

# Wide sargasso sea essay



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A patriarchal society is one whereby men are the decision makers and hold positions of power and prestige. Patriarchy refers to a societal structure whereby men are dominant not in number or in force but in their access to status related power and decision making power. In these societies, women are presented with an interpretation of the world made by men, and a history of the world defined by men's actions. Rhys presents her interpretation and opinions on first-wave feminism in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Second wave feminism and beyond suggests that men exploit women in nearly every aspect of their lives. Radical feminists define patriarchy as ' a system of social structures and practises in which men dominate, oppress and exploit'. *Wide Sargasso Sea* purposely highlights problems in its conceptions of gender. It is suggested that all women, including Antoinette, in Rhys' novels are exposed to the financial and gendered constraints of an imperial world. This imperial world is created and controlled by white men and is therefore extremely based on patriarchy.

Antoinette is the development of a forced dependency on the world that excludes her. Annette feels helplessly imprisoned at the Coulibri estate after the death of her husband, repeating the word ' marooned' over and over again. This repetition of the word ' marooned' implores sympathy and emphasises imprisonment. Antoinette can be suggested to be doomed to a form of enslavement in her love for and dependency upon her husband. Due to the patriarchal society of the time, the women's childlike dependence upon both fathers and husbands represents a figurative slavery that is made literal in Antoinette's physical captivity.

It is this childlike dependence on the nearest man that causes the demise of both Antoinette and Annette. Both women marry Englishmen in the hopes of ridding their fears as vulnerable outsiders, however, the men betray and abandon them. Antoinette does not even know where to begin to desire change or to assert herself. In her novel Rhys considers the possibility that perhaps, the gulf between men and women cannot be breached, suggesting the differences are so established and internalized that Antoinette cannot ever have the sense of security, happiness and pride that a woman may desire and deserve.

Wide Sargasso Sea presents a more post-modern form of feminism which takes into account the complexity of male-female interactions, in an attempt to try to change the ideas of patriarchy and its deep-set gender norms. This attempt to try change the ideas of patriarchy can be seen within the novella when we are not shown what happens with Antoinette and the candle in the closing as it does not show us any achievement to change opinion that she may have achieved through these actions. During the time of the novel, women's role in society was for them to be submissive; however, Antoinette is very passionate.

For Antoinette, marriage is seen as an oppressive force that chains women to their husbands, taking away their independence. For men in the novel, marriage increases their wealth by granting them access to their wives' inheritance. Antoinette can be seen to have passionate rages against her husband, Rochester, when he describes " her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring". Antoinette asks if he even loves her at all, and she bites his arm when he tries to take the drink from

her. She is Mr. Rochester's "red-eyed wild-haired stranger who was my wife".

This clearly suggests how Antoinette can be seen as a passionate female living in a world in which she must learn to control her fiery personality. Here she can be seen as a threat to male patriarch. Her appearance is used as a metaphor to demonstrate how she is a threat as her "hair is wild and her eyes too". The society of this time is pre-disposed, due to patriarchy, to seeing her as a threat and so they condemn her. Antoinette is oppressed by her arranged marriage to Mr Rochester, a man who doesn't love her. According to English custom, Antoinette is financially dependent on Mr Rochester, as he controls all her wealth.

In Part Three of the novel where the novel is described from Antoinette's point of view, she describes the key to the attic where she is kept prisoner as "the colour of fire and sunset", indicating that fire is a symbol of power. The novel ends with her dreaming of setting the house on fire, which is the only tool she knows how to use to express her rage. With a candle in her hand, Antoinette claims, "Now I know why I was brought here and what I have to do". As she is now stripped of her name and her country, the candle in her hand represents the only empowerment she is able to preserve.

By Rhys leaving the novella as a cliff-hanger, and not allowing us to witness the fire, she suggests that patriarchy is too strong to break through and that therefore women cannot fulfil their desires and are destined to be silenced. This idea also portrays Antoinette to be different from the passionate and fiery, extremely feminist, personality she is suggested in other parts of the

novella to possess. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a three part narrative, the middle part being in the first person voice of Rochester, and the other two being the voice of Antoinette.

This narrative structure skews ideals of patriarchy by challenging concepts of narrative authority, particularly of a white male authority, as Rochester is inserted in between Antoinette's two accounts. Antoinette grows up in a world with little love to offer her and is cared for as a child by inattentive and dysfunctional relatives. Because of this, Antoinette is unable to define herself by rejecting the labels others place on her and form a distinguished identity of her own. Madness, the only thing she seems to be labelled as, is Antoinette's inheritance as her father was said to be mad, and her mother, Annette, was also.

Antoinette's upbringing and environment worsens her inherited condition, as she feels rejected and displaced, with no one to love her. She becomes paranoid and has vivid dreams and violent outbursts. It is significant that women like Antoinette and her mother are the most susceptible to madness, pushed as they are into female docility. Because of their madness, they live invisible lives under the patriarchal society. From this we can suggest that Antoinette's madness did not stem from the patriarchal society but that she gained her madness through inheriting specific traits from her parents.

This may also explain more about why she is isolated from society as it could be due to the fact that she was already mad and so therefore Rochester locked her away. When Coulibri is set on fire by the natives, it destroys Antoinette's life. Mr Mason clipped the wings on Annette's parrot, so when

Coulibri burns down, the bird “ made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching”. The parrot provides a fitting metaphor for the death of Annette, Antoinette’s mother, whose “ wings were clipped” by Mr Mason when he refused to let her leave the estate despite her misery on the island.

Annette’s parrot, Coco, symbolically mimics the life of Annette and her daughter. The bird symbolises the bound captivity of both mother and daughter. The figurative clipping of their feathers by insensitive English husbands who see them as threatening free spirits. The parrots fall from the burning glacial, a recurring symbol of fire, mirrors Antoinette’s fall from the battlements of Rochester’s English home. As an important symbol throughout the novel, mirrors underscore the important questions of identity that Rhys highlights about her central characters and may also suggest reason for her insanity.

Annette constantly looked for her own reflection, a habit adopted by her daughter, and one that indicates their shared need to be visible in a world that ignores them. By putting Antoinette in a prison with no mirrors, Rochester intensifies her feeling of disconnection and it can be said that it is this isolation that fuels her ‘ insanity’ supporting her radical decision to burn down the house. He has already deprived her of her name; by calling her Bertha he effectively erases her existence as Antoinette.

Because of this, she does not know what to call herself, and without a face, she becomes a ghost to society. This can be linked to male patriarchy showing that women are victims by suggesting that women are unstable,

highlighting a possible anti-feminist point of view. However, it may also be interpreted to show how women are a threat to male patriarchy and they therefore feel the need to lock them away and silence them. Rhys' novella of *Wide Sargasso Sea* ultimately builds on the predominant first-wave traditional feminist text of *Jane Eyre* that explains how women strive for equality.

This want for equality that is highlighted can be seen to threaten male power and so therefore could be seen as radical feminism due to how it says that men are the problem, warning the patriarchal society. *Wide Sargasso Sea* however, ends just as Antoinette is about to be liberated and is therefore she is suggested not to be allowed freedom highlighting the female role as subdued victims beneath the patriarchal power. Through this, Rhys' novella can be seen to suggest that we as women need to speak out and do something about the inequality existing in this time period.