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# The Widening Gyre: Fear Paranoia and Freudian Defense Mechanisms in Wide Sargasso Sea

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## Abstract

Sanity/insanity is always a matter of discussion in the literary firmament. Literary discussions on the lunacy become further intensified with the advent of psychoanalytical criticism. Bertha's status as the wild madwoman in Bronte's *Jane Eyre* began to transform with the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. This paper attempts to find out the causes behind Bertha's so-called madness. Fear plays a significant role in the life of Antoinette. She is primarily the victim of fear than anything else. At times, her adamant effort to safeguard her silly lots overrides all the boundaries and sooner she became imprisoned as an abnormal. This present scrutiny aims to analyze the chance of defense mechanisms in the abnormality of Antoinette.

**Keywords:** Sanity, insanity, fear, insecurity, madwoman, defense mechanism, English man, identity

"I became insane with long intervals of horrible sanity (Poe 8). The idea of sanity and insanity is always a crazy subject to think about. The notion of lunacy further complicates in itself since the border between sanity and insanity is too narrow and everyone is blessed with even a spark of madness. The madwoman in the attic is an often discussed topic in literature since the publication of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte. Yet the silenced madwoman's voice starts to echo in every reader's mind with the publication of *The Wide Sargasso Seaby* by the Dominican – British author Jean Rhys. This present study attempts to analyze the 'mad woman's psyche with the Freudian self-defensive mechanisms. Antoinette has been leading the life of a loser since her childhood and her attempt to defend the last ray of hope pushes her into insanity. In addition, the study tries to shed light on the insecurity and fear that Antoinette has been experiencing as an individual.

Antoinette Cosway, the daughter of Mr. Cosway, a slave driver at Coulbri estate is the victim of constant fear and insecurity for several reasons. The novel is

narrated in three parts. The first part renders Antoinette's childhood from her perspective. The point of view shifts from the first person to the third person when Mr. Rochester starts to narrate the second part. Antoinette narrates the third section. Antoinette's mother Annette is from a French colony. Since it is an English colony people of Jamaica do not approve of her. Annette is least interested in the case of Antoinette so she leads a life of neglected childhood. Her only comfort is the servant lady named christophine who is from Martinique and is believed to possess some magical powers. Antoinette has a fake friend named Tia who used to blame her by calling her "white cockroach". It creates some uneasiness in her mind since she is neither black nor white. Tia's refrain 'go away white cockroach, go away, go away (9) disturbs her from within her mind in her lonely moments. At times Antoinette seeks refuge in velvety mossy walls of their family garden- an act of insanity perhaps!

Antoinette's mind has been struggling with fear and insecurity and she fails to withstand it most of the time. The black ex-slaves are a constant threat to the family. This realization intensifies her fear. Tia is nothing other than a thorn in the flesh of Antoinette for she betrays Antoinette by stealing her clothes. Helpless Antoinette is forced to wear her shabby clothes and this infuriates Anette who neglects her out of rage. Christophine later changes her dress and comfort her. Anette's focus is only on her disabled boy child Pierre. She doesn't understand the pain and insecure feel that her poor daughter is confronted with. "all that evening my mother didn't speak to me or look at me and I thought, 'She is ashamed of me, what Tia said is true'(11). Antoinette has a recurring forest dream in which somebody chases her. It makes her even more uneasy and her sleep isn't peaceful. The entire frame change with her mother's wedding with Mr. Mason, an English man. Anette explains their 'creole fears' regarding the servants to Mr. Mason but he mocks her for her fears and trusts his 'faithful servants. But his faith proves wrong when the black servants set fire to their house. That night turns so disastrous in the bitter revenge of the ex-slaves. Somehow they manage to escape from the estate leaving

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everything behind. The fire episode imprints lasting terror in the minds of Antoinette. The flames of the terror burn her psyche at times.

Antoinette experiences a prolonged fever of six weeks after that night. She realizes the sad demise of her young brother and her mother's insane condition when she wakes up to her consciousness. Mason visits her occasionally. Antoinette suffers from the nightmare of being chased by a 'faceless English man'. Antoinette has been suffering without a confidante to reveal her sad condition and at the verges of a breakdown. Her marriage with Mr. Rochester doesn't improve the situation as he is focused on the financial gain of the marriage transaction. While they dine together Antoinette claims that London is like a cold dark dream. She describes the fearful fire episode during her childhood to Rochester in their private time. She starts to love and enjoy his companionship of him. Rochester feels only lust instead of love for her and he wonders about her abnormal behaviors at times. Rochester narrates that Antoinette is happy and pleasant during the daytime but she talks of death and doom at night. Loneliness seems to trigger fear and insanity in her but the presence of Rochester always helps her to withstand such situations. Rochester makes love with her though out of lust and she too enjoys and hunger for it. The scene becomes worse when Daniel Cosway's letter reaches Rochester. Daniel Cosway portrays Antoinette's mother as a psychiatric patient and accuses Antoinette of an immoral character. Rochester starts to detach from Antoinette and it deeply hurts her. The idea of losing his love disturbs her psyche and she tries hard to repress the thought from her consciousness. She becomes possessive about Rochester and slaps Amelie when she passes a comment on him: "your husband he is outside the door and he looks like he sees a zombie. Must be he tired of the sweet honeymoon too"(62). Amelie tries again to upset Antoinette by singing "The white cockroach she buys young man" (63). She loses her control and Antoinette tears the bed sheet with scissors (63). Later she tries to disclose her sad feelings to Rochester but he neither listens to her nor understands her.

Antoinette seeks Christophine's magical power to win him back. She requests Christophine to prepare a love potion for him. Though Christophine tries to make her realize the hypocrisy of Rochester, she never wants to leave him. She is ready even to go to the 'cold London' for his love. Christophine prepares a magical potion as per her

request. But Rochester feels sick after having that potion. With his second visit with Daniel Cosway Rochester neglects her. She tries to disclose the pain of dejection to him but he never allows her. She is suffocated with the harrowing experience of her childhood and the pain of the present life. She laughs occasionally and Rochester becomes surprised. Rochester further insults by calling her Bertha a name that she hates: "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). By believing Daniel Cosway's version of Antoinette's life he questions her identity with the new name. Rochester makes love with Amelie and Antoinette has been listening to their sex play throughout the night. She becomes collapsed with this episode and she leaves Granbois for the next three days. As Baptist said she won't stay in this house. I heard her bedroom door slam and her handbell ring violently"(92). When she returns she becomes totally upset and starts to ring her handbell continuously: She demands alcohol to comfort her mind and Christophine tries to console her. Mr. Rochester forcefully brings her to London and locks her on the third floor of his mansion. Antoinette who is almost out of their sense believes her 'prison' is a temporary place for her. She awaits for Rochester to convince him about her sincere love. But he never lets her do that. Rochester has removed even a mirror- the minimum luxury – from her so-called room. Gradually Antoinette fails to remember who she is. She doesn't have any idea about time or space.

Antoinette may be suffering from 'neurosis anxiety' – a concept introduced by Sigmund Freud in 1895. Anxiety and fear were the major concerns of Freud. As per his idea, human anxiety has to be treated as the output of "accumulated tension" as what happened in the psychic condition of Antoinette. Anxiety further shakes her fear-affected psyche. Freud established that it is sexual excitation that transforms anxiety. According to him, anxiety reacts to libido as vinegar to wine. This observation is rather true in the case of Antoinette since she urges for making love with Rochester and becomes collapsed when Rochester abandons her.

Fear too has a great role in the life of a 'mad woman'. Throughout the narrative, Rhy paints her as a victim of constant fear and anxiety. Though she feels a bit relaxed with the company of Rochester; his dejection forces her to defend herself. In this way, Antoinette's 'uncanny, abnormal' behavior can be seen as her self-

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defense mechanism. Jean Rhys provided ample evidence for the defense mechanism of Bertha. Since the brutal fire episode in her childhood, the sad demise of her mother and brother, and the departure of Christophine Antoinette try to find her comfort zone in Rochester. Her unconditional love towards him in return for his lust is an example of this. When the idea of losing 'his love' strikes her mind; Antoinette defends the terrible notion with her all energy. It must be psychological warfare. As a result of the impacts of the bloody psychological war, Antoinette starts to behave 'abnormal'.

The Freudian self-defense mechanisms such as repression, denial, and sublimation may be helpful as analytic tools to understand Antoinette's 'uncanny' condition. In terms of Freud, repression is an attempt of a person to repress an unwanted idea or desire from the consciousness to the unconscious. When Antoinette overhears the sex play of Rochester with the servant lady she loses her mind. The idea of losing her husband's affection and companionship is terrible for Antoinette. Her three days departure from the home shows how harrowing her experience is. An abnormal Antoinette comes back to the home. She rings the handbell continuously and asks for alcohol. All these are her attempts to hide that unwanted truth from her unconsciousness. A very emotional Antoinette starts to speak her heart out and with each sentence, she continues her sobs. She asks her husband whether he loves her or not. The cold man replies "No, I do not" (95 ). It is more than enough for her and "she laughed at that. A crazy laugh"(95).

Sublimation is a defense mechanism to find expression in the life of Antoinette. According to Freud sublimation is the diversion of instinctual drives. While Amelie comments on Rochester Antoinette loses her temper and she even threatens Amelie. But instead of beating her the exhausted and angry Antoinette tears the bed sheet: "she took a pair of scissors from the round table, cut through the hem and tore the sheet in half, then

each half into strips"(63). Likewise, she leaves Granbois after realizing the physical relationship between her husband and Amelie. It may also be an act of sublimation- she deliberately avoids a direct conflict with them. Thereby she forces herself to divert her attention from the loss that happened to her.

Anna Freud defines denial as a self-defense mechanism that talks of one's refusal to accept a sad reality. In such a situation every so-called normal individual will deny the unhappy events as non-existing. Sad Antoinette accuses Rochester and cries in between. Yet "she stopped crying and said, 'is she so much prettier than I am? Don't you love me at all'"(95). It is the last attempt to 'deny' the sad reality of his betrayal. The mad episode could be averted if he could have comforted her with a soft assurance of 'I love you. Yet he replied "No, I do not"(95). Even after he locks her in London she awaits for talking with Rochester about how much she loves her.

The sad madness of the woman in the attic can be analyzed as her attempt to recover, to stonewall herself. Yet she is labeled as 'the mad'. As she utters "Justice, I've heard that word. It's a cold word...I wrote it down several times and always it looked like a damn cold lie to me. There is no justice" (94).

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