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Insanity as a Form of Postcolonial Resistance: 'The Madwoman' and the Questions of Sexuality, and Identity

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ABSTRACT

As the title suggests the central focus lies in deconstructing views of 'madness' both as an embodiment of imposed disability and discrimination and as a form of struggling with and resisting the various modes of suppression, exploitation and denial. The narratives of exile, marginalization and displacement are paradoxically private and public, individual and collective, conforming and rebellious and they allegorically represent the destructive, subverting force of female sexuality and the 'irrational' subjectivity that challenges the political, religious, educational, cultural and familial institutions. The colonial, neo-colonial and post-colonial worlds frequently depend on these composites to either bind the mind injured by the cultural, social and racial discriminations or to impose the so called 'sane' notions and ideas of nationalism, communalism, morality, ethics and communication on the disillusioned self. The raging conflict between these imposed ideas and the desire to cling on to the world of individuated language and identity is represented, re-examined, and interrogated with a remarkably deep insight and great sensitivity in Caryl Phillip's Cambridge, Shani Mooto's Cereus Blooms at Night and Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea. The dispossessed characters like Mootoo's Mala Ramchandin, Rhys' Antoinette Cosway (Mason) project the insanity and irrationality of the so called 'sane' world through the assertions of their problematic sense of the self, violent and destructive outbursts, strange and symbolic ways of avenging their oppression, expression of dilemma caused by the spiritual and physical constraints.

Keywords: Madness as resistance, Female Identity and Sexuality, Wide Sargasso Sea, Cerseus Blooms at Night.

INTRODUCTION

Helen Cixous, greatly influenced by Lacan, observes in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* , that 'the ebullient, infinite woman' is kept in the dark , immersed in naiveté and led into the attic of self-disdain by the phallocentric forces of the society even before being labeled as 'insane'. But many literary representations of 'the madwoman' sometimes tend to 'romanticize madness' to a great extent which shifts the reader's attention from the interchangeable identity shared by the soul trapped in a woman's tormented body and the walls of the confine partitioning the two worlds.

The narratives of exile, marginalization and displacement are paradoxically private and public, individual and collective, conforming and rebellious and they allegorically represent the destructive, subverting force of the female sexuality and the 'irrational' subjectivity that challenges the political, religious, educational, cultural and familial institutions. The marginalized characters like Pohpoh Ramchandin in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at night*, Antoinette Cosway in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Christiania and Emily Cartwright in Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* whose psychological upheavals directly address these complex issues, lead us to re-examine the term 'madness' in a radical way as a form of resistance. As the title suggests the central focus lies on the deconstructing views of 'madness' both as an embodiment of imposed disability and discrimination and as a form of struggling with and resisting the various modes of suppression, exploitation and denial.

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Looking at madness from a postcolonial perspective intensely deals with the idea of 'the divided self' which is often attributed to 'the schizophrenic mind'. A closer look at the psychoanalytic definition of schizophrenia looks at the 'disease' as an amalgam of apathetic attitude, obsessive thought and behavior fused with the inability to take real initiative, a viewpoint dealing with the unreality of both the world and the self, and an overwhelming sense of detachment from the body. This kind of examination of the dark, untrodden regions of the mind can be interpreted as an omniscient, authoritative attempt of the western psychologists to define and analyze the relationship of the disfigured mind of 'the mad figure' with the dominant notions of identity, language, culture, sexuality etc.

The colonial, the neo-colonial and the post-colonial world frequently depend on these composites to either bind the mind injured by the cultural, social and racial discriminations or to impose the so called 'sane' notions and ideas of nationalism, communalism, morality, ethics and communication on the disillusioned self. The raging conflict between these imposed ideas and the desire to cling on to the world of individuated language and identity is represented, re-examined, and interrogated with a remarkably deep insight and great sensitivity in both Shani Mooto's *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The fragmentation of the self evokes a complex idea of insurgence through the modes of sexuality and violence against the society which has inadvertently inherited the colonial oppressive, exclusionist ideas. This use of sexuality as a rebelling and subversive force can be found as manifested in the characters and relationships fraught with complications in *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Detailed analyses of these texts enable us to decipher the intricate ideas regarding the split within the sense of identity of the self, the dismembered and fragmented language reflecting the schism between the internal and the external world and the function of sexuality as a weapon to inflict irrevocable psychological injury or, to rebel against the norms of the society.

Identity

The discussions regarding the ambivalence of the postcolonial identity is inseparably attached with the attempts to decipher a new meaning of the objectified 'insane' being's erratic behaviour, raging outbursts and refusal of the order of normalcy. These interactions between the problematic sense of identity and the postcolonial, psychoanalytic discourses tend to re-examine and re-interpret the cultural, racial or ethical ideologies that eventually lead to a splitting of the self into several parts. I have tried to accumulate those facets of the above mentioned texts that deal with these psychologically complex issues of identity crisis elaborately, in this segment.

The first text that comes to my mind while exploring the relationship of insanity and identity is Shani Mootoo's 1996 novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* which looks at 'madness' in a postcolonial context from different perspectives while exploring multiple layers of the complex issues of conflicting identities and desires. Here, by crafting the fictionalized Caribbean town of Paradise, Lantanacamara, Mootoo attracts our notion to her allegorical representation of an alternative imaginary world which subverts the authoritative colonial norms in terms of dominant geographical conceptions, while creating an exclusive space where the discourses of displacement, colonial negation of identity, repression of sexuality and self-imposed exile into madness intersect each other without any obstacle. This imaginary space sometimes transforms into a paradoxical image of the lost Eden or, Idyll and sometimes it takes up the form of a composite made of memories and history. The allegorical structure of this fictional world largely depends on the binaries of the natural and unnatural, morality and immorality, sexual norms and sexual defiance, public and private forms of oppression, victimization and survival. Allegories play an important role in presenting cultural memory constructed to communicate social values and ethical ideals through fiction. Through this allegorical structure the novel presents us with the opportunity to

question the dominant ideologies about identity, sexuality, morality and language and these questions are also brilliantly employed in the characters of the novel.

The story of 'the gothic madwoman figure', Mala Ramchandin (Pohpoh) is not presented as a metaphorical one by this allegorical structure of this novel, rather it sees the lifelong incestuous oppression of Mala by her disillusioned father Chandin as another facet of the complicated realm of the novel which allows an intermingling of the private and the public. At the beginning of the novel we are presented with an account of Tyler's attempt to re-examine the fragmented remnants of Mala's story to grasp her history in its totality, as he identifies with Mala who is also rendered a marginalized individual like him for being 'unnatural' and 'different', in a society which itself is constantly struggling with the issues of indentureship, colonization and religious conversion. This brings up the discussions regarding language and identity in the context of the neo-colonial society and its effects on the psychology of the colonized other. Tyler who himself is an outcast because of his adherence towards homosexuality becomes an appropriate narrator of the moving story of Mala's scattered life as a result of her devastating encounter with a brutal, grotesque image of sexuality. Thus the issue of sexuality is also entangled with the fabric of several kinds of instabilities that are highlighted in this startling narrative.

As Tyler, the gay male nurse of the alms-house only recognizes the strains of suffering in Mala's story as similar to those of his own story; Mala also identifies her own tormented self deprived of any kind of protection with the unprotected, helpless state of nature. Nature enables her to struggle with her troubled sense of identity by providing her with a certain kind of authority. In this way she finds the empowerment of her soul only in nature and its components. The idea of this different kind of empowerment of the self and resisting the dominant exclusionist voice through the act of intensely attaching oneself with nature can be associated with the 'insane' Mala's attempt to defy the conventional order of language and meaning. As Tyler observes, "Miss Ramchandin made no sounds besides crying, moaning, wailing and sighing. I talked often to her though I truly thought she was unable to speak, and I watched her eyes, which I had come to believe were what she used for communicating (Mootoo 23)". These lines reflect upon the deep connection that exists between the natural world of the animals, insects, birds and the 'exclusive world' of Mala made of 'meaningless' sounds and silence. This very connection ironically points at the dehumanization of the madwoman by the patriarchal society.

Mala's tendency to identify herself with the insects, birds, animals (she often calls them by her own name, Pohpoh) shifts our gaze to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of 'being-animal' which is a recurrent conception in *A Thousand Plateaus*, it invests this animalistic state to which the mad person or, the colonized native is often reduced, with positive values. It is seen as a way of achieving some wider contact with the outer world which lies beyond the mere human consciousness. Mala thus enables a part of herself to negate the consciousness which is chained with her mere human body and enter the more sensitive world of colours, sounds, smell: "It was the light. It was the blueness of the sky. It was the colour of the trees and shrubs in the yard. The dankness of the house. Everything so opaquely saturated with moisture that the sun couldn't shine strongly enough to soak it up. The time of the day would come upon her and deafen her with the noise of insects screaming, *Pohpoh, Pohpoh, I want Pohpoh*. Insects spawning in pools of water, their drones shouting, *Sarah*! (Mootoo 131)". Thus this expanded consciousness intermingles with her experiences and through minutest sounds, spectacle, taste and touch she seeks freedom from her past and present. Mala's act of clinging on to nature especially her intense emotional involvement with the birds, reptiles, plants and insects that are typically regarded as the 'lower or lesser' parts of the hierarchical order of nature, enables her to attain a different kind of salvation as well as it offers a better understanding of the upheavals of her mind regarding her sense of the self caused by the dysfunctional familial bonds in a neo-colonial setting.

Jean Rhys, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, explores new dimensions of the cultural, racial ambiguity that are intricately attached with the sense of identity of the socially and emotionally oppressed individual in the 18th century colonial world of Jamaica and England. Antoinette Cosway exemplifies the victimhood of those people who are on one hand contaminated and ostracized in a neo-colonial or, post-colonial society because of their hereditary links with the western slave owning plantation owners, and on the other hand treated and degenerated as the racial other or, 'White Nigger' by both the white colonizers and 'the coloured natives'. By investing the largely objectified character of Bertha Mason with a voice of her own in her re-writing of the story of her journey from the severed sense of rootlessness in Coulibri to the state of confinement and imposed 'madness' in the rigid Victorian world of England, Rhys brings up the issue of the lost and injured sense of identity of those belonging to a mixed heritage. Through Annette and Antoinette Mason Rhys has shown the dilemma that haunt the mind of the people who are rendered cultural and racial outcasts in a colonial or, postcolonial society, in a terrible way. At the starting of the novel Annette, Antoinette's mother struggles to come to terms with the confusion about the status of her and her family in the Jamaican society which has always resented their hybridity. But this understanding of Annette does not make Antoinette realize that Jamaica cannot ever provide her with the sense of 'home' until her bitter encounter with Tia who becomes the embodiment of the identity of 'the native' that Antoinette can never attain. Tia's throwing of the stone makes her a mirror image of Antoinette's distorted idea of the self and she exclaims: "We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass (Rhys 28)."

This attempt of Antoinette to find her actual identity in mirror images focuses on the sense of dispossession and dislocation that torments her throughout her life. The anonymous English gentleman (based on the character of Edward Rochester of *Jane Eyre*) who marries Antoinette takes this ordeal of her identity one step further by robbing her of her name and transforming her into Bronte's Bertha Mason who ultimately sets Thornfield Manor (the symbol of the reduction of her identity into that of an animalistic, objectified 'other') on fire and immolates herself in an act of suicide. Her ferocious act of burning down her confinement can be interpreted as an act of returning to the past when her 'home' along with the innocence of her childhood was set on fire by an enraged mob at Coulibri. This act of demolishing the house is followed by her act of jumping to her death which can be seen more as the restoration of her idea of the 'self' which involves the fragmented images of Tia, the parrot Coco's monotonous calling, the pool at Coulibri etc. But these images have become nothing but fictive memories to her at her last moments. As she falls deeply in love with her husband who in order to make her 'more English' negates her originality and constantly calls her by another name, she allows herself to become almost like a mirror which does not possess any self-image but projects the image of her husband's self-hatred and his non-negotiable indifference towards her. Ultimately she finds herself confined in an attic after being labeled as 'a madwoman' where no mirror is left which can give back the idea of her self-hood and she sees "Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass (Jean Rhys 143)".

Sexuality

The argument regarding the fragmented identity and mental instability has close ties with the sphere of sexuality which becomes extremely complex in Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and in Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge* to some extent.

Cereus Blooms at Night takes the issue of sexuality which is quite significant in the postcolonial discussions about the excluded, suppressed, and incarcerated beings, to another extreme. Here Mootoo chooses Tyler (the gay male nurse of Mala Ramchandin) and Otoh (the son/daughter of Ambrose Mohanty) who struggle to find their place in a society largely based on binaries, as the principle

narrative voices representing the story of Mala's sexual abuse in the hands of her father. Mala's unnatural awakening to sexuality in childhood which grotesquely and brutally robs her of her innocence, vitality, and 'normalcy' can be associated with the hidden significance of the title of the novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*. The term 'bloom' inadvertently indicates the awakening of sexuality of a young woman, but the Cereus flower brings an uncanny connotation as it blooms only at one night in a year and this is linked with Mala's disastrous encounter with sexuality that ultimately results into a psychological disjuncture. The flower also becomes a symbol of survival and memory which connects the discourse of sexuality with the idea of rationalizing reality through irrationality. In the night when the cereus flowers bloom exerting their magnificent scent Mala observes how: "Crazed bats swooped by, crisscrossing each other's flight en route to suckle the blossoms. They disturbed the swarms of frantic moths. They brushed their hairy bodies against the blossoms to sample the syrupy, perfumed juices (Mootoo 138)." This observation emphasizes the link between the brutal image of the rape of Mala's body and soul by her father and the apparently beautiful image of the blooming flower, as Mootoo brings a comparison between the stinking smell of the house (a symbol of 'the unnatural sexuality') and the fragrance of the flowers.

Mala's desperate attempts in her adolescence to overcome the disturbing, tormenting sexual experience that her father's horrible bestial desires invested in both her mind and body, by forcing her only friend Boyie to indulge in an act to 'explore' sexuality in a completely different way exhibits another complex form of resistance . Although later in her life she acknowledges Ambrose's love for her but the conflict between the haunting past and the terrible present makes her reject sexuality in its entirety and lead her to the state where she depends on different modes of sensuality to liberate herself.

After putting an end to the tyranny of her father which indescribably tormented and shattered her mind in an accidental way, Mala loses the control over her own bodily and psychological senses completely in her exclusive inner-world. In this world at one moment unable to tolerate the loneliness that suffocates her she craves death by tasting mouthful of bird-pepper sauce and at another moment she tries to capture the impression of reversing decay by smelling some particular aroma. These apparently 'insane' acts empower her in a subversive way and she finds the purpose and authority of her limited existence. Thus, when she meets Otoh, the 'son' of her long lost lover Ambrose she recognizes the magical world of music, love and togetherness through the tune of the gramophone and starts humming, singing and dancing. She merges her sensual world with the actual world in order to break away from the world of excruciating pain, loneliness and frustration to which she is handcuffed by her terrible encounter with sexuality.

Sexuality becomes a metaphor through which completely new meanings of death, love, authority, hatred and many other facets of human life and mind are explored, in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette Mason, the protagonist of the novel, hoped to transcend the fragmentation of her self-hood caused by her hybridity and the troubled past fraught with the memories of her mother's incarceration and subsequent death, through the bond of love which she believed, linked every single detail of her and her husband's existence. But, these hopes are devastated as she finds out that her husband not only withhold his name from her, but he withholds an entire range of hostile feelings against the place which is deeply connected with her sense of identity as well as against her who seems to be nothing more than an unnatural and unknowable entity to him. This impossibility to grasp her mind and 'the wild landscape' of the West Indies entirely directly threatens this young English man's overarching sense of superiority and he tries to gain control over 'the exotic' through 'the erotic' and these encounters between the indomitable and unknowable exotic, personified by Antoinette and the erotic desires of the western colonizer manifested in the character based on Austen's Rochester, exert the strains of different

kind of colonial exploration and exploitation. In the course of this kind of 'exploration' the colonizer aspires to penetrate into the depth of the mind through the body of 'the other' and in a certain sense the geographical, cultural and social space of the colony become one with the body of the colonized woman. He thus finds himself struggling with his inability to love his wife or, the place to which she belongs and he overtly admits: "I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did (Rhys 69)."

This confession of Rochester exposes the inevitable devastation of Antoinette's hope to transcend the prevailing sense of dispossession and dislocation that tormented her from the very early period of her life, rather the magnitude of this oppressive sense is heightened instead of being wiped out by the intensity of their physical intimacy. This idea is further demonstrated by her desperate attempts to win back her husband's 'love' which was available to her only in the form of sexuality, through Christophine's 'Obeah'. On discovering the fact that Antoinette has used 'Obeah' in order to make him submit both his soul and body to her, Rochester becomes violently enraged as it was too much for his rigid Victorian mindset to accept the sexual dominance of a woman. In order to punish his wife for her 'atrocity' and to render her helpless and passive like the 'decent' ladies of the contemporary English society he indulges in a casual sexual encounter with Amélie. Sexual exploitation of the colonial and racial other is fused with the complicated postcolonial views of sexuality as a weapon. Thus sexuality simultaneously unveils the complexities embedded in both colonial and patriarchal systems as Rochester in his orientalist desire to exercise control on both Antoinette and the people or, landscape of Granbois, projects his lust and repulsion quite clearly.

Antoinette's raging desire to freeze the moment of perfect happiness, which she attains through sexuality, and her constant longing for death seems to find a parallel with the metaphysical conceit which looks at orgasm as an embodiment of death, hence she tells her husband: "If I could die. Now, when I am happy. Would you do that? You wouldn't have to kill me. Say die and I will die. You don't believe me? Then try, try, say die and watch me die (Rhys 68)."

This statement clearly showcases Antoinette's physical and psychological submission to her husband, which ultimately gives him the power to push her to her death, both literally and metaphorically by conquering her and then desecrating her mental and physical identity through the destructive forces of sexuality. Antoinette's radical attempt to enslave his (the white colonizer's) repulsive mind with the help of Voodoo and Eros is peculiarly avenged by Rochester's deliberate adultery with Amélie at Granbois, a place which was loved by Antoinette 'like a person' and thus he takes away even the last remaining facet of her identity reducing her into 'nothing': "But I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this; and now you have spoilt it (Rhys 115)". Thus Rhys on one hand associates the several kinds of death that a woman needs to experience in a patriarchal society with sexuality and on the other hand she depicts the physical desires and sexual encounters as destructive forces used by the colonizer to reduce 'the other' into an objectified 'lunatic' while re-defining the limits of his/her marginal position.

Caryl Phillips' brilliant novel, *Cambridge* which was published in 1991 also explores the relationship between insanity and sexuality in an unconventionally analytic way. In this work, which reflects over the 18th century complex equation between the slaves and the plantation owners, Phillips inadvertently includes the strains of sexuality that are used both by the colonizer and the colonized as a weapon of self-empowerment in a society which was sharply categorized into hierarchical ranks. Christiania becomes an embodiment of the power of sexuality that can be found frequently in the constructed notion of 'the exotic', as she succeeds to secure a superior position among the other black slaves by becoming the mistress of the manager of the plantation, Arnold Brown. Although her sexual submission to the

animalistic desires of the white man is interpreted as a path of empowerment, but this does not elude the undertone of sexual exploitation. Cambridge tries to understand the motive lying behind Mr. Brown's sexual abuse of his wife as he exclaims: "Perhaps he look upon my comely wife as a visual entertainment, in the same manner that some Englishmen keep about them dwarfs or pet monkeys? Or was he lonely? Or was he simply humouring her in anticipation of this moment when he might punish both my wife and myself with one act of brutal desire? (Phillips 162)". These interrogating ideas lead us to a state where we are enabled to look at the sexual abuse of Christiania from a postcolonial, postmodern as well as from a feminist perspective. Sexuality thus empowers and victimizes Christiania who ultimately ends up as another marginalized, ostracized madwoman as the tyrannical Mr. Brown finds another object of desire in the newly arrived White woman Emily Cartwright and throws Christiania away while pushing her towards "her final and irrevocable madness" (Phillips 163).

Emily Cartwright also becomes an important character in the discourse of sexuality as she gains the right to call Mr. Brown, Arnold and the control over the domestic sphere (snatched away from Christiania) through her sexual prowess. Her act of indulging in a sexual relationship can be interpreted more as an act of liberating her sense of self rather than as an act driven by love. But this sexual liberation of the English aristocratic woman of the Victorian age comes exclusively with the life in the colony which initially seems to be unnatural and uncanny and subsequently in an ironic way this 'unnatural' place becomes her 'home' where she is fed by those 'Negroes' who always brought revulsion in her. Cartwright's sexuality leads her to a similar marginal as Christiania, eventually she looses everything that was dear to her, Mr. Brown (he gets murdered in the hands of the enraged Cambridge), her newborn child, her social status as well as her urge to return to her 'home'.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing these texts that depict several forms of resistance in light of the disordered and fragmented language, the injured and mutilated sense of identity or rebelling forces of sexuality we can conclude that the objectified self confined in a world which is apparently separated from the 'rational' world of conventional and traditional ideals or racial and cultural prejudices, can also respond to the political, social, cultural crisis in a subversive way. These dispossessed characters like Mootoo's Mala Ramchandin, Rhys' Antoinette Cosway (Mason) or, Phillips' Christiania and Emily project the insanity and irrationality of the so called 'sane' world through the assertions of their problematic sense of the self, violent and destructive outbursts, strange and symbolic ways of avenging their oppression, expression of dilemma caused by the spiritual and physical constraints. These dispossessed, dislocated beings also demonstrate peculiar forms of resistance against the insanity of a postcolonial or, neo-colonial world.

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