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The Postcolonial Gothic: Madness, Memory, and The Haunted Woman in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Gothic literature, which originally denoted the macabre, the mysterious, or a form of medieval architecture, has changed drastically. Postcolonial Gothic literature brought to the fore the aftermath of colonialism and its impact on the colonised. Themes such as colonial trauma, gendered madness, etc., found their way into the periphery of Gothic literature. The present study examines how madness is not restricted to being a psychological disorder, but a strong reaction against patriarchal and societal oppressions. In this context, female madness emerges as a site of resistance, challenging the traditional notions of sanity, identity, and social order. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* will be examined in a comparative study of how madness and memory haunt and traumatise the characters and drive them into madness. In this paper, the qualitative literary research method is used through textual and thematic analysis.In Rhys, it is a Jamaican creole woman and her daughter who are driven to madness due to their white husbands, representing the coloniser, and the society's rejection also plays a role in alienating them. In Roy's case, a Syrian Christian woman and her twin children try to break free of the class-creed difference by flouting the dictates of society and family, destroyed, leaving only inherited trauma. Both writers reconstruct earlier notions of sanity, identity and social order through postcolonial Gothic. (230 words)

Key words: madness, gothic, memory, trauma, haunted, colonial

Introduction

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, the term "Gothic" refers to "a style of fiction characterised by the use of desolate or remote settings and macabre, mysterious, or violent incidents." It also denotes a form of medieval architecture marked by pointed arches, vaulted ceilings, and an emphasis on verticality and light. For a long time, Gothic was closely linked to Romanticism and the Enlightenment in literature, and it remains associated with medieval and revival architecture.However, beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, a critical re-evaluation of the Gothic extended its boundaries to include horror, science fiction, speculative fiction, magical realism, and the supernatural. This expansion has allowed the Gothic to become a fertile site for exploring themes of colonial trauma, cultural dislocation, and gendered madness. In postcolonial contexts, these elements are evident in works such as Toni Morrison's Beloved, Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy, Bessie Head's A Question of Power, and Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain, and so on. In the works of Arundhati Roy and Jean Rhys, the Gothic resurfaces through the haunted woman, fractured memory, and psychological disturbance, as well as figures and tropes that signal a deeper cultural and historical unrest.

The theme of female madness is central to both Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. In literary tradition, Shakespeare's Ophelia, from *Hamlet,* has often been viewed as the archetype of the "madwoman," embodying the intersection of gender, grief, and loss of agency. "Ophelia's neurosis sets her in contrast with Hamlet's self-imposed, methodical madness, the former being, as the etymology of hysteria tells us, organic, visceral, and unruly, while the latter is rational, respectable, and deliberate." (Percec and Punga 420) In the postcolonial contexts, madness frequently becomes a subversive response to patriarchal and colonial oppression.

Female characters who are denied voice and autonomy often turn to psychological collapse as a form of resistance or retreat. The discourse on women and madness intersects with a range of theoretical fields, including psychoanalysis and psychiatry, sociolinguistics, behaviourism, gender studies, sociology, and anthropology. These interdisciplinary perspectives help to understand how madness functions as a culturally and politically charged expression of dissent.

Methodology

The analytical-interpretative-descriptive qualitative research methodology is employed in the present work. It is based on the application of critical views on the selected texts. The method involves a close reading of the selected literary texts, as well as the interpretation and analysis of the issues addressed in the work.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

Wide Sargasso Sea is inspired by Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). This is regarded as a prequel to Jane Eyre. Brontë's character, "the mad woman in the attic," the first wife of Edward Rochester, the crazy Bertha Mason, became a controversial, intriguing character for feminist writers. Though she dies, she ignites a new series of thoughts about the suppressed female voice. Brontë's "Gothicism far transcends the mere attempt to excite: it induces a genuine sense of suffering. The madwoman in Jane Eyre is a profoundly suggestive type of the irrational. She has been seen by feminists as the epitome of the female rage born of sexual repression, particularly in relation to her confinement within a secret room." (Mulvey-Roberts). Madness becomes a part of the gothic in Brontë's novel.

Wide Sargasso Sea begins in Jamaica and follows the life of its protagonist, Antoinette Cosway, through a fragmented narrative structure. The first part of the novel is narrated by Antoinette in the first person, offering insight into her troubled childhood and the social tensions of post-Emancipation Jamaica. The second part alternates between the perspectives of Antoinette and her unnamed English husband (a character often identified as a reimagined Rochester from Jane Eyre), revealing the disintegration of their relationship. Part Three begins with the voice of Grace Poole, Antoinette's caretaker, before returning to Antoinette's perspective as the novel concludes.

The sociopolitical backdrop of the novel is the Emancipation Act of 1833, which granted freedom to enslaved people in the British colonies. This shift disrupts the colonial hierarchy, and Antoinette's father, a white slave owner, loses his wealth. Her mother, Annette, a white Creole from Martinique, finds herself alienated from both the black and white communities.

The events at Coulibri Estate exemplify a potent mixture of superstition, social tension, and gothic horror. The sense of terror begins with the mysterious and sudden death of Annette's husband, which sets the tone for the family's decline. Annette becomes increasingly alienated, socially and psychologically, as she is isolated and poor. To escape her precarious situation, she marries Mr. Mason, an Englishman who fails to comprehend the enmity the local Black community feels towards the Whites in the post-Emancipation period. The Gothic atmosphere increases as Coulibri grows eerily silent, with all the servants vanishing one by one, foreboding the violent unrest to come. The burning of the estate by former slaves marks a climactic moment of chaos and terror. The image of the family's pet parrot catching fire, its flaming wings seen as an ominous sign by the Black locals, adds a surreal symbolic layer to the scene. The horror is aggravated by the death of Antoinette's disabled brother Pierre during the fire, an event that destroys Annette's mental stability. The destruction of Coulibri not only signals the collapse of the colonial estate but also triggers the psychological disintegration of Annette, marking the beginning of the Gothic spiral that will eventually capture Antoinette as well.

Her Aunt Cora raises Antoinette until she is married off to an Englishman, later identified as Rochester, through an arrangement made by Richard Mason, her stepbrother, who offers a financial incentive. The Gothic elements of the novel intensify when the couple retreats to Granbois in Massacre for their honeymoon, a place marked by isolation, disorientation, and psychological unravelling. The eerie, creepy atmosphere of Massacre comes out through the inhabitants, the wilderness, bewildering Nature, obeah magic and potions and even the "alien" moon.

When her husband takes her to England, he changes her name to "Bertha," effectively erasing her identity and imposing a new one that aligns with his own cultural and religious expectations. Antoinette passively accepts this renaming, viewing it as a possible escape from her previous existence as a marginalised "white cockroach" in the Caribbean. Rochester thus becomes a symbol of the coloniser, while Antoinette, renamed Bertha, embodies the West Indian Creole woman, who suffers the dual oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy. Like her mother, she is silenced, othered, and ultimately exploited by her white English husband. Her final act of burning down Thornfield Hall is not merely a symptom of madness but a symbolic gesture of liberation, a reclaiming of agency and identity in the face of systemic erasure. Her voice is not that of a madwoman but a voice of resistance and reason. Mesut writes,

In patriarchal society, the burning of the house can be seen as the final point of madness, but it is the reflection of vengeance; it is the reflection of Antoinette's activity. She tries to escape from the attic, from the

life which causes her madness. She can be seen victim of patriarchal society; her weakness causes her self-destruction; this self-destruction Consumes and destroys her, but her madness plays an effective role in fighting against Patriarchal and colonial society. (Günenç 212)

In Wide *Sargasso Sea,* memory functions not as a stable recounting of the past but as a fragmented and haunting force that parallels Antoinette's fall into madness. These memories, which are both personal and cultural, reinscribe colonial trauma, gendered silencing, and psychological disintegration, thus situating Antoinette as a haunted woman in a postcolonial Gothic landscape.

Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things:

The God of Small Things explores the story of forbidden love between an upper-class Syrian Christian woman, Ammu and the outcaste Dalit Velutha. The seemingly insignificant "small things" lead to bigger issues in the Communist backdrop. The love affair does not just destroy them but their families as well. Ammu's di-zygotic twins- Rahel and Estha- are traumatised and cannot function as normal individuals. When they are separated in childhood, they make walls around themselves. The story starts at the meeting point of twins after 23 years of separation and ends in incest.

The Gothic mode in *The God of Small Things* is evoked through the portrayal of haunting spaces, particularly the Ipe family house in Ayemenem and Kari Swipe's house, later referred to as the "History House" by the children. These spaces are more than physical settings; they become repositories of generational secrets, unspoken fears, and buried trauma. The Ayemenem house embodies the weight of familial and societal repression, echoing the classic Gothic trope of the haunted house as a site of psychological disturbance and historical residue.

The patriarchal head, Pappachi, harbours a deep resentment over not receiving recognition for his discovery of a new species of moth during his time in the British administration. This unacknowledged achievement transforms into a symbolic entity, Pappachi's moth, which becomes a recurring metaphor for suppressed rage, frustration, and a haunting familial curse. His cruelty toward his wife, Mammachi, reflects the entrenched misogyny within the Ipe household and sets the tone for the generational suffering that follows. The curse of Pappachi's moth seems to linger, haunting his daughter Ammu and granddaughter Rahel, both of whom struggle against the weight of inherited trauma. Roy's novel is steeped in the rigid norms and hierarchies of upper-class Kerala Syrian Christian society, marked by gendered violence, caste-obsessed attitudes, and a colonial hangover that manifests as cultural elitism and social snobbery.

Madness, in the conventional sense, is not present in Ammu per se; instead, it manifests more visibly in her son Esthappan. However, Ammu experiences a different, more complex form of psychological distress, one rooted in her position as a divorced woman and single mother with no locus standi in a deeply patriarchal and caste-conscious society. Her inner turmoil is shaped by the tension between her role as a marginalised woman and her irrepressible desire for freedom, love, and agency. Ammu is haunted by her past choices and the weight of social judgment. Her desire to preserve her children's innocence to freeze time by treating them as perpetually small, even as they outgrow their childhood, is an expression of her desperate attempt to resist the relentless passage of time and impending loss. Her "madness," then, is not pathological but emblematic of a woman tormented by the conflict between desire and duty, rebellion and repression, a madness shaped not by delusion but by the suffocating structures of gender, class, and family.

Ammu's aunt, Baby Kochamma, is another character deeply haunted by memory, specifically, the unfulfilled longing of an unrequited love in her youth. Her lifelong bitterness stems from this emotional failure, which calcifies into pettiness and cruelty. In her old age, Baby Kochamma becomes a grotesque figure of decay and repression. Adorned in excessive gold jewellery, her body puffed up and disconnected from the world outside, she embodies a kind of living relic of a failed past. The Ayemenem house, now under her control, mirrors her inner deterioration: the windows remain shut, the air stale, and the outside world is kept at bay while she loses herself in television soap operas. In her obsession with control and moral policing, she becomes the embodiment of the decaying moral order of the Ipe household. Her presence introduces a quiet horror to the novel—a psychological Gothic rooted in guilt, regret, and the slow erosion of the self.

Estha's madness takes the form of extreme withdrawal into himself, shaped by multiple traumatic experiences. As a child, he is sexually abused by the "Orangedrink Lemondrink Man," an incident that leaves lifelong psychological scars. To save his mother and under pressure from Baby Kochamma, the young Estha is forced to lie to the police about Velutha, the man he deeply loved and trusted. Though only a child, Estha is fully aware of the falsehood he is telling, and the knowledge of this betrayal becomes a burden that haunts him for the rest of his life, silently eroding him from within. This is apparent in the tragic lines from the novel.

The Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said yes.
Childhood tiptoed out.
Silence slid in like a bolt.
Someone switched off the light and Velutha disappeared. (Roy 320)

This trauma, combined with his forced separation from his mother and twin sister, leads him to become emotionally detached and silent, unable to communicate with others. His retreat from speech and social

interaction is a psychological response to the violence and abandonment he endures. Rahel, by contrast, internalises the same trauma differently. Although more outwardly functional, she is unable to form a meaningful relationship with her spouse, and her marriage eventually ends in divorce. Like a curse passed down through generations, Rahel inherits the emotional wounds of her mother, Ammu, and carries them into her adult relationships.

The History House in The God of Small Things becomes the quintessential Gothic space that is isolated, decaying, and haunted by the past. Originally owned by Kari Saipu, the Englishman who "went native," the house is steeped in colonial history and scandal, making it a physical manifestation of both personal and cultural transgression. Its atmosphere is eerie and oppressive, marked by abandonment, silence, and the weight of unspeakable events. When Rahel, Estha, and Velutha seek refuge there, the house becomes a stage for betrayal and violence. The spatial arrangement, Velutha sleeping on one side of the wall, the twins on the other, unbeknownst to each other's presence, increases the sense of tragic irony and spatial dislocation typical of the Gothic. The children become silent spectators as Velutha is brutally beaten by the police inside this crumbling relic of colonialism. Thus, the History House transforms into a symbol of inherited trauma, broken histories, and suppressed memories. It mirrors the fractured identities and buried pain of the characters, a place where the past refuses to remain silent, and violence echoes through the walls.

Conclusion:

In both Wide Sargasso Sea and The God of Small Things, memory emerges as a disruptive, non-linear force that entwines with madness and trauma, especially in the lives of their female protagonists. For Antoinette, memory is fragmentary and deeply tied to her psychological disintegration; her recollections of her mother's rejection, the fire at Coulibri, and her estrangement from her husband surface in disjointed, haunting fragments that mirror her descent into madness. These are not simply personal memories but postcolonial echoes of displacement and cultural rupture. Similarly, in Roy's novel, memory is a palimpsest of the grief and loss that Arundhati Roy constructs through Ravel's interior monologue. Rahel revisits the past in cyclical patterns, unable to escape the traumatic memory of her twin's death and Ammu's societal condemnation. In both novels, memory is not a tool for healing but a spectral presence, a Gothic residue of loss, forbidden love, and colonial violence. The women in these narratives are haunted not just by what happened, but by how memory refuses to fade, revealing how postcolonial madness is as much a function of historical memory as it is of individual trauma.

In both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and The God of Small Things, madness is not an isolated psychological condition but a generational legacy shaped by trauma, repression, and societal rejection. In Wide Sargasso Sea, madness passes from mother to daughter, as Annette's psychological breakdown foreshadows Antoinette's eventual descent into mental instability. Similarly, in The God of Small Things, madness is transmitted from mother to son. Ammu's emotional torment, shaped by social exclusion and forbidden love, reverberates through Estha's psyche, leading to his eventual withdrawal and silence. In both cases, madness becomes a haunting inheritance, deeply rooted in gendered suffering and the oppressive structures of race, class, and patriarchy.

The figure of Bertha Mason, confined, silenced, and ultimately destroyed, embodies the trope of the "madwoman in the attic," a symbol of both repressed female rage and colonial otherness. Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea reclaims this character, exploring her descent into madness not as a monstrous deviation but because of cultural dislocation, racial alienation, and patriarchal control. In both novels, madness is not just a psychological state, but a Gothic device used to evoke fear, generate suspense, and critique the ideological structures that imprison women.

In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette's descent into madness is shaped by her racial and cultural hybridity, as well as her forced assimilation into British colonial expectations. In The God of Small Things, characters like Ammu and Estha experience psychological trauma resulting from caste taboos, familial repression, and social transgression. This paper argues that in both texts, madness functions not merely as a psychological condition but as a politically charged metaphor for resistance, marginalisation, and nonconformity. Rather than pathologising their characters, Roy and Rhys employ madness as a narrative strategy to expose the violence of colonial and patriarchal systems. Seen through a comparative lens, the study explores how both authors challenge dominant constructions of sanity, identity, and social order, ultimately presenting madness as a complex space, one that embodies both suffering and the potential for subversion within the postcolonial context. (3080 words)

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