

Independence and freedom of female characters in memoirs of emma courtney, wide s...

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Throughout the years, it has been possible to appreciate how a great variety of styles and genres has developed within literature due to the influence of the literary waves. In this case, the issues of independence and freedom, which will be analysed in the selected works, have a presence that predominates especially within postcolonial genre but also in literary works where female characters have an important role within the story. These characters may or not be protagonists of the novels as well as being conditioned by society of the period. In this essay, therefore, we will analyse how these concepts are reflected in the following selected novels: *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* by Mary Hays, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys and *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus.

During the last decades, the number of feminists has progressively increased and developed a critique against the traditional ethics related to the issue of autonomy. At the beginning of the 1970s, those feminists began to refute the way in which mainstream philosophy promoted autonomy as a universal ideal without recognising the innumerable ways society has denied women the means to achieve it. In addition, they also went against the concept of “autonomy” itself, “pointing out that the autonomous subject — self-made, self-directing and self-sufficient — is an unmistakably masculine ideal, modelled on the social roles and fantasies of men, leading some to question its ultimate value for women.” (Norton, 2013) The Age of Enlightenment was another focus of attention for feminist critiques but although initially it was not easy to appreciate it, during that period there was also a development of an imminent feminist critique that we can see represented with a greater clarity in Hays’ work, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796).

Hays' novel can be seen as a Bildungsroman because it is a story about the development and maturity of Emma Courtney from her childhood until her adulthood with the aim of getting recognition of her identity in the world. However, the novel does not conclude with the protagonist's realisation, unlike *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* (1914) by James Joyce, so keeping in mind social and historical limitations that women had to suffer at the time, it could be difficult to understand if it is possible for a woman to end her story without getting married and still be happy. In addition, the text is also considered a great reference of feminist critique not only because the author has a great ability to convey through her work the desires and frustrations that women had to live in English society of the 18th century, but because of her attempts to combine different traditional values such as freedom and restraint, female and male, reason and passion, public and private.

Hays reflects throughout her novel, especially when Emma is considered an adult among society after being eighteen years old, the problem that society imposed on women at the time, which is to deny the opportunity of exercising their aptitudes constructively. At the age of eighteen, Emma loses her beloved aunt Mrs Morton, who had a "romantic manner of thinking" due to the old romances, and her aloof father, a man of pleasure who never loved anyone else but himself, she finds herself alone with a poor inheritance and an incomplete emotional education. After her father's death, she realises that "the small pittance bequeathed to me was insufficient to preserve me from dependence." (ch. 11) She has limited options of works, all

of them related to the servitude, but her “ mind panted for freedom, for social intercourse, for scenes in motion, where the active curiosity of my temper might find a scope wherein to range and speculate.” (ch. 11) But Emma also realises that among society of her time, her virtues as woman are strongly limited or not recognised. However, due to the vulnerability among society, being legal, economic, emotional or social; Emma feels the necessity to get independence as well as her mentor Mr Francis urges her: “ The first lesson of enlightened reason, the great fountain of heroism and virtue, the principle by which alone man can become what man is capable of being, is independence.” (ch. 11) However, as Emma also declares with anger: ““Why call woman, miserable, oppressed, and impotent, woman — crushed, and then insulted why call her to independence — which not nature, but the barbarous and accursed laws of society, have denied her? This is mockery!” (ch. 12) Through the passage, Hays reflect how patriarchal society undermines female “ independence” and Emma’s words debunk Mr Francis’ suggestions since independence is precisely the thing society denies her.

As we can appreciate, contemporary society that is shown in Hays’ novel is still strongly oppressive from a female perspective and it is society what encourages women like Emma to pursue that feeling of self-sufficiency and freedom within the novel.

“ Civilization is yet distempered and imperfect; the inequalities of society, by fostering artificial wants, and provoking jealous competitions, have generated selfish and hostile passions. [...]. Endeavour to contract your

wants, and aspire only to a rational independence. [...] let discernment precede confidence.” (ch. 9)

If we consider Mr Courtney’s position regarding his daughter’s education, we can see how it differs slightly from the conventional rules established within society regarding education for women. As a gentleman says while he is talking with Mr Courtney, “ knowledge and learning, are unsufferably masculine in a woman [...]: lines of thinking destroy the dimples of beauty; aping the reason of man, they lose the exquisite, fascinating charm, in which consists their true empire.” (ch. 7) After Emma’s arrival at her new home, her father does not overlook that her daughter’s thoughts are more emotional than rational, giving priority to themes related to fiction, so he decides to correct her education: “ your fancy requires a rein rather than a spur. Your studies, for the future, must be of a soberer nature.” (ch. 7) At first, Emma does not welcome the task imposed by her father to follow a course of historical reading, but this genre progressively manages to attract her attention and curiosity. However, Emma also declares about the genre that she “ could never acquire a taste for this species of composition” (ch. 8) due to complexity and numerous conflicts that constitute it, unlike genres of poetry and fiction, where she always entertains herself. All the education created from the tasks imposed by her father and Emma’s ability of being self-taught made her mind begins to be emancipated and she is able to reason and exercise her thoughts with freedom. All of these experiences contribute to the development of Emma’s character and, more specifically,

they prepare the way for her “ fatal” love for Augustus Harley. (Norton, 2013)

Hays’ novel, however, shows how Emma’s obsession with self-sufficiency “ can obscure the ethical value of human relationships, the extent to which we depend on each other to live full and flourishing lives.” (Norton 2013)

Emma’s feelings for Augustus begin to flourish when she and Mrs Harley become closer and Augustus’ mother begins to tell her anecdotes about her son, an event that happens before these two characters meet. However, those feelings of affection are inseparable from her desire for self-improvement to live a useful and productive life. Mrs Harley, in addition, feels a special affection for Emma and considers her as another daughter. All of this will make the protagonist spends more time in the residence of her neighbour and Augustus becomes a philosophical mentor for her, thus providing her a greater intellectual development. Oppression, even so, that denied eighteenth-century women the right of being able to participate in the wider world created by and for men together with her passionate desire to improve herself, Emma develops a dependence on Augustus that is clearly reflected during their dialogues and in the letter that she sends him. When Augustus begins to move away from her side, Emma fears that she would be unable to continue cultivating and improving her talents to live the productive life she desires if she did not have Augustus by her side. In this way, Hays shows a situation that was very common for all those women who were not satisfied with the traditional tasks of doing household chores and raising children, but they aspired to everything else and wanted to achieve

an autonomous life under the conventional and oppressive rules imposed by society.

Finally, Emma's decision to marry Mr Montague can be interpreted as the only means of escape that is offered to the protagonist after a life full of effort and dedication to achieve self-sufficiency that was never granted. Emma adopts the role of wife and mother in her new life with Mr Montague, although it does not make her forget her purpose of living a useful and productive life since she works as an auxiliary nurse when Augustus arrives injured at her home. As a conclusion, the only purpose of the novel from the point of view of the protagonist was to tell her adopted son Augustus the years of her youth to learn from them and avoid a similar romantic tragedy in his own life.

Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), on the other hand, is known for being the prequel to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. It is a work of postcolonial genre, so the themes of "independence" and "freedom" have an important role within the story and, in addition, it is analysed from different points of view. The protagonist of the novel, Antoinette Cosway or Mason, is the character known as Bertha in Brontë's novel but Rhys places the novel in an earlier period where the Abolition of Slavery Act changed the political status of the West Indies from protectorates British to colonies, generating numerous problems for families such as Antoinette's. Antoinette's life is full of oppression and suffering: during her childhood, she never felt the warmth of protection and during her adulthood, she suffers cultural and gender oppression. Are those types of details which Rhys plays with to show the

meanings of “ slavery” and “ freedom” within different social class as well as to create metaphors such as presenting European women as slaves within that new world.

Rhys’ purpose consisted on creating a novel about the character of Mrs Rochester in Jane Eyre, from who there is almost no information, to know her closer and comprehend the reason why she became a madwoman. During her childhood, Antoinette accumulates mainly hostile experiences. Her status as Creole along with her family’s economic status generated numerous problems since she did not belong to English white class, but neither to working class of blacks and mulattos: “ They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. [...] ‘ Go away white cockroach, go away, go away.’ [...] ‘ Nobody want you, Go away.’” Those words, promulgated by a girl against Antoinette, reflect the deep hatred felt by former black slaves. However, hate and discontent do not only remain retained in words, but also in actions due to Mr Mason bought new servants after his marriage with Annette for their new life at Coulibri Estate. Far from settling for harassment against them, those individuals decided to set fire to the Manson residence and Antoinette’s family is forced to flee the place before being condemned by them. The episode ends with Antoinette’s young brother, Pierre, dead as well as a cruel and cold memory in the protagonist’s mind about her last meeting with Tia, her old friend. The girl, who knowing her place and side as a daughter of former black slaves, attacked her when Antoinette ran to her seeking help, expressing in that way they belonged to different sides. With those circumstances that culminate the first part of the novel, Rhys shows

how the meaning and state of freedom for some people can be a condemnation for others.

The passage in which Mr Mason decides to present Antoinette to society as an adult woman will mark a before and after in the story since not only her marriage and relationship with the unnamed Rochester will begin, but it will involve the first act of theft of identity for Antoinette. Part two begins with a change of narrator where the new perspective will be offered by Rochester, through which we can appreciate his difficulties in adapting to the new West Indian environment. Rochester's fleeting vision of the truth and reality around him is distorted. He is surrounded by characters who act according to the role that has been demanded, including Antoinette: "the doll's smile came back-nailed to her face." Rochester is aware that always something eludes him and, being a man of English upper class that always wants to have the control of everything, the situation supposes a problem for him.

The term "obeah" in the novel refers to the religious practice that took place among slaves in the West Indies and consisted in the theft of the spirit to reduce human beings to a state of puppets, dolls or zombies. Both characters, Rochester and Antoinette, practice this ritual with the other in different ways.

Daniel Cosway, one of Alexander Cosway's bastard children, has an important role in the story because he will be the one to provide Rochester with a letter with information about his wife and her family that until now was unknown for him. In the letter, Daniel not only alludes to a case of incest

that took place between Antoinette and his cousin Sandi, but also warns Rochester about the madness that runs through the genes of Antoinette's family exposing Annette as an example. Antoinette's mother, as her daughter tells, began to show signs of madness and melancholy from her earliest memories, but her condition worsened after the fire and death of her little brother. A short time later, Annette died while Antoinette was studying at the school of the convent. Rochester, fearing that this situation would happen again with his wife, begins to adopt a series of behaviours towards her as. He was more distant with her and started calling her by another name, thus having the second act of theft of identity: " Bertha is not my name, you are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name, I know, that's obeah too."

The image that Rhys shows us of Antoinette, on the other hand, is " connected to nature, beautiful, vain, poorly-educated, melancholic, and love-starved." (Gilchrist, 2012) The Abolition of Slavery had a negative influence on her childhood, as we have already seen, and caused an existential crisis along with a death wish that would lead her to fulfil her last dream in the Rochester Mansion. However, Antoinette also develops " slave" qualities that create a dependency on men that places her in a precarious but erotically powerful recurring dream. These qualities are developed because of her nostalgia for the image of a life under slavery that no other character could corroborate. As she tells Rochester of Coulibri, " If I could make you see it, because they destroyed it and it is only here now." Antoinette's words carry a double meaning: on the one hand, she could refer to how the English

metropolitan destroyed the plantation by freeing the slaves and leaving them in poor condition. On the other hand, she could refer to the terrorist act and loaded with hatred of the former slaves against their family, destroying Coulibri after its restoration. (Gilchrist, 2012)

The only true purpose of Antoinette was to get the affection of Rochester. She gave herself to him sexually because she loved him and feared that her happiness would not last: “ If I could die. Now, when I am happy.” However, Rochester forces himself to rationalise his own feelings because of the issues of incest and racial impurity. Although he feels a great desire for his wife, he also declares that desire is not love and, therefore, has no feelings for Antoinette because she is different: “ I did not love her. I was thirsty of 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.” Antoinette did not overlook that something was wrong in her marriage since her husband was distant and they slept in separate beds, so she decides to go to Christophine to help her reconquer Rochester, who ends up offering her a love potion — a kind of aphrodisiac — that allows them to have a night of intense passion. All that remains of it is Antoinette’s ripped nightgown on the floor, the bruises on her body, and a smile on her lips that Rochester refuses to believe is real. The submission of Antoinette during the sexual act can be interpreted as “ a psychological corrector of his childhood neglect and a recreation of historical slavery” (Gilchrist, 2012) where they simulate the master-slave relationship that gives her the feeling of freedom that she has always longed for. Nevertheless, Rochester considers this act of unbridled sexuality as a

madness that leads to physical corruption and, fearing that Christophine's obeah magic and Antoinette's passion reach more, he decides to reduce his wife to a soulless being: " Like a doll. Even when she threatened me with the bottle she had a marionette quality." In this way, Rochester becomes the practitioner of the colonial obeah who, considering his culture and race as superior, steals Antoinette's spirit and drives her mad. The decline of Antoinette will take place after discovering the infidelity of Rochester, thus making her his lifeless puppet.

Finally, the last part of the novel shows an Antoinette immersed in madness and deprived of any existing freedom. Locked in an attic and with a guardian who guards her, the protagonist begins to doubt what is real and what is not. Her fuzzy dreams and red dress are the only things that reminded her of her previous life. The novel ends by showing an ironic relationship between the tragic events of the parrot that died in the fire of Coulibri with Antoinette's death amid the flames. Just as Mr Mason caused the death of the parrot by clipping its wings, thus preventing him from escaping from the flames, Rochester deprived Antoinette of any freedom by cutting off his wings, thus alludes to the colonial desire of a master to control and break his slave. Antoinette's suicide, therefore, can be interpreted as an act of rebellion against his master and the fact that Tia was present in that dream along with the fact of Antoinette jumping into the flames to go with her can symbolise the path to freedom and the moment of redemption of her life.

The third and last work, *I Love Dick* (1997) by Chris Kraus, is an epistolary and autobiographical novel that tells the protagonist's romantic obsession,

known as Chris Kraus, with Dick, an academic colleague of Chris' husband, after their first and only meeting. During the more than two hundred letter that Chris writes addressed to Dick, sometimes along with those of Sylvère, the protagonist creates a universe where Dick is an object of devotion and manipulates his identity “ into a faceless, patriarchal screen onto which she projects her sexual fantasies, personal anxieties, and critical interventions.” (Fisher, 2012)

In her letters, Chris recounts her humiliations by naming not only Dick's refusal of to the proposal to maintain a romantic relationship with her but also insults and condescension from society that she has to endure for being the wife of a successful public figure. However, Chris also proves to be a dedicated woman in her work and with determination: “ Chris continued making independent films they'd always be juggling money, thousands here and thousands there.” As well as dealing with everything related to the economic issue within her marriage, from checking invoices and paying taxes to buying and renting properties to make a profit. In this way, “ with Chris' help Sylvère's career was becoming lucrative enough to offset the losses incurred by hers.” While he gets top billing, she is on the guest list as his “ plus one” (Fisher, 2012). The monotonous and fruitless situation that Chris has to live is also conditioned by the failure in her professional career, perhaps because she had not enough talent for making films or because society underestimated her only for being a woman. All this causes her to become a “ parasite” within her marriage, a financial and emotional burden from her husband's resource. Chris considered herself a staunch feminist

who would achieve success by herself but failure and economic constraints forced her to be dependent on her husband: “ Chris [...] smiled to think that in order to continue making work she would have to be supported by her husband. ‘ Who’s independent?’ [...] ‘ The maid? The bureaucrat? The banker? No!’ Yeah. In late capitalism, was anyone truly free?”

The first and only encounter with Dick, however, would cause the situation to take an unexpected turn in favour of Chris. The trigger of her love letters was the process of deconstruction that Sylvère and she carried out after their meeting with Dick. Sylvère, noticing that Chris could not stop thinking about that man, proposed that she could write a letter to him where she expressed what she felt. From that moment both Sylvère and, mainly, Chris began to write individually a series of letter to Dick. This makes Chris’ feelings increase and the diary provides her with the freedom she needed to be able to express herself as she wanted, without limitations or obstacles, using Dick as an object of devotion and shaping him to her liking within her new world.

As the novel progresses, we can see how Chris’ fantasies become more real, highlighting the erotic theme among her pages. As she admits, “ when you’re living intensely in your head there is no difference between what you imagine and what actually takes place. Therefore, you’re both omnipotent and powerless.”

The situation, on the other hand, becomes harmful from Dick’s point of view. Chris correspondence lurks, as the author herself within the novel when she decides to go to the place where he is only to see him. This psycho-sexual

obsession is reflected in the different entries in the diary that, in turn, become weapons that Dick cannot use in his defence. Chris perverts the meaning of the lyrics and uses Dick as an exchange object first between her and Sylvère and then between her and the reader. The impotence and fear that Dick shows in his only letter to them to answer all the letters that Chris wrote to him is not a mystery because of the intensity of the narrative and the intention of publishing the book using his name. In addition, Dick fails to find protection under patriarchy or “the law of the father.” Chris’ feminine subterfuge turns Dick’s own logic against him, as she insists on the excess produced by the system’s supplementary parts—bad taste, affect, contamination—that by dominance’s own logic cannot be taken into the court record. (Fisher, 2012)

Possibly the reason why Chris felt more connected with Dick, despite not having any kind of physical or romantic relationship with him outside of her fantasies, than with Sylvère could be a matter of control and independence. Within her “relationship” with Dick, she was the one who had the control of the situation and she was not judged or felt in the shadow of anyone, while within her marriage to Sylvère, Chris lacked independence, especially economically, and had to depend on her husband’s support to undertake and continue with her projects. Therefore, thanks to the affective obsession with a man, from whom she barely knew anything about, Chris manages to disengage from her husband and eliminate “the relentlessly accommodating structure of patriarchy with little appreciation for the implications of its collapse for her own survival without it.” (Fisher, 2012)