

Catherine Earnshaw and Antoinette Cosway: A Study on Women and Madness

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 26 Jul 2022; Received in revised form: 14 Aug 2022; Accepted: 21 Aug 2022; Available online: 30 Aug 2022</p> <p>©2022 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Patriarchy, Madness, Other, Women, Femininity, Identity.</p>	<p><i>In the patriarchal society the man/woman binary is subverted. Audre Geraldine Lorde calls the opposition “man/not man”. As Irigaray puts it, a man needs a woman as “a mirror to catch his reflection” (Irigaray 1985:11). The woman completely disappears as an entity of her own. Her voice is ignored. The world of female and female sexuality is dominated by the male, causing some women to become “mad”. But, this “madness” is a metaphorical madness through which she finally fights back.</i></p>

1. Introduction

In the introduction to *Out of her Mind: Women Writing on Madness*, Rebecca Shannonhouse brings forth a crucial question- “So what is “madness? When is it mental illness? Or when is it the circumstances of a woman’s life driving her “out of her mind?” The influence of the patriarchal society on the mind of a woman will be highlighted in this paper through the characters of Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* and Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*. “Madness” writes Ina Franziska Brandner, “can be used by patriarchal society as an instrument to suppress women, but it can also be a device for women to escape this very society.”

The three concepts, femininity, madness and psychiatry do not have a fixed meaning rather the meanings are subject to change.

The patriarchal society, taking control of the female body ascribes certain norms to it. As Caryl Churchill shows in her play *Top Girls*, the 9th century Pope Joan, who aspires to and becomes a pope in spite of being a woman, by taking up the guise of a man, is punished, brutally murdered by men for

having stepped beyond and defied what is expected of her as a woman since “Women, children and lunatics can’t be Pope.” Consequently she too questions herself, “I had thought the Pope would know everything. I thought God would speak to me directly. But of course he knew I was a woman.” In several families, even the birth of a girl child is looked down upon. Daughters are not considered to be ‘real members of the family’ as after they are ‘given off’ in marriage, they would be somebody’s wife or mother, not daughter. However, what is common in these three identities that are assigned to her throughout her lifetime is that it is always in relation to somebody else, preferably that of a male’s. Hence, Ina Franziska Brandner comments, “Women cannot break free from this system with their bodies; however, they can flee patriarchal norms with their minds- by going mad.”

For the women who do not want to conform to these social rules, madness may be the only option, thus making it a tool either for liberation or suppression. Women, who wish to gain more knowledge, sharpen their minds and broaden their horizons, are restricted to the limited space of a room as seen in the short stories of Rabindranath Tagore

where the young female protagonists often need to lock their room to be able to read in secrecy as Virginia Woolf writes in "A Room of One's Own", 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'.

Femininity has always taken up the position of the margin. It has been constructed as the 'Other'. In ancient Greece women were not even considered to be citizens and it took centuries for women to gain the right to vote.

Madness is, essentially, playing the counterpart to a behaviour which is socially accepted. Madness has been linked women so much more than men that it is constructed as natural female trait. We find this in the term 'hysteria' itself. The word is taken from its Greek root *hysteria*, meaning womb. Whatever be the gender of the sufferer, the illness has always been associated to women in particular. It coincides with the long-held belief that women are somehow "crazier" than men. It raises stereotypes of the emotional woman who is not in control of herself, primarily due to biological causes, that is, her hormones. However, as Barta puts:

the moody woman gains power through her unpredictability. When people do not know what to expect from her, she can manipulate them and keep them in suspense; she can even scare them (Barta 2004:10)

This madness is often used to put women into their "place". But if it deviates too much from the norm, women are considered mad. Psychiatrists, often the representative of patriarchal norms, take up the role of the suppressor. As Barta writes,

woman's violation of society's traditional role for her was much more troubling than a man's, mainly because there were so many more ways that a woman could defy her role. If a woman did not stay home, marry, have children, obey her husband, she was considered abnormal (Barta 2004:8).

Therefore, one can conclude that women who did not fulfill the norms of a "good woman" had to be treated or institutionalised.

2. Catherine Earnshaw and Antoinette Cosway

Catherine's "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same...Nelly, I am Heathcliff!"(91) echoes Shelley's poem "Epipsychidion". The love between Catherine and Heathcliff reminds one of the Lacan theory of the

earlier stage of psychological development where "all children look for a confirmation of their own identity in a mirror-image of themselves." When Catherine announces that her relationship with Heathcliff will not be hampered even after her marriage with Edgar, Nelly says that she is either "ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying; or else, that you are a wicked unprincipled girl" (92). Her argument seems to be that if she loves Edgar and she is Heathcliff, therefore, Heathcliff must love Edgar.

When Heathcliff decides to avenge himself by marrying Isabella, the two women diminish from their human entity into mere objects of possession. Even though Catherine's temper does not make her seem a feminine peace-maker, yet she displays an ethic of care and looks for a solution to hurt no one. When Edgar forbids her to see Heathcliff, Catherine isolates herself from the dominance of her husband into silence and starvation. According to Patsy Stoneman, "Catherine's apparent self-destruction has to be seen, not as wilful egotism, but as a despairing response to her two lovers' failure to love her enough to share her attention."

In her 'madness', Nelly becomes a witch. She is unable to recognise her own face in the mirror and recoils in terror. She is unable to identify the reality, human needs and wishes outside her own self. Her identity is so terrorized that she is unsure if she is dreaming or has fallen into madness.

In chapter twelve of *Wuthering Heights*, we find a restless Catherine tearing her pillow talking about Lapwing babies. She had made Heathcliff promise to never shoot a lapwing. When she finds Lapwing feathers in her pillow she feels uncertain about Heathcliff's promise. Questioning her trust in Heathcliff, shows distrust in her own self. According to Steve Lukits, "Heathcliff's exertion of male power destroys his shared identity with Catherine during their childhood." She feels exiled from her "former world". Concerns about childhood and motherhood, freedom and imprisonment, home and estrangement, are interwoven within the plot. Nelly becomes the representative of traditional authority to report her behaviour.

During her first stay at Thrushcross Grange, Catherine is 'domesticated'. Robbed of her independence and natural feminine individuality, she decides to marry Edgar. Her struggle to delineate her identity as a woman, a mother in her husband's house, leads to her death. Her confinement at the Grange makes her life unbearable as she resolves to die.

Heathcliff, an intruder to all but Catherine, alters the balance of power and authority in the family. Gilbert and Gubar read this as a fulfilment of young Cathy's wish for a whip, the wish to become empowered, "Catherine gets her whip. She gets it figuratively-in the form of a 'gypsy brat'-rather than literally... so as to insulate her from the pressure of her brother's domination." (264)

On one hand, Catherine's identity is stronger as Catherine Earnshaw and not Catherine Linton, while Antoinette loses her identity until the last scene of the fire where she sees her land and Tia for a second. She completely loses her identity of Antoinette Cosway and becomes, not Bertha Rochester, but Bertha Mason.

Faizal Forrester calls *Wide Sargasso Sea* to be "haunted" as it is "possessed" by an already dead protagonist. Her destiny has been written and locked within the "cardboard house" of *Jane Eyre*, where she is described as "a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband," an unfeminine excess that she can no longer be described in human terms: "it snatched and growled like some strange animal" (338).

Talking about her mother, Antoinette relates, "I saw the man lift her up out of the chair and kiss her." For her, the horror lies in Annette's insanity. Although providing the appearance of it, it prevents true consent. Knowing that she thinks him to be Luttrel, the man laughs as he can exploit her. As Jennifer Gilchrist puts it, "His skin color seems symbolic: the black man, 'and others' (157) Christophine tells Rochester, can rape Antoinette's mother because Emancipation has both created the loss that drove her mad in the first place and dismantled the social structure that had provided special protections to white women." When asked about her mother's death and insanity Antoinette replies-

Because they told me to say so and because it is true. She did die when I was a child. There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about. (81)

Rochester replicates Annette's enslavement by confining Antoinette in the English attic, comments Jennifer Gilchrist.

In the confined space when Antoinette hears the word "legally" she has a fit of rage and attacks her brother. The term marks the complete control of her husband over her. Like the Lapwing in *Wuthering Heights*, the talking bird plays a significant role in

Wide Sargasso Sea. Antoinette's family parrot Coco calls out "Qui est là? Qui est là?" and responds with a self-location and self-identification "*Ché Coco, Ché Coco*" (22), meaning either "Dear Coco," "Coco's place," or "It's Coco." But in case of Antoinette, 'the question of "who is there," is answered by and with the name of the subject's owner' (Alexandra Neel). She is dehumanized and rendered a thing.

Roche has overblown sexual and racial fears about Antoinette. The Obeah love potion, through which they reached their sexual pinnacle, becomes a conduit to the "dark past" between them. Even after Rochester's sadomasochistic sexual pleasures and bruises on Antoinette's body, she maintains a smile on her face which he refuses to believe. He even imposes the name 'Bertha' upon her-

My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?

Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha. (86)

Fire becomes an expression of her fury as she associates her red dress with the fire at Coulibri. She says, "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (124). She feels that violence is the ultimate solution. In the attic she is ruthlessly secluded from the society. Now, finally, she becomes 'dangerous'. When she jumps to her death, she exits the world of the *Wide Sargasso Sea* and enters the realm of *Jane Eyre*, where she is a mad, voiceless creature in imprisoned in the attic, Brontë's 'Other'.

It is difficult to place Antoinette within the boundaries of a particular race or ethnicity. He identifies herself with Tia- "We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass." (45) She was a white among the black Creole culture. She thought them to be her own. But even Tia, her 'friend', called her a "white nigger", not a real white person with the "gold money". She is a colonial exile and doubly marginalized through her race and gender.

3. Conclusion

A specific place is ascribed to women by the patriarchal society. Men are supposed to work within the public arena, whereas home has always been linked to the female; despite this fact, the behaviour of women at home must still conform to societal norms. Therefore, making the home only appear to be the sphere of the woman, but it is merely an extension of patriarchal society. The woman is treated as the

‘other’ of man and not an individual with a voice of her own.

According to Diane L. Hoeveler the feminist strategies of the Brontës’ novels include “the rejection of motherhood, control of the patriarchal estate, struggle with tyrannous religious forces, overthrow of the suffocating and claustrophobic nuclear family and the celebration of education for women.”

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