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Female Island: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract:
Two leading articles of feminist hue – "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) and "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981) – by two seminal figures, Hélène Cixous and Elaine Showalter respectively, grant a new look at Jean Rhys's novel Wide Sargasso Sea. Two main themes that come to the fore from these two articles with reference to Rhys's novel are the male-dominated female zone and the importance of female writing for women. Both critics mention the strong hold of patriarchy on women, which is quite obvious in Antoinette's condition in Rhys's novel. Next, both Cixous and Showalter claim that while men see the female domain as a dark space, women should stick to their female domain and express themselves through writing. And this is what Rhys does in her novel; she gives a voice to the mad woman in the attic, Antoinette, who has been put there and tagged mad by her husband. By exploring the similarities between feminist criticism in Cixous's and Showalter's articles and Rhys's novel, this study aims to show that although Wide Sargasso Sea is a revolutionary novel with its ability to give the mad woman back her individuality, it is not strong enough to create a world where this woman can experience her individuality.

Introduction

With the development of feminist criticism, literature has attained a new debate; literary works have acquired a new dimension, the dimension of a new voice. Feminist criticism acquired a new dimension in the 20th century when such eminent writers and critics as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and many others produced strident texts. The works of these seminal figures provided a framework, albeit quite flexible, for feminist criticism. Despite the fact that

there were always works written by women, after the feminist critical texts from different eras, these works started to be observed from a very different angle. Feminist critics also paved the way for a different way of reading works by men. This study will outline an analysis of feminist criticism by Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) and by Elaine Showalter in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981) and analyse Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the light of these articles.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a prequel of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in terms of content as it gives voice to Rochester's mad wife in the attic from Brontë's novel. As a result, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the voice of the suppressed in *Jane Eyre*, a novel produced in an era when feminist criticism had not reached its present condition. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a story about an Englishman – whose name is not mentioned in the novel[1] – who comes to Jamaica to marry a rich, white Creole girl, Antoinette, and get her dowry. The novel is multi-voiced as it is narrated by Antoinette, her husband, and Grace Poole – Antoinette's guard in England.

Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" and Elaine Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" express critics' concerns with reference to women's condition in a male-dominated world. These two seminal articles help to bring forth two main themes according to which this study will develop and according to which Rhys's novel will be analysed: women's general condition in a male world and their function in this environment, and the urgent necessity to develop their ability to express their feelings and emotions with reference to what they experience in a world governed by male authority.

These two articles, as well as many more, constitute an academic depiction of women's experience. Based on real and multiple female lives, these articles create a solid background that illuminates every part of female multiplicity and difference while at the same time they illuminate a way how to comprehend such novels as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Of course, it is impossible to limit these articles by these explanations. It is also impossible to limit the novel by these articles. However, it is possible to maintain that what Cixous and Showalter try to express in their articles is artistically depicted by Jean Rhys in her novel in the example of Antoinette's life. Rhys's novel is a sad example of women's inability to escape a male-dominated existence. Through her art Rhys depicts

that women cannot escape from patriarchy in the strong sense of the word. There is always that feeling of doom created by the presence of ubiquitous male-oriented dominance.

Male-dominated realm and women's condition

First, female nature as discussed in Cixous's and Showalter's articles and as Rhys portrays in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is always suppressed and women are taught how to behave and exist by male-dominated authorities. As Cixous states, men always dominated women and provided them with norms and rules:

> [Women have been]. . . confined to the narrow room in which they've been given a deadly brain-washing. . . . As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so we have internalised this horror of the dark. (1976, pp. 877-878)

Women were first taught to think that they represent darkness – which stems from the binary opposition of dark and light where the latter is represented by the authority – and then to be afraid of themselves and of their darkness. To be more concise, women have been defined by men. Of course, the term "Africa" in the quotation above does not convey any kind of territorial or continental meaning although it symbolizes the idea of "otherness". Africa and blackness in this extract stand for women's forced positioning in the periphery of existence, outside of the centre.

Showalter discusses similar limitations that women experience. These are women's limits in terms of language. "[W]omen have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocution" (Showalter 1994, p. 60). This silence stands for the darkness Cixous mentions. Men decide on how much women can speak out which actually means how much light they will get. As a result, as Cixous states, a woman cannot make herself understood because she does not comply with the standards of male discourse; she does not have enough linguistic competence to communicate with men:

> Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away – that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression

> it is for a woman to speak – even just open her mouth – in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine. (1976, pp. 880-881)

Woman has been made to believe that she has linguistic inadequacy and precisely because of this, she feels uneasy when she speaks. And even if she tries to express something that is outside of male discourse, she is not heard because the male listener does not accept anything beyond his discourse. In relation to the idea that the language women use belongs to the male world and that women are not eligible to use this language, Showalter states that it is impossible to decline the male language and the norms of the male governed world completely. She goes on to say that women are unable to free themselves from these linguistic constraints. "But we must also understand that there can be no writing or criticism totally outside of the dominant structure; no publication is fully independent from the economic and political pressures of the male-dominated society" (Showalter 1994, p. 66).This is the point that is focused on in this study. There is always that lurking impossibility for women to escape from this world where everything is marked by male authority. The hold of this authority is so strong that women cannot create their own parameters of existence and establish their own frames. As there is not any possibility of an escape from the language provided by the patriarchal world, there is not any possibility of making women feel secure in this world.

Rhys's novel is a portrayal of a woman who has become a construct in the male universe. What is more, this woman, Antoinette, is the symbol of her country's situation which is a dark continent for the Europeans and is being changed into the one that can fit to English standards. "Antoinette is, like her island, 'colonised', her independence and autonomy subsumed to British culture and to British law" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 193). Both the island and Antoinette are the victims of the ideology that constitutes the basis for patriarchy. According to this ideology everything that is outside it should be changed and colonised. So Antoinette is doomed to be colonised. Although Antoinette is in her own country she is not safe. She is threatened in her hometown just because her family stands out among the others; her family owned slaves in the past and the ex-slaves constitute the main population of the place. In this regard Antoinette states: "The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother" (Rhys, 2000, p. 5). Her mother is the representative of the

slave-owner class. Antoinette's personality is formed as a result of her and her mother's estrangement from the rest of society. She has grown up under the pressure of her mother's fear of isolation. Antoinette's mother pronounces these words when she thinks about her being isolated from the others in Jamaica: "now what will become of us?" (ibid., p. 6).She says it when she loses her only friend, Mr Luttrell. Obviously, her mother feels the urgency of belonging to somebody, of the inability to exist as an independent individual. Her mother's vulnerability in her own country passes down to Antoinette and the latter feels danger; it becomes obvious through her dreams: "I dreamed I was walking in the forest. Not alone. Someone who hated me was with me, out of sight" (ibid., p. 11). Although Antoinette tries to soothe herself by appreciating a familiar domestic setting that could protect her from any danger, later on when her brother dies at home, she understands that her home is not safe enough. When Antoinette's mother marries, Antoinette tries to feel secure by having an English style of life: "I was glad to be like an English girl" (ibid., p. 17). She thinks that being English can protect her; yet, it turns out to be precisely the opposite. Her mother's belief in the protection that can be established after her marriage to Mr Mason is shattered because the latter wishes to stay at Coulibri, the estate where the family lives and which has become utterly dangerous for them. The ironic belief in Mr Mason's ability to protect the family proves to be false as Antoinette and her mother lose their brother and son, Pierre, in a fire that is started by local people (ibid., p. 22). Her mother's fears about the local people and her desire to protect her children are not heard by her husband, who insists on his own opinion up to the end. Antoinette's mother, eventually, is depicted as an insane woman who is unable to protect even her body from various attacks and harassment (ibid., p. 27).

Antoinette's life is replete with incidents that formulate the fundamental part of her broken and weak psychological background – a background that is constructed on the idea that a woman cannot be safe even in her own home. From the experience with her mother, Antoinette sees that a single woman's condition in this country does not promise anything positive. However, she also sees that even if a woman has a man, a British man, beside her, nothing changes. Still, when Antoinette is in a convent, she is taught that a woman should always be with a man: "The saints we hear about were all very beautiful and wealthy. All were loved by rich and handsome young men" (ibid., p. 30). Antoinette

grows up in an atmosphere where young girls want to look like the European women whom they see in the convent where Antoinette stays for a while: “Please, Helene, tell me how you do your hair, because when I grow up I want mine to look like yours” (ibid.). There is a tendency among young girls to be like European women in order to be beautiful and strong. However, it does not work to protect them in their environment. On the contrary, the person who harms Antoinette the most is an Englishman.

Even though Antoinette learns that women should have men beside them in order to be protected, she feels danger when she is driven into marriage. Her stepfather finds an English husband for her and when he tries to tell Antoinette about it, she feels it in a negative way: “a feeling of dismay, sadness, loss, almost choked me” (ibid., p. 33). She even resents the girls who stay in the convent after she leaves it: “They are safe” (ibid., p. 34). Obviously, Antoinette feels that something dangerous is awaiting her in the future, in her marriage. This is something that precisely comes from an English man, her stepfather. Interestingly, when her stepfather introduces the subject of an English friend who is going to stay with them for a short time, Antoinette has a dream about the forest and an unfamiliar person in the forest: “It is still night and I am walking towards the forest. . . . following the man . . . sick with fear . . . his face black with hatred” (ibid., p. 34). It is precisely the same dream that she had when she was a child and when she felt that her mother was afraid of something. In short, Antoinette becomes a woman whose individual features fail to reveal their specific hue due to the fact that her psychology is formulated by her mother’s fears, English male figures’ authority, and her own fears.

After her marriage to Rochester nothing changes in Antoinette’s life regarding her mental imprisonment by male-oriented authority. She continues to live according to the patriarchal dictates. Indeed, even her name is renewed according to the wishes of her husband. “Married against her will, deprived by her husband of even her Christian name as well as her fortune . . . Antoinette . . . emerges as the victim of a patriarchal plot devised by fathers and sons” (Howells, 1991, p. 108). Mr Mason, who involuntarily is the reason for Antoinette’s mother’s death, becomes the reason for Antoinette’s demise; he introduces her to Rochester, who wants Antoinette just because of her dowry. Nobody asks her whether she wants to get married or not; after she marries, her husband gives her another name: “Bertha” (Rhys, 2000, p. 94). And this is an example of what Cixous tries

to say about women's being in the dark and what Showalter states when she says that women are silent. Antoinette's desires or wishes, feelings or opinions are ignored. Indeed, her English stepfather makes her marry to "restore Antoinette to the identity and stability of the dominant order" (Maurel, 1998, p. 134). Antoinette continues in the footsteps of her mother, who used to get married just to be under someone's control. It is obvious that by marrying an Englishman and by taking him into her country, Antoinette completely loses her self and individuality:

> In taking Rochester to the island to begin with, Antoinette has exposed what is most precious. Certainly both Antoinette and Rochester identify her with this island. It is her self, her secret self. In destroying this place for Antoinette, Rochester precipitates her madness because he has destroyed her sense of hope, of belonging, of ownership, autonomy, and ultimately her own sense of personal power. (O'Connor, 1986, p. 154)

Although Antoinette's experience on her island does not show that she is free or strong, it at least makes her believe that she belongs somewhere because she grew up there. By marrying Rochester, this weak feeling of belonging evaporates completely and she becomes Rochester's "Marionette" (Rhys, 2000, p. 99), a doll that he can control. According to Rochester's narration, Antoinette wants to be as her husband desires. Rochester hears Antoinette when she talks to the servants: "Don't put any more scent on my hair. He doesn't like it" (ibid., p. 48). From Rochester's narration it is seen that Antoinette wants to become Rochester's slave when he hears her speak: "Say die and I will die. You don't believe me? Then try, try, say die and watch me die" (ibid., p. 57). Seemingly, Rochester wants to see Antoinette as his slave. However, in Rochester's narration there are glimpses of Antoinette's protest against Rochester's strength, especially when she says: "You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too" (ibid., p. 94). From what Rochester narrates the reader sees that it is difficult for Antoinette to submit herself to him and she cannot stand it anymore: "But I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate" (Rhys 2000, p. 94). Rochester devastates Antoinette's sense of belonging to her island. However, throughout the novel, there is always that fear of inability to subjugate Antoinette that the Englishman feels. Antoinette's body is his, but her soul is hidden from him. No matter how hard Rochester tries to make Antoinette his object, he feels that he always fails: "she

was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did . . . I was certain that nothing I said made much difference. . . . her fixed ideas would never change" (ibid., p. 58). Rochester thinks he is not powerful enough to command Antoinette's mind or to change her way of thinking.

Another woman whom Rochester takes under control is Christophine who is Antoinette's black servant and who practices obeah.[2] Although Christophine's obeah can easily frighten any foreigner in the territory, Rochester knows the ways how to overcome her. He threatens Christophine by calling the police because he knows that she is afraid of the police; she admits it: "that's something I don't like" (Rhys, 2000, p. 98). When Christophine tries to protect Antoinette's rights in her house, Rochester warns the black woman: "Then I will have the police up, I warn you. There must be some law and order even in this God-forsaken island" (ibid., p. 103). Both characters practise their own versions of power and strike each other. Yet, Rochester is the winner because Christophine's country is ruled by European standards. He shows her that she is Africa, as it is depicted in Cixous's ideas; a woman, and a black woman, represents the darkness that the male authority tries to define and illuminate. "Rochester cannot tolerate Christophine's view which challenges those assumptions on which his own superiority is based. In opposition to her black magic he invokes the white magic of the law against her, and Christophine walks out of the novel" (Howells, 1991, p. 199). She does not appear as Antoinette's supporter anymore although in Antoinette's narration she is seen as an image of strength and emotional support. Thus, Antoinette loses her supporter and Rochester progresses steadily towards victory over Antoinette in her own land. "As always, the cold and rational Englishman crushes the world of feeling – that is, the world of the heroine – beneath his feet" (Angier, 1990, p. 558). Although Rochester cannot eliminate the warm feelings between Antoinette and Christophine, he stops the communication between them; it is the communication that actually makes Antoinette strong.

In Cixous's article laughter can be heard; it is laughter which is a reaction to male dominance. Cixous tries to explain female negative reaction to any kind of endeavour to constrain women by highlighting female laughter – a symbolic act of fighting against constraints – in the title of her article. Cixous, then, states that a woman writes "in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break

up the 'truth' with laughter" (Cixous, 1976, p. 888). The laughter in Cixous's title is not remote from Nietzschean laughter, which "belongs among the means and necessities of the preservation of the species." (Nietzsche, 1974, 1)[3] Nietzschean laughter, in this sense, is the means to overcome attacks from those who try to impose authority on others. This laughter is the way to mock that authority and the way to preserve oneself in the survival in life where the strong try to overpower the weak. Obviously, Nietzsche was not a feminist; yet, he struggled against strict categorizations and conventions. Laughter mentioned in Bakhtin's discussions on carnival is also an important act that justifies the idea that laughter is a strong indicator of fighting against strict norms. For Bakhtin, laughter is an indispensable element of "the *life of the carnival square,* [which is] free and unrestricted" (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 129-130). Apparently, laughter is a revolutionary act in the sense that it depicts the performer's resistance to obey the rules. Indeed, being aware of women's condition in a male-dominated world and trying to express concerns in this regard is a kind of revolutionary act and resistance against particular norms. As Habib underlines, feminism is resistance that laughs:

> Feminism thus advocates a principled recalcitrance to definition, a conceptual fluidity and openness which laughs in the face of tyrannizing attempts to fix it as just one more category to be subsumed by the vast historical catalogue of male-generated concepts. (2005, p. 668)

Oppression and authority invoke a sense of resistance in Rhys's novel. Christophine is often seen laughing in the face of Rochester. Indeed, Christophine is quite an independent character in the novel. She is against marriage and she is strong because she practises magic. When she talks to Rochester, who tries to overpower her, she "laughed – a hearty merry laugh" (Rhys, 2000, p. 97). It is the laughter of mockery and belittling. Although Christophine is aware of Rochester's strength in subjugating others, she does not hesitate to laugh at him. Actually, Rochester admits being "hypnotized" (ibid., p. 101) when he talks to Christophine. Christophine laughs again when Rochester states that he regrets coming to this island (ibid., p. 104). She knows that he does not like the place because he feels alienated and afraid, although he is a representative of the dominant entity. Christophine feels his fear and Rochester sees it through her laughter. As a result, he wants to silence her. At the end of his narration Rochester accepts that he "disliked their

laughter" (ibid., p. 111).

Although the island is Antoinette's domain and although she tries to feel belonging to this place, the novel shows that Antoinette can be free and protected neither in childhood nor in adulthood when she tries to create her future with her husband. The novel shows that the world surrounding a woman is always harmful to her because of male-oriented authority. Still, there are some faint possibilities to challenge such a condition for women; it is laughter that has the potential to sabotage male belief in their ubiquitous power over women.

Female domain and writing

The second main them that comes to the fore when these two articles are discussed is the idea of the necessity of women's writing about themselves; women should show that the female domain is precisely the place where women belong and a place that should not be feared. Moreover, women should develop ways to write from this female domain in order to express it. In this way, male discourse about women, the female domain and female nature will be challenged. Both Cixous and Showalter mention that the world of women is depicted as a realm which is dark and unexplored by men. Cixous states it is "still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable" (Cixous, 1976, pp. 884-885). So, the female world is not known to men because women are silent. Even the female body has been seen as an "uncanny stranger" (ibid., p. 880), which should be hidden.

The setting of Rhys's novel, which symbolizes Antoinette's world, is an example of a dark female world. *Wide Sargasso Sea* mainly takes place in the Caribbean and when the landscape is described by Rochester it is wild, dark and menacing. He says: "I woke next morning in the green-yellow light, feeling uneasy as though someone were watching me" (Rhys, 2000, p. 51). Rochester does not feel safe in this place because he does not know it. "Granbois alternately is a hostile, menacing presence for 'Rochester' or a friendly, benevolent one for Antoinette" (Maurel, 1998, p. 151).The Jamaican setting becomes more hostile for Rochester when he contemplates the difference between England and Jamaica. On this island everything seems strange and excessive to him: "Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much

green" (Rhys, 2000, p. 42). Rochester is quite uncomfortable in Antoinette's place because he has never experienced it before; it is an unexplored island for him. Even Antoinette is not an easy figure to see through. She becomes the symbol of her island. Her husband cannot solve her mystery: "Antoinette remains a stranger, eluding him as she had always done. Even in exile she cannot be accommodated or effectively imprisoned" (Howells, 1991, p. 109). Both Antoinette and her island remain a mystery for Rochester.

Rochester finds it impossible to set his norms in this wild place. And because he is afraid of the uncertainty of Antoinette's environment, he escapes any profound feelings towards his wife. "For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst" (Rhys, 2000, p. 111). He cannot give her a frame because she is unexplainable to him:

> Rochester could have loved Antoinette*:* what stopped him was nothing simply mean or cold, but rather fear. Fear of passion, and of the loss of control and independence which that would unleash; fear of being frowned in Antoinette's world of boundless 'black' self-surrender. To that extent his fear is 'English' and opposed to the Jean Rhys heroine's. (Angier, 1990, p. 552)

Rochester is afraid of plunging into utter desire and love because these feelings are also unexplainable. He tries to be on the side of solid facts and logic, something that he can easily put into words. Although Antoinette's female domain is menacing to Rochester, it does not prevent him from harming Antoinette. In other words, a woman is not safe even in her own domain. On the contrary, just because Rochester is afraid of Antoinette's island, he projects his desire to overcome this fear by putting more pressure on Antoinette. When Christophine asks Rochester to leave Antoinette alone so that she can marry someone else and be happy, Rochester becomes angry with this idea: "A pang of rage and jealousy shot through me then" (Rhys, 2000, p. 102). By having Antoinette all to himself, he makes sure he is victorious over all the island.

The women's domain, exemplified by Rhys's novel in this study, should be expressed through writing according to Cixous and Showalter. In this regard, Showalter generates the term "gynocritics" which means the study of women's writing:

> [W]omen as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of

> female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition. (Showalter, 1994, pp. 53, 55)

Showalter mentions Cixous's idea of *ecriture feminine:* "the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text" (ibid., p. 55). She thinks it is a "Utopian possibility rather than a literary practice" (ibid., p. 55) although she accepts its importance for the future because it "provides a way of talking about women's writing which reasserts the *value* of the feminine" (ibid., p. 56). What Showalter offers is a model based on culture of women. She says that "women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space" (ibid., p. 63). When Showalter concludes her article she states that an analysis of female writing does not end up at a discovery of "the serenely undifferentiated universality of texts but the tumultuous and intriguing wilderness of difference itself" (ibid., p. 69). So she focuses on the impossibility of finding a unified way to study female writing.

Cixous starts her article by saying that "woman must write her self" (Cixous 1976, p. 875). She then goes on to add that a "woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, . . . might exclaim: I, too, overflow" (ibid., p. 876). This statement can be said to be a precursor to Showalter's female cultural writing as a type of writing that goes from one woman to another. Consequently, these women writers create a culture of female writing. Cixous claims that it is precisely the act of writing that can change everything. It is "*the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (ibid. p. 879). For Cixous, women's writing let them out of the places where they had been confined by men. "Now women return from afar, . . . from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond 'culture'" (ibid., p. 877). Cixous invites women to write through the body; it is the realm through which women can address the world. "Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (ibid., p. 880).Writing through the body is the means to unearth the women's world which was hidden and suppressed inside a woman's mind. Writing with the body means subverting and challenging the patriarchy. Body has always been repressed by patriarchal society. As Habib analyses Cixous's article:

> To write with the body implies facilitating a return of the repressed,

> a resurrection of that which has been subordinated and treated as secondary, as dirty, as weighing us down and preventing us from rising to the perception of higher truths. (2005, p. 704)

In this sense, it is writing through which a woman's individuality can be understood rather than condemned as mad and hysteric.

Wide Sargasso Sea is the voice of the mad woman in Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. The novel is "Jean Rhys's metaphorical inscription of a pre-existing discourse which compels a woman's text, turning it into an echo-chamber" (Maurel, 1998, p. 129). The novel is a loud pronouncement of the idea that women have their own interpretation of existence, their being in life. The novelist demystifies the mystery behind Brontë's novel. While in Brontë's novel the mad woman in the attic is only "it", in Rhys's novel, she is the narrator. What Rhys does is to give voice to the woman to cry out that this is not madness and let the woman express herself and explain what happens inside her. Maurel states: "Jean Rhys replaces the pronoun 'it' which so often refers to Bertha in *Jane Eyre* with a more human 'she' and even with an 'I', since she promotes the grovelling creature, producing what Jane calls 'oral oddities', to the status of a speaking subject" (ibid., p. 144).

The voice of the mad woman in the attic explains that she is not mad or if she is mad, it is because she was driven to madness by a male-oriented existence. In one of her letters, Rhys talks about it:

> The Creole in Charlotte Bronte's novel is a lay figure – repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive which does. She's necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls and laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry – off stage. For me (and for you I hope) she must be right on stage. (ibid., p. 145)

The writer wants to listen to her story about her marriage and her feelings about Rochester, which, actually, has always been the question in many readers' minds when they read Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. From Antoinette's narration the reader can see the events from the mad woman's point of view.

The third part of the novel is narrated by Antoinette who is kept in a locked room in England because she is mad. However, it becomes questionable whether she is really mad or not.

> 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 2000, p. 117)

Antoinette's monologue raises doubts in the reader's mind about her madness. Is she really mad as her husband describes her? According to her husband's narration: "She'll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would – or could" (ibid., p. 106). Rochester's description of her is exaggerated whereas Antoinette's narration is full of feelings and tenderness. She remembers her past, her unhappy childhood. Moreover, she perfectly understands that she is being deprived of everything and that the main enemy is her husband. Because she loses everything and is kept in a place which is far away from her native land, she cannot accommodate herself there. She cannot believe that she is in England: "They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them" (ibid., p. 117). She does not want to believe that the England of her dreams is the place where she is imprisoned. In other words, the place about which she used to have tender dreams turns to be the worst place for her. So, even Antoinette's favourite dreams tend to haunt Antoinette's freedom.

Antoinette's poetic language drives the reader into a dream world. She describes dreams that reveal her fears related to her past and future. She sees this dream before she gets married:

> Again I have left the house at Coulibri. . . I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself; if anyone were to save me, I would refuse. . . . We are no longer in the forest but in an enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall and the trees are different trees. I do not know them. There are steps leading upwards. (Rhys 2000, p. 34)

Although it is a dream, it is identical to Antoinette's real life, her husband, and the house where she is imprisoned by her husband. Rhys fuses dream and reality. Maurel states that such a technique of fusing two worlds serves the writer:

> In Jean Rhys's practice, the dialogue between fantasy and plausibility is exacerbated in order to subvert the patriarchal categorisation of the real and also to palliate what consensual taxonomies fail to apprehend: it gives utterance to all that is not said, to all that is unsayable within the dominant order, to all that it registers only as absence. . . Like any fantastic text, Wide Sargasso Sea creates 'epistemological uncertainty', uncertainty of vision and

> interpretation, resisting fixity and stable identifications. (1998, pp. 155-156)

Antoinette's narration of her dreams makes her challenge male authority and a truth-focused existence based on logic. She tries to accentuate the senses of the female domain; they are senses that are unexplainable to men.

Antoinette's narration, which is heard from an attic room in England, raises doubts about Rochester's narration. From the first part of her narration it becomes obvious that she does not want to belong to him: "I give you all I have freely . . . and I will not trouble you again if you will let me go" (Rhys 2000, p. 116). This is a challenge to Rochester's narration about Antoinette's desire to die for him. Moreover, there is an interesting detail in her narration about the drink that Grace Poole drinks and Antoinette tries to drink. In his narration, Rochester claims that Antoinette likes drinking. However, in Antoinette's narration, she does not like the drink: "The first time I did this I wanted to spit it out but managed to swallow it" (ibid., p. 116). Obviously, she is not used to drinking. Another important point that casts doubts on Rochester's narration is Antoinette's statement about her relationship to Sandi, her stepbrother in Jamaica; it is also implied that they are lovers. Antoinette says that Rochester learns about their relationship and becomes furious about it: "Infamous daughter of an infamous mother" (ibid., p. 121). Obviously, he is jealous. And this might be the reason for his strong wish to imprison her in England. Her relationship with Sandi, which is implied through Antoinette's narration, can be accepted as the refutation of Rochester's belief in her obsession with him. She describes how they kissed for the last time: "That was the life and death kiss" (ibid., p. 121). While giving Sandi's proper name, Antoinette does not say the name of her husband; she calls him "that man" (ibid., p. 120), which underlines her hatred towards him. Moreover, through Antoinette's narration it is seen how she challenges the power that imprisons her. In her dream, she tries to escape from the voice that calls her "Bertha!" (ibid., p. 123) because it is the voice that imprisons her. On her way out of her attic, she knocks all the candles down (ibid., p. 123) in order to set a fire which is "a wall of fire protecting me" (ibid.). So she embraces fire in order to escape imprisonment. Although this is just a dream, in the last paragraph of the novel she says that she knows what she has to do (ibid., p. 124): jump to her death. And this is the only choice that Antoinette has to protest against the

patriarchy that stole her subjectivity and freedom.

Furthermore, the novel depicts different stories of women by highlighting the idea that the female domain is not a mystery; on the contrary, it is replete with real stories and events. Firstly, there is Christophine, a woman who practises obeah, but who has her own specific features and fears. Although she tries to challenge Rochester, she proves to be weak when she encounters a power that she cannot overcome, such as the police. Even in Antoinette's narration she gradually loses her power: "No one spoke of her now that Christophine had left us to live with her son" (ibid., p. 31). Even Christophine, a strong and independent woman, is depicted as one who starts to depend on a man. In other words, Christophine is a black woman, but she is not the darkness that the common male discourse insists on when describing women. Next, there is the story of Antoinette's mother and her life that ends in madness. Despite the fact that for Rochester, Antoinette's mother is simply a mad woman, through her story it becomes evident that her madness is the result of her experiences. She loses her child because her husband does not believe in the danger awaiting them on this island: "There is no reason to be alarmed" (Rhys 2000, p. 19). And right after he says it, they find the dead body of Antoinette's little brother. It becomes obvious that a woman is not free enough even to protect her children. The depiction of these experiences is what Cixous and Showalter call female writing; it is making her story visible to everybody in order to illuminate a woman's life.

In other words, Rhys portrays the Caribbean country as a normal place where everybody experiences something and undergoes the consequences. Howells says:

> Caribbean history is full of disrupted stories and it is through her narrative recording of its gaps and silences as much as through its vanished voices that Rhys replaces the threatening other world on the periphery of Bronte's vision with a community that is 'possible, convincing.' (1991, p. 109)

Rhys, in other words, provides explanations for various behaviours and attitudes that seem to be unexplainable by the male authority. What Rhys wanted to do by giving voice to this mystery in Brontë's novel is to show women who are suppressed by ideological and social norms:

> In examining her own life, in writing her own text, and in allowing the primacy of her heroine-narrator's text to dictate its relation to the dominant text, Rhys created a novel that demonstrates one kind of

> appropriate feminine aesthetic. The whole of Wide Sargasso Sea can be seen to complete the 'woman's sentence' that, more than fifty years ago, Virginia Woolf despaired of finding. (Harrison 1988, p. 130)

Indeed, Rhys builds on Woolf's idea of female writing through which it becomes possible to unveil everything that has been hidden for centuries.

The ending of the novel is especially symbolical of women writing. After Antoinette sees her last dream in which she sets fire to the house, she awakes and waits for Grace to fall asleep:

> I waited a long time after I heard her snore, then I got up, took the keys and unlocked the door. I was outside holding my candle. Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage. (Rhys 2000, p. 124)

Antoinette's waiting for Grace's sleep can be interpreted as women's patience in the face of patriarchy. The candle stands for women's writing and freedom which firstly was forbidden and weak because of the draught of authority. Antoinette's shielding the flame is her individual struggle to attain freedom which is at the end of a dark passage. So what the novel shows is the weak light that women must endure when they try to achieve freedom; it is their female writing. However, the novel ends in the dark passage. The reader cannot see Antoinette's coming out of the passage, which, indeed, is the main idea of the novel. In other words, Rhys is not as enthusiastic about women's emancipation as Cixous and Showalter are.

In short, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* paints an image of a female island that is under male dominance and gives voice to the suppressed. Yet, what this study aimed to underline is the fact that despite some elements in the novel that challenge authority and depict powerful feminist outbursts, the novel focuses on the impossibility of women's complete freedom in a world where there is still the dominance of the patriarchy. The novel returns the mad woman in the attic her individuality, but it cannot provide her with an environment in which she can experience it – just as Showalter claims that it is impossible to eliminate patriarchal dominance.

Endnotes:

[1] He is usually called Rochester because of Brontë's novel.
[2] Obeah is a religious folk practice originated in Africa; obeah was seen by Europeans as superstition, witchcraft and poison but by the slaves and their descendants as a source of healing and religious belief.
[3] The numbers in Nietzsche's work refer to the section numbers, not page numbers.

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