

**MADNESS as ANTI-COLONIAL AGENT in  
WIDE SARGASSO SEA and THE BELL JAR**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present article studies the metaphor of mirror as third space of enunciation in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Women characters' madness as a result of colonial power namely patriarchy in Esther of *Bell Jar* and imperial approach in Antoinette of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the result of their fractured sense of identity, response to their dispossession from selfhood, and frightening sense of dismissing culture and sanity. Both female characters are emotionally vulnerable; while Antoinette is economically powerless; internally displaced, who deals with dismissed sexual passion, Esther's suicidal depression is the result of her reaction against the pressures of social conventions and protest against patriarchal power which has contaminated the psychiatric treatment to make female patients obedient wives. Both Esther and Antoinette seek seclusion in mirrors following the loss of their mental health. The looking glass in both novels suggests double identity, madness and deterioration of subjectivity as a result of colonizing power. Mental instability and loss of identity has been interpreted as Bhabhaian third space of enunciation in mentioned novels.

**Key words:** Wide Sargasso Sea, The Bell Jar, Mirror, Colonial Power, Identity, Third Space

**ÖZET**

Bu makale, ayna metaforunu Üçüncü Uzamın ilanı bağlamında Jean Rhys'in *Wide Sargasso Sea* ve Sylvia Plath'ın *The Bell Jar* eserleri üzerinde çalışmaktadır. Sömürgeci gücün bir sonucu olarak karakterlerin deliliği, Ataerkil baskıdan dolayı *Sırça Fanus* eserindeki Esther ve emperyal yaklaşımın sonucundan dolayı da *Wide Sargasso Sea* eserindeki Antoinette parçalanmış kimliklerinin birer sonucu, kendi benliklerinden yoksun olmalarına karşı birer yanıt ve akıl sağlığını ve kültürel duyguya karşı bir reddetıştır. Her iki karakter duygusal olarak değersizdir; Antoinette karakteri ekonomik olarak güçsüz; psikolojik olarak yerinden edilmiş ve cinsel tutkudan azledilmişken, Esther'in intihar depresyonu, toplumsal sözleşmelerin baskılarına karşı verdiği tepkiden ve kadın hastaları itaatkâr eşler yapmak için psikiyatrik tedaviyi kirleten ataerkil iktidarı protesto etmesinin bir sonucudur. Hem Esther hem de Antoinette zihinsel sağlıklarının kaybının ardından aynalarda inzivaya çekilmektedir. Her iki romanda da görünen ayna, kolonileşme gücünün bir sonucu olarak çifte özdeşlik, delilik ve öznenliğin bozulmasına işaret ediyor. Zihinsel dengesizlik ve kimlik kaybı, söz konusu romanlarda Bhabha'nın Üçüncü Uzamının bir ilanidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Wide Sargasso Sea, Sırça Fanus, Ayna, Sömürge Gücü, Kimlik, Üçüncü Uzam

In literature, madness is not merely a mental disorder but more than that a social burden. The present article examines madness as a weapon against imperial power and seclusion to escape social oppression which results from male dominant society and patriarchal ideology. A woman who rejects to follow traditional roles of womanhood is apt to be labelled as abnormal. It does not depend on whether she has experienced depression, is well-educated and from well-to-do class, or an illiterate member of the working class. A female figure can be sexually harassed, beaten or othered without reasons in a male dominant society if she does not fit into societal, patriarchal or imperial rules.

Present article investigated two focal points. Firstly, it will show how madness is used as a weapon against colonial power by studying the heroine of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and secondly, it will investigate that how madness is used as seclusion to flee from imperial power by analysing the heroine of *The Bell Jar*. Within the framework of patriarchal oppression, truth does not exceed the borders of male-centered viewpoint.

For years, people were menaced by being marked mad once they attempted to challenge the status quo norms which were governed by male dominance or imperial power, and this is no more evident than through literature. If women do not submit to patriarchy, they will be automatically branded abnormal or insane in a patriarchal society; and since the institutions of power are part of the hegemony, no one contested the power and therefore women who might have succeeded in gaining some ground were silenced.

Postcolonialism, and its social and literary effects are examined in the center of the article. It highlights the connections between madness and revolution of women against the colonial and imperial power in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath from women's perspective. Also, women strategies used against power in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath were investigated.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* was written by Jean Rhys, a Dominican-born British woman writer. Jean Rhys herself is actually a hybrid/creole. She was never adopted by Western society because she was born in Dominica and later moved to England. In fact, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a bildungsroman work describing the time from the author's own childhood to her youth. At the same time, it is a sequel of *Jane Eyre* which was written by Charlotte Bronte, an English-born British writer and its prequel in terms of linear story telling. *Jane Eyre* is about a mad woman who had to live in the attic of a big dark mansion. Jean Rhys narrated the story from her viewpoint and on how she became insane. In her work she explained whether madness is a result or a means to end power abuse.

Another novel to be examined in the article is *The Bell Jar*. It was written by Sylvia Plath in 1963. The protagonist of the novel is a woman who has gone mad because she does not fit into the model of woman imposed by the imperialist power. The female protagonist's name is Esther Greenwood. Esther is a college student who likes reading and writing poetry. Since it is a patriarchal society, Esther cannot live as she wishes; therefore she is always under pressure. She cannot express her ideas and thoughts.

Jacqueline Rose wrote in her book titled *Femininity and its Discontents* that:

[...] psychoanalysis becomes one of the places in our culture where it is recognized as more than a fact of individual pathology that most women do not painlessly slip into their roles as women, if indeed they do at all (Rose, p.9).

The quote links feminine insanity to a woman's unwillingness to 'slip into the role'. It is one of the reasons for women's madness that the refusal to accept the role of gender imposed, by tradition. Besides the apparent common theme of female madness owing to reluctance by the heroines to acknowledge their traditional role in gender in two novels, they share another characteristic: the issue of female self-identity and the degree to which the concept of self-identity influences female role in sex.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is divided into three parts. Part one describes childhood of Antoinette Mason. The life of Antoinette is marked by rejection and ambiguity. She is experiencing discrimination as an insane woman's daughter. Her mother, Annette, is secluded and harshly punished by society for her psychosis. The voice of Antoinette tells the reader of her life as a young Antoinette Cosway, a young girl who lives on a ruined estate called Coulibri, near Spanish Town, Jamaica. Her mother, Annette, is described as a beautiful Creole woman from the island of Martinique. The novel is set around the year 1834 when the slaves received emancipation but Jamaica witnessed large-scale social turmoil owing to the new social dynamics emerging between former slaves and owners.

Part two is the longest section of the book. The voice in this part is mainly Rochester's (the character from *Jane Eyre*) although his name is never mentioned. Antoinette and Rochester are already married. They are on honeymoon in the Windward Islands, on an estate called Granbois which means big wood, and once belonged to Antoinette's mother. Soon he receives a letter from Daniel Cosway, Antoinette's illegitimate brother, warning him of the madness that runs in the family. Rochester

believes what he reads. Even though Daniel's accusations about Antoinette's incestuous relation with her cousin Sandi and his demands for money to keep all this a secret disgusts Rochester, he wants to believe all he has heard. He begins to view Antoinette with suspicion and his attitude towards her changes. The oppressive nature of his manhood is revealed when he is simultaneously disgusted by Antoinette and at the same time does not want her to flourish on her own. Rochester decides to take Antoinette with him to England for medical treatment. Part two ends with two of them leaving the island. Rochester vows Antoinette would never return to the Caribbean island.

In part three, Antoinette is captured in an attic room in the mansion. She is not allowed to go to other rooms. One night, like several nights before, Antoinette dreams that she steals the keys from Grace Poole, lets her out into the passage to the rest of the house and moves along carrying candles. She dreams herself in a chapel that looks like Aunt Cora's house. Soon, in the dream, there is a wall of flame behind her. Moving away from the flames and the sounds of yelling, Antoinette goes back upstairs out to where she watches the red sky and sees fragments of her life pass before her. She sees Tia taunting her from the ground and coaxing her to jump.

The theme of madness is mentioned from the beginning of the novel to the end of it. Repeated references to madness in various characters make it an important theme in the novel. Cosway a drunken slave owner is said to have died a raving lunatic and was also believed to have madness in his genes. Annette's progression from aloofness and depression into complete madness as her life takes various turns from bad to worse brings into focus the link between womanhood and madness. When her son dies she loses all semblance of balance and is yet again abandoned by Mr Mason who goes back to England.

She experiences in-betweenness and is aware of it, asks Christophine questions, "So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (p.61). As a result of non-homeliness she intends to learn where she belongs, because she does not fit into anywhere. In colonial societies, people who have suffered psychological problems are always left behind as a ruin. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which summarizes the situation of people in colonised societies. Bhabha defines un-homeliness as below:

The colonised observes two distinct worldviews; that of the coloniser, the conqueror, and that of the colonised, the conquered. Seemingly, neither of the cultures feels like home (Bhabha, 2019).

The feeling or perception of abandonment by both cultures forces colonial subject, to become a psychological refugee. The colonized writer must create a new discourse by rejecting all the established transcendental significance created by the colonizers. Such a writer must also embrace pluralism, believing that no single truth or meta-theory of history exists (Heidarzadegan, 2019).

It is the 'in-between' space which carries the burden and significance of culture and makes the concept of hybridity important. Hybridity was often used for cross-cultural 'exchanges' in post-colonial discourses.

Antoinette's past is Third Space after which she seeks happiness and prosperity. Through the novel she cannot fit into anywhere or anyone therefore she is not happy. Antoinette wants to be free from oppression she feels from beginning to the end therefore she chooses being mad and in the mirror she finds seclusion and take refuge there to be feel safe. Finally, she wins her battle against colonial/imperial power and sets fire on the house and gets her freedom in the Third Space.

During the honeymoon in Granbois, when Rochester criticized the "horrible" language of Christophine when she asked him "taste my bull's blood, master" (p.71), his trailing dress, and her lingering appearance. Here Rochester explains the point of view of the colonizer: the black woman is unclean, sexualised and lazy, he inferred. Homi Bhabha states this situation in his book *The Location of Culture*:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past kept alive in the national tradition of the People (Bhabha, p.37).

Although every colonial stereotype, however, Antoinette replies in each case by telling Rochester that each trait is logical: the expression of richness, the slow movements are precise to make one's dress dirty. The difference between Christophine's two personal views is that in Rochester, colonial stereotypes are confirmed as inherent or biologic truths concerning black women, whereas Antoinette sees them as sociological points.

Sylvia Plath's growing usage of transitional spaces and transitional artifacts (mirror, thresholds, windows), as well as her preferred scenographies (hospital quarters, cemeteries), heterotopic or alienating in her book *The Bell Jar* considers the first the option of Plath's spatial imagery as a radical guide for transitional conditions and locations of otherness and ambivalence. *The Bell Jar* is described as a *Kunstler Roman* (Bildungsroman) in terms of structure. Esther Greenwood is the main character and Plath's alter ego. *The Bell Jar* is also viewed as Plath's dramatic effort to free herself from patriarchal past experience.

Esther cannot place herself to anywhere. She feels isolated from the world around her. She cannot match with her mother, girls at the college, other girls in New York and even her fellow patients. She cannot identify herself with the society she lives in and compares isolation and alienation to someone living under the bell jar. She can hear and see what happens around her, but she cannot include herself in it. She just sees it through a glass wall, and she cannot participate in it. She is an outsider observer to see what happens around her. But at the same time she is the subject to be observed by the others. She is stuck under the bell jar; and cannot escape the judgments and glances of others.

She is free but she has a fear of being captured by bell jar again. She always carries it in her mind, "But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday -- at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere -- the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (p.125). She recovers from her rehabilitations in asylums she feels better. She has completed her ritual death and rebirth through story. She has escaped from pressures to symbolic place as Homi K. Bhabha says "Third space". In this conflicting and ambivalent environment, which makes Bhabha's claim to a hierarchical 'pure' of cultures impractical, cultural identity often emerges. For him, understanding this ambivalent space of cultural identity will help us transcend the exoticism of cultural diversity by acknowledging an inspiring hybridity within which cultural difference can operate:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. (Bhabha 1994: 38)

It is the 'in-between' space which carries the burden and significance of culture, which makes the concept of hybridity so important. Hybridity was often used for cross-cultural 'exchanges' in post-colonial discourses.

The bell jar symbolises the Third Space and seclusion which she seeks being free for Esther. She goes back her cave to defend and protect herself from pressures, forces and external forces which dictate her to change her attitude and become traditional woman stereotype.

Esther sometimes cannot identify herself with her image, "The mirror over my bureau seemed slightly warped and much too silver. The face in it looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury (p.11). She sees the reflection but she does not understand whose reflection is this. It is enunciation for madness.

When she sees herself in mirror, she cannot recognize who is in the mirror:

The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell after a prolonged beating. It looked bruised and puffy and all the wrong colours. It was a face that needed soap and water and Christian tolerance (p.54).

She does not have an idea of whom she sees in the mirror. The more days pass the more awareness of being mad she has. Especially, in this quote it clear, “The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian” (p.58).

For Antoinette and Esther, madness creates a space which is between reality and dream by means of mirror and looking glass in both novels. Antoinette sees her reflection wearing red clothes which symbolises the happy moment for her in the mirror. She says; “Time has no meaning. But something you can touch and hold like my red dress, that has a meaning” (p.149). She is happy when she sees her reflection in mirror. She is happy when she lives in third space by looking glass/mirror; “The colour of flamboyant flowers aying, ‘If you are buried under a flamboyant tree,’ I said, ‘your soul is lifted up when it flowers” (p.150).

Esther sees her reflection by smiling at herself by thinking how happy she is in the mirror at the hospital. She laughs at herself:

I slid into the self-service elevator and pushed the button for my floor. The doors folded shut like a noiseless accordion. Then my ears went funny, and I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used up I looked (p.10).

It is obvious that Esther goes mad and lives in her third space, when she cannot tolerate the oppression coming from patriarchal power. She also suffers pains by not being normal and traditional women like Antoinette therefore she seeks her new place to take refuge and be free from all agents of patriarchal power.

The main subject of the story is that the character of Antoinette escapes from the means of colonisation imposed on her and finds herself mad. Madness was the main theme in both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Bell Jar*. A Creole woman on the Caribbean islands and a woman living in New York, share the same fate, and common causes of their fate and the life of these two leading characters. Stories in two different books from two different societies have same conclusions.

The woman, who is always seen as the other in the society, will have psychological problems and will be driven to madness. Madness is not only psychological attitude to oppressive forces but also is a seclusion to preserve all characteristics of female figures. Seeing madness as a form of rebellion often poses many questions related to the over-simplification of living conditions, recognizing extreme suffering and hindrance as a revolutionary act of daily activities. But the paper discussed the positive dimensions of the characters sufferings with the attempt to highlight how insanity is a social construct. The intended focus of expression is the post-colonial condition in which insanity and the world contrast with their colonial and post-colonial systems. The chosen women writers described both the portrayal of insanity and the imperial power including colonial and patriarchal oppressions.

Madness was a resisting and revolting tool adopted by two heroines against colonial and imperial power and is also a Third Space embodied on mirrors to take refuge in from imperial and colonial power.

The common point of both characters is to want to be free from all agents of imperial/colonial and patriarchal dominant. Because Esther does not believe any so-called truth which is said by society, she wants to be free from their truth such as virginity. The other main point for patriarchal society is keeping virginity. Virginity is important in a patriarchal society. If a woman wants to marry, she must keep her virginity pure and non-touch. If a woman wants to get rid of it, it means that she wants to get

rid of all components of imperial power and in patriarchal societies virginity is a value for women not men. It symbolises purity, cleanness and to be intact, it is like a territory which is waited the time when it is colonised and exploited by the dominant, colonizer, imperial or patriarchy (Caroline, 2015). Esther is virgin and she reserves it for Buddy, her lover. The people around her including her family and friends tell her that she must keep her virginity for her husband whom she marries soon. Esther is a territory to be exploited by her husband as a colonial power, patriarchal society, or oppressor. It gave all the reasons a girl should not sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married.

Colonised society experience not only physical depression but also spiritual breakdown; therefore, they become passive and ineffective. Colonizer makes colonised feel inferior and ineffective and colonizer dictates new identity and calls colonised with another name. For example, Antoinette of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is called 'Bertha' by her colonizer husband Rochester. Antoinette is a dictated new name and new identity. Like Antoinette, Esther Greenwood of *The Bell Jar* experiences the identity crisis which is dictated by patriarchal dominant such as society, her family and Buddy.

Societies which have experienced persecution and oppression finds solution either in riot against imperial/colonial or patriarchal powers or live in seclusion in order to protect themselves. Especially, women who are considered weak and ineffective compared to men choose to live in seclusion rather than adopting active roles. Because Antoinette wants to be free from oppression which stems from her husband and patriarchal society, she takes refuge in madness as a Third Space. She lives happy and in peace when she is in her Third Space. Similarly, Esther wants to be free from oppression of patriarchal society and she commits suicide several time, but she cannot achieve what she wants and finally she finds madness as a Third space which makes Esther relieved and safe. Her Third Space is seclusion where she feels satisfied.

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