by Mr. Mason despite her incessant struggle to get out of Coulibri, fearing assault of any form from the natives. Interestingly, she fears the life of her son Pierre and no mention of Antoinette have been made which may reflect her affection for her daughter. When their home was attacked, she was ‘twisting her hands together, her wedding ring fell off and rolled into a corner near the steps’ (Rhys 20). She seems to rebuff her marriage and her husband who does not stand behind her at the time of distress. She screams as her son gets burnt but it gets misconstrued as her being a mad woman. Annette was exposed to poverty and extreme alienation following the Emancipation Act of 1833. This led to losing her sanity. The same happened with Antoinette when she was locked in an attic deprived of her voice and identity. Both were also oppressed sexually. Ramchand mentions how Annette succumbs to her vulnerability, never questioning her relationships but Antoinette retains certain agency. Then the madness of the latter becomes ‘wholly human and insightful and not total disorientation and defeat’ (qtd. in Wilson-Tagoe 227-28).

There was a stark contrast that existed between Rochester and Antoinette. While the former was a city person, the latter was a woman of unrestrained wilderness. This alluded to her unrestricted sexuality. She did not conform to the meek submissive angel-in-the-house model, the term which became popular after Coventry Patmore’s poem by the same title. She had sexual relations with Sandi Cosway (which has not been stated explicitly in the text but subtly by Amelie) which was normative in the Creole culture. But this was an indelible blot in the pristine immaculate culture of Victorian England. Besides, the letter that Rochester received from Daniel Cosway further channeled his emotions against Antoinette as it gave him information about the family history of madness. While Antoinette loved Rochester, the latter confesses that he never loved her; he was only thirsty for her. Antoinette was a stranger to him who did not think or feel

as he did. The second time Antoinette dreamt, it exposed her sexual inhibitions. The trees swayed and jerked, nudging her to climax. Mary Lou Emery points out how 'madness and female sexuality must be suppressed in the interest of civilized morality' (50). Rochester already feeling smothered in the wilderness drives Antoinette to insanity and curtails her liberty by confining her.

Rochester tramples Antoinette under his patriarchal hegemony. His first step in the process was by rechristening her, thus annihilating her identity. Deborah A. Kimmey gives an astute explanation of Antoinette's plight vis-à-vis her naming:

In most linguistic traditions, naming is an exercise of approbation. Those who guard the realm of the symbolic or the dominant discourse impose meaning on (and construct meaning for) those at the borders of the discursive community. They who are relegated to the margins are refused direct access to self-definition. (117)

Rochester renamed Antoinette as Bertha because he liked that name. She dissents, 'Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name' (Rhys 94). Antoinette's clamor went unanswered. She was objectified, 'her face blank, no expression at all' (Rhys 107). She was displaced from her native place and shifted to England where she had anticipated solace rather it further expunged her identity. She was confined in the third floor of Thornfield hall. Rochester desires to possess Bertha and her body in his own terms and frequently refers her as doll rendering her inanimate.

It is clear from the text that neither Annette nor Antoinette was mad rather they were driven to insanity by the contemporary societal circumstances. And no insanity is ever cured through incarceration. People are confined to prevent any scandal as Michel Foucault has very clearly stated in his seminal work *Madness and Civilization*. And in this confinement, mad people were also dehumanized and given 'animalistic monstrous attitudes' (Foucault 69). The same can be seen in the treatment of Bertha in *Jane Eyre* where she 'snarls and grovels like a dog quarrelling' (Eyre 248). Antoinette ultimately attains her freedom when she sets the house on fire and immolates herself with it. Many feminist critics have perceived this act to be anti-climactic defeating the purpose of being emancipated from the rigid hegemonic institution of

patriarchy. But it is this act that liberates Antoinette. Foucault clearly deconstructs the manifestations of madness as follows:

We have now got in the habit of perceiving in madness a fall into determinism where all forms of liberty are gradually suppressed; madness shows us nothing more than the natural constants of a determinism, with the sequences of its causes, and the discursive movement of its forms; for madness threatens modern man only with that return to the bleak world of beasts and things, to their fettered freedom. It is not on this horizon of *nature* that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries recognized madness, but against a background of *Unreason*; madness did not disclose a mechanism, but revealed a liberty raging in the monstrous forms of animality. (83)

One may question the cause of Rochester's domination. Along with Antoinette's dead father, Rochester's father is another absent patriarch. They taught their children to perform under the immense weight of patriarchy. Despite Rochester's father being absent, he has been mentioned in the narrative but Rochester's mother is unheard of. If we extend Iris Marion Young's argument where she contradicts Nancy Chodorow we don't simply see mother as the nurturer but in Rochester it is the father who is the nurturer. His father being a patriarch, Rochester assimilates the same in his identity formation resulting in the oppression of Antoinette. He appears to prove himself to his father, he being the younger son and his father favoring his elder one. So he is sent off to Coulibri to marry a rich woman and fetch her property. He somehow succeeds in this endeavor. This analysis based on psychology shows a distant relation that Rochester shares with his father much like Antoinette's with her mother. Coulibri is an alien environment for him. It takes time for him to conform. He considers Coulibri, Antoinette, Christophine and everyone there as the other thereby imposing his colonial and patriarchal authority. Mean while, the newness of the place creates a menacing presence for him. He divulges,

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.

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)

Rochester expected Antoinette to conform to the Victorian ideals like meekness and submissiveness. But she came with an aura of her own wilderness. She refused to be categorized. To overcome this, he tries to dominate Antoinette by driving her mad. He also repudiates Christophine's suggestion to Antoinette in separating herself from Rochester and starts her life anew. Rather he asserts his ownership on his wife and all her belongings. Rochester seemed intimidated by his wife's physical presence, 'long, sad, dark alien eyes' which did not seem to blink (Rhys 40). He also felt inferior by the intelligent presence of Amelie that he looked away. He asserted sexual dominance over Antoinette. He watched her die many times, in a sexual way predicated by him. He seems low in self esteem. He is not prepared to hear the truth from Antoinette and breaks her off mid way which enrages her. He confesses his hatred:

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 its secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and its 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 111).

While Brontë had suppressed the myriad voices emphasizing only few, Rhys places the marginal in the centre stage. Besides Antoinette, Christophine's story also does not go unheeded. She held the authority over her own life. She was a wedding present from Annette's husband to her. Christophine stayed with her because 'she wanted to stay' (Rhys 8). Among the many women characters that we find in the text, we come across Christophine as the most undaunting and independent one. With no one to look after her, and no one she would look after she acts according to her will. Her presence calms Antoinette. Rochester specifically seems intimidated by her presence in their honeymoon house. When she prepares to leave the honeymoon house and Antoinette is distressed, she calms her saying 'Women must have spunks to live in this wicked world' (Rhys 63). She seems to know the way of the world under the manifolds of patriarchy and the need for women to fight for themselves. She believes in keeping her own

money. Even Rochester confesses that he found a fighter in her. Christophine could have been doubly marginalized- on account of her gender and class- a woman servant. Yet, she empowers herself through her beliefs.

The caged parrot and Antoinette run parallel to each other in the text. Both of them were confounded with their identities. While the parrot's wings were clipped by Mr. Mason and it was ultimately charred in the fire in Coulibri, similarly Antoinette was confined in Thornfield hall deprived of her basic rights. Unfortunately, she also lost her life struggling in the fire, in a similar curbed state. As a treatment to the insanity, incarceration is the sought after treatment. This results in her taking up the drastic step of setting the house on fire after she dreams the same. As Gilbert and Gubar have pointed out, Bertha is the 'truest and the darkest double of Jane' (359-60).

Jane's repressed sexuality and her desires get expressed through the actions of Bertha. A similar kind of confinement is seen in *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman where the narrator-protagonist is incarcerated for post partum depression, dissuaded from reading, writing and even creative thinking. Consequently, she observes patterns on the wall, calling out to her. She reaches a stage where she scraps off the wallpaper. On seeing her in a fit of madness, her husband swoons and she crawls over him, proclaiming her triumph against the patriarchal society. Germaine Greer sardonically says 'psychologists cannot fix the world, so they fix women' (90). Elaine Showalter joins the league where she critiques the treatment i.e. confinement as a 'sinister parody of the idealized Victorian femininity: inertia, privatization, narcissism and dependency' (274).

Edward Said suggests in *Culture and Imperialism* that classic realist fiction develops in Europe in the nineteenth century because of the 'power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging', is a way of asserting cultural superiority (qtd. in Smith xvii). Blocking Antoinette's narrative was the way of Rochester proclaiming his masculinity. Adrienne Rich writes in her classic essay, 'Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. . . . We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us' (Rich 35). Jean Rhys has successfully looked back at Bertha, to create a story of her survival.

Wide Sargasso Sea enables us to perceive Antoinette and not Bertha. It is necessary to critique the institutions that confine one's identity and stifle them. Antoinette was doubly marginalized- first because of her gender and second because of her race. Rhys constructs an identity for her and not just subscribe to her character as a 'paper tiger lunatic'. The tyranny of patriarchy was enforced upon Annette as well as Antoinette. The motif of fire was used to challenge this authority in both the cases. We can conclude Antoinette was driven to insanity as she was rejected by everyone she felt close to- mother, family, Rochester. She was alienated and confined when ruthlessly taken away from her nativity. This makes one question was Rochester mad in indulging himself in these activities.

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