Madwoman as the Imprisoned Other: Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* in Light of French Feminist and Anglo-American Feminist Literary Theories

Marja-Liisa Helenius
University of Helsinki, 2003

‘There is always the other side, always.’ (Rhys 99)

Introduction

Jean Rhys, who was born to a Welsh father and a white Creole mother, spent her childhood in the Caribbean islands and later moved to England. Her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which she wrote in 1966, is the story of the madwoman in Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason – or rather the story of Antoinette Cosway, the young Creole heiress from Jamaica, before she became Bertha Mason. Rhys was haunted by the character of the madwoman in Brontë’s novel, and so she decided to write her life (Wyndham 3-6). The novel has undeniable links with colonial context, since the protagonist is discarded by both the black Caribbean as well as the white English societies and thus forced to see herself as ‘the other’ in terms of race.

However, Antoinette is a character ‘othered’ also in terms of her gender, and thus she is doubly marginalized. *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be seen as a strongly feminist text, for Jean Rhys tries to justify Antoinette’s behaviour and discover why she became the appalling, beastly madwoman she appears to be in *Jane Eyre*. Rhys tells the story of Antoinette – or Bertha – from a woman’s point of view, defending her against the prejudices of the male-centered world, where a woman who does not live according to the standards set for her is deemed mad.

Hélène Cixous, a significant theorist representing the French feminist movement of literary criticism, claimed that women should create their own style of writing, *écriture féminine* (Selden 143), embracing an utterly feminine role. *Wide Sargasso Sea* seems like an undeniable specimen of this kind of feminine writing. However, features from the Anglo-American feminist theory, represented by such critics as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, can also be seen in the novel. Gilbert and Gubar claim that women authors break the female stereotypes by seemingly submitting to them but simultaneously converting them. It can be argued that, though Cixous’s French feminist approach and Gilbert’s and Gubar’s Anglo-American view both emphasise that women must break the silence by writing and thus liberating themselves from the prisons built by men, the two critical movements also differ in many ways and partly contradict each others’ arguments. Where Cixous celebrates femininity, Gilbert and Gubar see feminine writing and submissive female characters as a mask, a way of subverting the roles that men and patriarchal conventions have imposed on them. *Wide Sargasso Sea* abides to the ideas of French feminism in its poetic, liberated and emotional style and language and in its emphasis on the feminine experience, but it can also be associated with Anglo-American criticism and read as a work that criticises and converts patriarchal ideals and stereotypes.

It is evident that Antoinette is not only ‘the other’ in terms of race, but also in terms of being ‘the Other’ to the man, using the expression of the founding French feminist
Simone de Beauvoir (Selden 137). In the novel, Antoinette defines herself through Edward Rochester, the British man she was almost forced into marrying, after everyone else has abandoned her. In Jane Eyre, Mr Rochester was seen as the victim, a man who had suffered because of the burden of a mad wife, but in Wide Sargasso Sea it is Antoinette who is the real victim, even though Rochester is not a simply evil character, either. In the beginning, Rochester wants to be good to his wife, but because he does not understand her, her culture or her powerful sexuality, he ends up fearing and then hating her. Antoinette gives herself to him completely, though she is afraid, and thus it seems to be Rochester’s rejection that finally destroys her and drives her into insanity. As Carole Angier states in her book on Jean Rhys, Rochester could have loved Antoinette, but he let his fear and weakness control him (Angier 552). Furthermore, being a man and thus ‘the One’ in power, he uses this power to crush Antoinette with his hate, to turn her into ‘the Other’.

Although the author does not make Rochester into a stereotypical villain, but rather gives the readers a chance to feel sympathy also for him by telling the middle part of the three-part novel from his point of view, he is still the typical male, conventional in many ways. He has respect for traditional values such as property and personal honour, and he is rational as opposed to Antoinette’s emotional nature. Indeed, in the vast amount of imagery and symbolism in Wide Sargasso Sea, Rochester is compared to the wind, to a hurricane that breaks the tree representing Antoinette (Angier 563). More significantly, Antoinette calls Rochester ‘a Stone’ (Angier 563). Though Antoinette has a chance to refuse the marriage, the society is pressuring her into marrying. After the marriage ceremony she is basically at the mercy of her husband. All of her inheritance and possessions belong to her husband, and she must obey him. When he decides to go to England, she must follow. When the marriage starts to go wrong, the old, wicked servant Christophine tells Antoinette to leave her husband, to hide somewhere and later ask for a part of her money back. Christophine actually speaks with a voice of a very independent woman. She says: ‘A man don’t treat you good, pick up your skirt and walk out’ (Rhys 83). She also comments that marrying is a foolish thing for a woman to do. She says that though she has children, she has had no husband: ‘I keep my money. I don’t give it to no worthless man” (Rhys 83). Antoinette, however, is not strong enough to leave Rochester, because she wants him to love her. Even though she ends up passionately hating Rochester in the end for discarding her, she still lets him control her and take her to England to live in captivity in his house. She lets him kill her emotionally, without a visible fight. As Angier states, ‘the cold and rational Englishman crushes the world of feeling – that is, the world of the heroine – beneath his feet’ (Angier 558). Thus Antoinette exemplifies the victim of male dominance and female subordination.

The Unexplored and Dark Continent of Femininity: Hélène Cixous and the French Feminist Theory

Cixous’s Theory and the Elements of Ecriture Féminine in Wide Sargasso Sea

The novel Wide Sargasso Sea is filled with dreams and metaphors, with haunting and inexplicable images. Considering the prophetic dreams and the intuitions of the protagonist, as well as the allusions to voodoo magic and spirituality, it is evident that the novel goes far beyond the surface of reality. The unconscious is very clearly present in the novel, for Antoinette’s intuition and the strong feeling of destiny, of the
inevitability of life, seem to control her. The marriage of Antoinette and Rochester is doomed from the beginning, even though neither of them can consciously admit it. In the terms of the French feminist Julia Kristeva, the ‘semiotic’ aspect – the anarchic, the irrational, the unconscious stream of language that derives from the female body – controls the novel, letting the female unconscious run free (Selden 142). The rational and organised ‘symbolic’ aspect dominates in the real world – in the world governed by the Law of the Father, where preset roles for men and women are waiting for them when they enter language (Selden 141). The ‘symbolic’ aspect, where the male language prevails, is hardly visible in Wide Sargasso Sea. Even the part of the story that is told through Rochester’s eyes cannot sustain its rationality, but the mystical ‘semiotic’ stream eventually takes over, making the novel a strong example of écriture féminine.

Hélène Cixous emphasises that by this act of creating their own transcendent and poetic language that derives from the unconscious and irrational rather than from the formal and rational conscious that controls men’s writing, women will break away from the patriarchal tradition. The poetic language of Wide Sargasso Sea indeed reflects the emotions of the protagonist, and the sexuality – even the violent side of it – depicted in the novel was very daring and groundbreaking for a woman writer in the 1960s. Furthermore, Rhys presents the idea of a woman as an imprisoned victim oppressed by the standards and ideals prevailing in the patriarchal, phallogocentric society dominated by the male form of logos, language (Selden 139). Cixous writes in her essay “Utopias” that ‘woman must write woman’ (Cixous 247), encounter and embrace her gender and sexuality without being afraid or ashamed of it. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette tries to repress her feelings and gives in to the silence. After a futile attempt to explain her past, she says to her husband: ‘I wish to stay here in the dark… where I belong’ (Rhys 105). Antoinette does not dare to leave the ‘Dark Continent’, using Cixous’s term, by which she can only mean the female sexuality and the feminine side that has been repressed. Cixous states that the continent is ‘still unexplored only because we’ve been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable’ (255).

Cixous says of the silenced women: ‘Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonie revolts’ (Cixous 256). Wide Sargasso Sea is filled with dreams, silence and shadows and emotional, colourful language that bursts through the rational male voice. Antoinette begins her story with the voice of a shy young girl, frightened of the world and frightened of rejection, and her voice is then replaced and repressed by Rochester’s voice. He tells the middle part of the story from the male point of view, but his voice is shaken and towards the end it becomes more and more like Antoinette’s, unreal and confused, poetic and dreamlike. At certain points Antoinette’s voice bursts through and disrupts Rochester’s narration. As also Kathy Mezei states in her essay, Rochester loses control of his narration, and Antoinette’s thoughts and words invade his mind and his speech (Mezei 10). In the very end, Antoinette – now turned into Bertha – regains her voice, though she has lost everything else – happiness, home and sanity.

Furthermore, Cixous sees femininity as something close to nature; écriture féminine is to her ‘a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed’ (Cixous 260). Wide Sargasso Sea certainly offers plenty of nature imagery,
all of which is associated with Antoinette; she feels at home among the colourful nature of the island. She says:

The sky was dark blue through the dark green mango leaves, and I thought, ‘This is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay’. (Rhys 82)

Rochester, on the other hand, feels threatened by the untamed and colourful nature of the island. He says: ‘I had reached the forest and you cannot mistake the forest. It is hostile’ (Rhys 78), and he feels ‘lost and afraid among these enemy trees’ (Rhys 79). At several points he makes known his unease and the feeling that he does not belong there, among the forests and rivers and purple skies, but among the people in the ‘rational’ cities of England. To him the island seems like a dream, mysterious and secretive. Antoinette is a part of nature, which seems to corroborate Cixous’s theory of the woman as ‘the Dark Continent’ – dark and unexplored and thus threatening – and of the feminine consciousness as in touch and as one with nature. Even the name of the novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, alludes to the ever-changing, deep and secretive part of nature – the sea that separates Antoinette’s home island and England. Cixous writes: ‘we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves… More or less wavy sea, earth, sky’ (Cixous 260), and Antoinette indeed seems to be the sea – never belonging anywhere, but floating in between. When they come to England, she believes that they got lost at sea and arrived somewhere else. She says: ‘When I woke it was a different sea. Colder’ (144). She has left behind her beautiful home island as well as the Sargasso Sea, with its purple or green sunsets, and she feels lost.

All the elements of *écriture féminine* seem to be present in the novel: symbols of female captivation and liberation – such as the looking glass – and the flamboyant colours as well as the beautiful language. The language in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, just like Cixous’s explosive language, is liberated and mesmerising, as women themselves, for Antoinette mesmerises Rochester. Women and nature are depicted as seductive, leading men to temptation, hypnotising them. Even Chistophine’s voice hypnotises Rochester: ‘I thought, but could only listen, hypnotized, to her dark voice coming from the darkness’ (Rhys 123). Cixous’s idea of women ‘flying in the language and making it fly’ (Cixous 258) is apparent in the novel, for in her last dream, Antoinette ‘walked as though I was flying’ (Rhys 150), and when she finally jumps to her death in the dream, she felt that her hair ‘streamed out like wings’: ‘It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones’ (Rhys 152). Of course, the wind will not carry her and she will not be able to fly in reality, but is doomed to be crushed by the hard stones that symbolise the patriarchy. In her dreams and in the language, however, she always flies.

The line between dream and reality is a thin one in this novel. Antoinette does not believe that anything but the beauty of the island is real: ‘How can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?’ (Rhys 58). To her, England seems like a dream: ‘Yes a big city must be like a dream’ (Rhys 58), and when she is finally taken there, it still seems unreal: ‘It is, as I always knew, made of cardboard’ (Rhys 144). Also Rochester, to whom the beauty and mystery of the island of Jamaica seemed untrue, is mesmerised by the nature: ‘Only the magic and the dream are true – all the rest’s a lie’ (Rhys 133). Rochester comes to his senses – the hate clears his head and leaves him ‘sane’ (Rhys 136) – but he still acknowledges that Antoinette is a part of the island, and that is why he fears and hates her: ‘she belonged to the magic and the
loveliness’ (Rhys 136). Dreams are the place where Antoinette lives. Women and nature are both connected to the mystery of life – ‘the secret’ that both frightens and intrigues men, like Rochester, who thinks: ‘What I see is nothing – I want what it hides – that is not nothing’ (Rhys 64).

The Power of the Female Sexuality: ‘I will write my name in fire red’

Sexuality plays an important role in the novel, as in all of Rhys’s work. Her writing represents the period in feminism when ‘a new type of frankness about sexuality’ begins to show in women’s literature (Selden 136). The gynocritic Elaine Showalter states that in Victorian times, ‘[s]exual appetite was considered one of the chief symptoms of moral insanity in women’, and therefore she concludes that Bertha Mason was seen as suffering from ‘moral madness’ (Olaussen 60). This was mostly due to men’s desire to control and repress women’s sexuality. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester is clearly afraid of Antoinette’s sexuality, and her beauty both attracts and repels him, because it is not the kind of beauty he is used to. In the beginning, when they are riding together, he says: ‘Looking up smiling, she might have been any pretty English girl’ (Rhys 50). This obviously pleases him, because he would prefer a ‘normal’ girl, feminine in a conservative way. When Antoinette becomes mad and Rochester sees her for the first time, he ‘was too shocked to speak. His hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen’ (Rhys 114). Antoinette has become the opposite of the pretty and normal English girl she could have been.

Cixous claims that men need to be afraid of women because it arouses them, and therefore they associate ‘death and the feminine sex’ as ‘two unpresentable things’ (Cixous 255). Indeed, Rochester needs to hate Antoinette to gain his own sanity. It could be argued that men need to associate women with death in order to control them – they need to ‘kill’ them emotionally to suppress them, and that is what Rochester does to Antoinette:

‘Die then! Die!’ I watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers. In sunlight, in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight. In the long afternoons when the house was empty. Only the sun was there to keep us company. We shut him out. And why not? Very soon she was as eager for what’s called loving as I was – more lost and drowned afterwards. (Rhys 68)

As the French feminists, Rhys resists the phallocentric ideal of female sexuality (Selden 139) by describing Antoinette’s sexuality in a shockingly direct and, at times, brutal manner. Angier points out Rhys’s idea about men and love: ‘men rob love with sex’ (Angier 543). For men, sex equals love, and when Antoinette offers herself to Rochester, he can only respond with sexual desire, which turns into hate. And for that reason, emotionally he is ‘a Stone’. Antoinette is more passionate in every way, until Rochester kills her emotionally and she becomes, as in *voodoo* or *obeah*, a living dead.

Furthermore, the colours in the novel are extremely vivid and flamboyant, and they seem to be linked to the female sexuality. The colour red is one of the strongest metaphors in the novel – the colour of sexuality, passion, dreams, emotions, violence. This suggests that even though Antoinette is extremely sensitive and though one cannot see her battle on the outside, she is fighting on the inside. Cixous states that
women’s fragility is ‘equal to their incomparable intensity’ (Cixous 256), which certainly applies to Antoinette. She is extremely passionate, and there is a fire inside of her that even captivity cannot extinguish. Even at the very end, her caretaker Grace Poole says: ‘she hasn’t lost her spirit. She’s still fierce’ (Rhys 142). As a young girl in the convent, Antoinette’s favourite colour was red: ‘I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason, née Cosway’ (Rhys 34). A powerful metaphor for sexuality is the red dress that Antoinette herself loves, but which does not please Rochester, undoubtedly because it emphasises her sexuality and passion, and – in Rochester’s mind – makes her seem like a whore. Her love for the red dress, ‘the colour of fire and sunset’ (Rhys 147), is perhaps her way to rebel: ‘I took the red dress down and put it against myself. ‘Does it make me look untemperate and unchaste?’ I said.’ (148). The colour red, inevitably linked with fire, makes passion seem dangerous, something to be feared: ‘I looked at the red dress on the floor and it was as if the fire had spread across the room’ (Rhys 149). Indeed, Rochester is sexually aroused when he sees Antoinette in her white dress, because white traditionally symbolises virginity and purity and because white women should, traditionally, be modest and chaste. His passion and desire is aroused by the thought of an innocent, virginal woman – a woman Antoinette in reality is not. Antoinette changes from the virginal bride wearing a white dress into the ‘rejected scarlet woman’ in a red dress (Olaussen 67).

Angier emphasises the victimising of women through their sexuality; she says that the passion of men such as Rochester is aroused by ‘passive innocent girls, whom they can imagine, and then turn into, the sad victims of men’ (Angier 565). Rochester leads Antoinette to be locked away in his house as she saw in her prophetic dream, and she passively follows him in her white dress: ‘I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself; if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse’ (Rhys 40). As Cixous suggests, men have a need to own women, to keep them submissive and silent, for otherwise they might fly away. Rochester wants to both possess and dominate Antoinette: ‘I’ll take her in my arms, my lunactic. She’s mad but mine, mine’ (Rhys 131). The only way to do this is to crush her resistance, her hate. He says: ‘I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty’ (Rhys 135). Only by making Antoinette a victim, a powerless madwoman, can Rochester repress his own fear for her beauty and sexuality.

**Behind the Masks of the Angel and the Monster:**
**Gilbert and Gubar and the Anglo-American Point of View**

**The Face of the Monster: The Feared Double in the Looking-Glass**

The ideas of Anglo-American feminist criticism can be seen behind the fluent, transcendent, feminine style of the novel. Rhys’s effort to justify the madwoman and to make people sympathise with her seems to be an attempt to break the division between the female stereotypes ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ that the Anglo-American feminist theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar depict in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Gilbert and Gubar attempt to prove that female writers seem to conform to the standards and stereotypes set by male writers while simultaneously subverting them, and thus trying to establish their literary authority (e.g. Gilbert and Gubar 13, 72). Thus the characters in their novels may be seen, to some extent, as the author’s own – even if monstrous – double (Gilbert and Gubar 78). Gilbert and Gubar suggest that women need to ‘kill the “angel in the house”’ as well as the angel’s
double, ‘the “monster” in the house’ (17) – the stereotypes that male authors have assigned women. They go on to suggest that, in reality, female writers have rarely done this, but rather see themselves ‘through a glass darkly’ (Gilbert and Gubar 17), adopting the views and stereotypes men have created for them.

Gilbert and Gubar declare that women have often accepted the inferior position that men have assigned to them in literature, or, refusing to do this, they have decided to mimic men – to become more masculine and even assume a male identity in order to be taken seriously (Gilbert and Gubar 72). However, Gilbert and Gubar see ‘submerged meanings’ (72) in the texts of these female authors, and they think it possible that women authors use the male form as a disguise in order to fight against it and to project their own ideas (73) – a concept dating as far back as to the Trojan war and the infamous wooden horse. Thus, by pretending to be angels, the writers simultaneously conform to and subvert the literary standards of the patriarchal society and achieve literary autonomy (Gilbert and Gubar 73). In Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys redeems her monster. Antoinette seeks the love of a man but is betrayed, crushed, which evokes the reader’s sympathy. Indeed, Rhys subverts the female roles by turning the ‘monster’ – the ‘madwoman’ – into a sympathetic character. Perhaps the part of a victim is only a disguise – perhaps Antoinette seems to submit to male dominance, but really she is waiting for a chance to liberate herself. Though she seems to perceive her fate as inevitable, gives in and dies emotionally, she never becomes Bertha – at least not the perfect ‘angel’ that Rochester wants her to be. She says: ‘Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name’ (Rhys 115). Renaming her is one way in which Rochester exerts his masculine power over his wife, but Antoinette only seems to submit to it. Her struggle is on the inside, and instead of becoming ‘the pretty English girl’ Rochester wishes her to be, she becomes someone else entirely – someone much like her mother was, the madwoman who is not simply a victim but not really a monster either.

Gilbert and Gubar draw parallels between the character of Jane Eyre and the mad Bertha in Brontë’s novel. They claim that Bertha is Jane’s ‘other’, her alter ego, who realises Jane’s secret impulses. Jane is therefore ‘the angel’ and Bertha ‘the monster’, which ‘echoes Jane’s own fear of being a monster’ (Gilbert an Gubar 362). According to Gilbert and Gubar, women are afraid to look into the looking-class for fear of seeing an image of what they really are, the monster. This also applies to Antoinette, who in vain searches for her own image all her life, identifying with her mother and her black childhood friend Tia, but never truly discovering her identity. In the end, she is not Antoinette anymore, but nor is she Bertha; she does not know who she is, for she says: ‘There is no looking-glass here [in the attic] and I don’t know what I am like now’ (Rhys 143). Antoinette may or may not be Rhys’s own double, but is seems plausible that, to some extent, Antoinette is the reflection Rhys saw when she looked into the looking-glass.

The Madwoman in the Attic: Women Caged inside Male Texts

Gilbert and Gubar, as well as the French feminist Cixous, strongly emphasise the importance of breaking free from the male text. Cixous writes: ‘I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst’ (Cixous 246), encouraging women to write in their own language, bursting through the male texts. Gilbert and Gubar write that women themselves have ‘perhaps the power to reach toward the woman trapped on the other side of the mirror/ text and help her to climb out’ (Gilbert and Gubar 16).
Antoinette longs for freedom from the roles and ties that patriarchy imposes on her, idealising and admiring the freedom of the black women. One of the most important metaphors for freedom in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the image of a woman as a caged bird. Angier claims that the parrot Coco, who belonged to the family and died in the fire when the black people burned Antoinette’s home at the beginning of the story, represents an imprisoned soul, referring to Antoinette’s mother and also to Antoinette (Angier 562). Because she was a white Creole woman of considerable fortune, Antoinette had to marry to be socially acceptable, just like her mother had to marry Mr Mason. Her true wish, however, was to be free. She had to conform to a life under the domination of men, and finally the only way for Rochester to control her was to destroy her. Similarly, Mr Mason had to cut Coco’s wings to control it, as Olaussen points out (Olaussen 152).

Gilbert and Gubar write that in the nineteenth century ‘women were in some sense imprisoned in men’s houses’ (83), and thus, symbolically, they were ‘locked into male texts, texts from which they could escape only through ingenuity and indirection’ (Gilbert and Gubar 83). When Antoinette – or now the mad Bertha – is taken to England, she is held prisoner in the attic of Rochester’s house, like a bird in a cage. Finally Coco died in the fire, at the same time saving the family from the black people, who were frightened by the death of the bird since it is said to bring bad luck. In the same way Antoinette finally dies in the fire, at least in her dream, for the actual death occurs outside the novel in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Setting the house on fire is Antoinette’s last act of will, and by jumping off the roof she finally liberates herself from the obeah state – the state of emotional death. And, ironically, her last act also liberates Rochester, for now he is free to marry another woman and be happy.

**Two Faces of the Medusa:**
**Comparing the French Feminist and the Anglo-American Approaches**

As mentioned above, in addition to their similarities, there are significant differences between Cixous’s French feminist approach and Gilbert’s and Gubar’s Anglo-American approach, some of which I shall now investigate further.

Gilbert and Gubar perceive both stereotypes, the angel and the monster, as negative, distorted images that should be killed. Whereas Cixous sees the Medusa-like, strong and feminine character as nothing to be feared, Gilbert and Gubar see the ‘monster in the house’ – or in the attic – as a horrid creature ‘whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity’ (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Cixous, on the other hand, states that ‘[y]ou only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing’ (Cixous 255). Therefore it could be argued that the French feminist theory sees Antoinette’s metamorphosis as taking over her own body – as finally acknowledging her femininity. This interpretation can be supported by the symbolism of the aforementioned white and red dresses, for example. Before, Antoinette only wants to please Rochester and so she dresses in the white dress that Rochester loves: ‘I’ll wear the dress you like tonight’, she says (Rhys 69). After her transformation, she wants to wear her red dress, and it seems like one of the only things that still matter to her: ‘But something you can touch and hold like my red dress, that has a meaning’ (Rhys 147).
In light of Cixous’s theory, one could argue that Antoinette’s madness is a rebellion against the patriarchal repression and the male form of writing – and, before her suicide, she destroys the prison that has held her captive by burning down the house; an old, dignified English mansion representing the patriarchal tradition. In light of Gilbert’s and Gubar’s theory, on the other hand, the transformation can be seen as negative, as a sign of men’s victory over women rather than as a sign of female liberation. Gilbert and Gubar write:

[T]his figure arises like a bad dream, bloody, envious, enraged, as if the very process of writing had itself liberated a madwoman, a crazy and angry woman, from a silence in which neither she nor her author can continue to acquiesce. (Gilbert and Gubar 77)

Both theories therefore see madness as a violent act of liberation, but Cixous’s theory encourages this kind of violence, urging women to laugh like the Medusa, whereas Gilbert and Gubar see it as negative but inevitable.

Furthermore, Cixous emphasises the difference between the rational male and the irrational female, celebrating that distinction, whereas Gilbert and Gubar would prefer to abolish the prejudices that the distinction summons. In the spirit of the French feminists, Rhys indeed celebrates the female emotionality as a strength, but she also acknowledges it as a weakness. She criticises the cold, rational male stereotype incapable of real love and emotion. It could be argued that, at many points, Rhys emphasises the difference between men and women instead of imposing equality. Cixous says that ‘both sexes hesitate to admit or to deny outright the possibility of a distinction between feminine and masculine writing’ (Cixous 253). As Cixous herself sees the difference as positive, something to be celebrated, she rejects the neutral ‘bisexuality’ that many previous woman writers exhibit. A feminine type of writing that Cixous favours in her theory is visible in Rhys’s poetic style that emphasises the female experience as emotional and subjective. The irrational and the unconscious is the source from which écriture féminine springs. Cixous states: ‘The unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive’ (Cixous 250). This ‘other country’ is a perfect place for ‘the Other’, but although Cixous relishes in the fact that women live in the unconscious, that they make words fly and the text erupt with their power and joy, she does nothing to eradicate the notion of difference between men and women. Her language is powerful and liberating, but she only emphasises the difference, and thus it can be argued that, to certain extent, she ‘others’ the woman even further.

As opposed to Cixous’s theory, where the female body is the instrument for language and life, it could be argued that in Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette’s struggle happens on the inside, and her body is only a shell, a disguise. Gilbert’s and Gubar’s theory seems to abide here: the face of a victim is only a mask. A woman can surrender her body to the man, and Antoinette can be seen as a captive of her body. Antoinette becomes a marionette, without a will of her own. Christophine says to Rochester:

‘She tell me in the middle of all this you start calling her names. Marionette. Some word so.’
‘Yes, I remember, I did.’
(Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta) (Rhys 121)

Rochester renames her – he controls her body now, but not her spirit. Antoinette is only a puppet, a doll: ‘The doll had a doll’s voice, a breathless but curiously
indifferent voice’ (Rhys 135). This indicates also that men reduce women to objects in order to control them, but inside the doll, underneath the disguise, there is still the woman who would rather give up her body than her spirit.

There are many similarities between Cixous’s approach and that of Gilbert and Gubar, for they both emphasise the liberation of the female voices living in captivity inside the patriarchal text, but these two theories also contradict in many ways. Though the fierce madwoman can be seen as a sympathetic character, breaking the boundaries between ‘the angel’ and ‘the monster’ in light of Gilbert’s and Gubar’s theory, she is still seen as a tragic victim. However, the distinctly emotional, feminine and dream-like language and the emphasis on the difference between the cold, unfeeling and rational male and the emotional and irrational female seem to relate the novel strongly to the French feminist tradition and to Cixous’s theory that, though celebrating and not striving to eliminate the difference between the sexes, advocates the ‘madness’ of the text as an act of female independence.

Conclusion

Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a novel of many dimensions. The fluent, poetic and dream-like style and language and the imagery and symbolism in the novel emphasise the victimisation and the emotional turmoil of the protagonist. Through the experiences of the protagonist, the novel expresses the victimisation and the oppression of women in the patriarchal, or in French feminist terms, the phallocentric society. In the spirit of the French feminists, Cixous in particular, Rhys’s language seems to derive from the unconscious, emotional and subjective – in Julia Kristeva’s terms, the ‘semiotic’ – feminine experience of the writer, and therefore it can be seen as an example of *écriture feminine*. In light of the Anglo-American feminist theory it can be argued that Rhys also converts the traditional stereotypes of women by making the reader sympathise with the emotional and sexual madwoman. Sexual and emotional oppression seem to be the key ideas in the novel, for Antoinette lets herself be victimised by the enemy, the man she was tricked into marrying. In the end, however, after Rochester has drained her of all emotion, she manages to break free from the suffering by making her last act of self-determination. With this last step, Rhys turns her ‘madwoman’ into the symbol of female liberation.
Bibliography


Olaussen, Maria. Three Types of Feminist Criticism and Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea. Åbo: The Institute of Women’s Studies at Åbo Akademi University, 1992.

