

Mental Illness in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: A Ramification of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Shweta Chaudhary and Smarika Pareek

Abstract

Trauma studies as a literary field gained popularity at the beginning of the mid-1990s. Trauma can be defined as a state resulting either from an extremely mentally distressing experience, which causes a severe emotional condition, or from a physical injury to the body, which may have psychological consequences. The idea of trauma was historically used to mark clinical conditions, but the term now signifies all events ranging from simple to catastrophic, which guides the victims to revise mental models in order to adapt to new circumstances. Trauma is caused by a devastating event that penetrates the shield of the psyche resulting in hysteria or psychological illness. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a chronic health illness spurred on by witnessing or experiencing a tragic incident, with an individual facing difficulty in adjusting and coping with the situation. Flashbacks, nightmares, acute anxiety, as well as intrusive thoughts, are all possible symptoms of PTSD. Annette and Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* portray these symptoms as they fail to cope with the tragic conditions they faced in their lives. Here, Jean Rhys realistically depicts the fragmented heritage of the Caribbean islands. She expresses the frustrations and exploitation that eroded the Caribbean sensibility. This article considers the mental illness of Annette and Antoinette in the light of trauma theory and aims at correlating clinical symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to symptoms exhibited by Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Keywords: Trauma, Madness, Colonisation, Caribbean, Post-Traumatic Stress.

Introduction

Traumatic experiences, such as natural disasters or wars, have been documented to alter human behavior and wellbeing for centuries. Trauma can be defined as a state resulting either from an extremely mentally distressing experience, which causes a severe emotional condition, or from

a physical injury to the body resulting in psychological consequences. Despite the passage of time, reactions to stressful experiences have not changed all that much. Literature plays a great role in this process of documentation of such events and emotions as it revolves around humans and their inhabited societies. Literature, in a nutshell, is a bridge that connects, and acts as a link between, the actual and observed world of the author which helps readers to understand the narrative perspective as a representation of the historical and sociological background of the age. It acts as a medium that gives a platform in terms of looking at a dialogue between the micro, psychic, and individual private orders of trauma with the collective, the macro, and the cultural vectors of trauma. Annette and her daughter Antoinette in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* portray these symptoms as they fail to cope with the tragic conditions they faced in their lives. Here, Rhys realistically depicts the fragmented heritage of the Caribbean islands. She expresses the frustrations and exploitation that eroded the Caribbean sensibility. This article considers the mental illness of Annette and Antoinette in the light of trauma theory and aims at correlating clinical symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to symptoms exhibited by Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Background

Every individual is a sum total of traits acquired from parents and the environment they are brought up in. The latter is considered a fundamental factor that plays a key role in shaping one's personality. Psychology is a branch of science that deals with understanding human behavior in the light of circumstances experienced by an individual. Carl Jung confirms the relevance of studying literature instead of psychology: "It is obvious enough that psychology, being the study of psychic processes, can be brought to bear upon the study of literature, for the human psyche is the womb of all sciences and arts."¹ Thus, psychology and literature emerge as two sides of the same coin. This forms the foundation for exploring the implication of psychological issues in individuals. Understanding trauma in

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¹ Carl Jung, 'Psychology and Literature', in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 15, ed. R. F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 84-106.

literature helps to understand human behavior more generally.

Trauma is a word derived from the Greek word meaning ‘wound’. Thus, trauma refers to a wound inflicted not only on the body but also on the psyche of an individual. Trauma is a medical condition that disrupts the natural psychic status of a human being. Unaddressed trauma often leads to mental illness. Utilising a psychoanalytic conceptualisation of trauma, Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley state,

The trauma is supposed to break through the individual’s defenses, and in the absence of normal abreaction (i.e., Josef Breuer’s notion of the process of discharges of repressed emotions by revising and reliving painful experiences that have been buried in the unconscious... a discharge of tension) to cause a foreign body reaction – the mental equivalent of the process whereby the tissues of the body wall of a foreign body lodged in them. Subsequently, emotional arousal may reawaken early traumatic experiences, resulting in an attack on defense mechanisms from inside and outside simultaneously.²

In the field of literary studies, trauma studies present a loop between medical sciences, psychology, and literature. It assists in reading for comprehending mental wounds to encourage the process of healing. Literature provides an opportunity to consider trauma not only from a medical perspective, but also from a narrative perspective, to understand how trauma portrayed by characters is representative of the historical and sociological background of the age. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren argue that,

Literature is a social institution using as its medium language, a social creation ... literature represents life, and life is, in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation. The poet himself is a member of society, possesses of a specific social status.³

Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, Joseph Breuer, and Sigmund Freud laid the foundation of contemporary theory on trauma. Between then, they proposed several theories to explain their patients’ anomalous actions, none of which had any evident link to immediate physical wound or suffering. As J. Roger Kurtz explains,

The psychoanalytical understanding of ‘trauma’ defines it as an event so overwhelming that it cannot be processed normally at the time of

² Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley, ‘Trauma’, in *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (New York: Collins, 1977), pp. 644-655.

³ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 94.

occurrence so that its memory is effectively blocked but returns to haunt the victim until it is appropriately confronted and dealt with appropriately.⁴

The term trauma was earlier used to mark clinical conditions only, but now the term signifies all events ranging from simple to catastrophic, which guides the victims to revise mental models in order to adapt to new circumstances. According to Freud, trauma is any physical or psychological jolt that burdens the senses and compels the mind to develop a mechanism to combat unwanted situations. Freud believed trauma to be a devastating event that penetrates the shield of the psyche resulting in hysteria or psychological illness. The defensive mechanism of an individual pushes them to a condition of numbness when the feeling of pain is temporarily suspended. Freud also recognised periods during which patients act normally and go about their regular activities without expressing any emotion. This latency period may continue from days to years, but the repercussions of experience may manifest at any stage of life either as nightmares or other symptoms of mental illness.⁵

Trauma is further explored by Roger Luckhurst in *The Trauma Question*, which traces the origins of the notion of trauma across psychiatric, legal, and cultural-political sources starting from the 1860s till the official recognition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the DSM-III 1980. It also examines the nature and scope of trauma culture, using a variety of cultural genres such as literature, memoirs, confessional journalism, photography, and film to do so. Modernity has been a major factor in recognising the effects of trauma. Roger believed that there is a significant connection between modernism and trauma, and Luckhurst further strengthened his position by citing Mark S. Micale's and Paul Lerner's explanation of trauma as responsive and constitutive of 'modernity'.⁶

Cathy Caruth, one of the significant critics of trauma studies, believes that trauma can neither be fully understood nor experienced because of its uncertain nature, but its impact cannot be overlooked.⁷ Michelle Balaev, author of *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* points out that trauma remains unfathomable because every individual reacts to trauma in a variety

⁴ J. Roger Kurtz, *Trauma and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 3.

⁵ Jung, 'Psychology and Literature', pp. 84-106.

⁶ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 20.

⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

of ways because of individual, social or cultural reasons. PTSD is not a new paradigm and its origin dates back to the period of ancient Greeks. During the World Wars I and II, PTSD was at an all-time high, referred to as ‘shell shock’ and ‘combat neurosis’ at that time. In 1870, A. B. R Meyers coined the term ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’, which later attained popularity after the Vietnam War. It was included in the official list of psychiatric disorders by the American Psychological Association in 1980. Previously, PTSD was mostly associated with war veterans and, to a lesser extent, victims of specific traumatic experiences like natural disasters and extreme sexual assault. As it stands, PTSD is a distinct syndrome that is etiologically tied to a traumatic or catastrophic event.⁸ It should be noted that a differential diagnosis of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has also been identified, which is associated with long-term traumatic circumstances from which an individual cannot readily escape.

Sociologically, women are more prone to develop PTSD as compared to males in non-combat situations. A few most common reasons leading to PTSD are pre-existing psychiatric problems, a family history of mental illness, or childhood trauma. This illness is attributed to the high stressor that results in severe psychiatric suffering. Even though PTSD is a relatively new diagnosis, it has been extensively discussed in scientific articles as well as novels.⁹ The analysis of descriptions across time reveals that while the nature and type of stress have varied, people’s reactions to highly intense stressors have remained largely consistent. The first descriptions of the symptoms associated with PTSD can be found in Egyptian physicians’ notes, as well as in the stories of Homer, Herodotus, and Plutarch. Homer’s *Odyssey* presents Odysseus, who suffers from recurring memories of the traumatic scenes on the battlefield accompanied by the guilt of surviving the Trojan War.¹⁰

The advent of women’s liberation in the 1970s shifted the focus of trauma studies to women and children. In the 1970s, renowned psychiatrists such as Cathy Caruth, Caroline Garland, and Judith Herman studied trauma

⁸ Michelle Balaev, *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), pp. 3-5.

⁹ Masoumeh Mahmoudi, Mehdi Pourasghar, and Kamaleddin Alaadini, ‘Literature and Medicine: Clinical Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Contemporary Iranian Fictions’, *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences*, vol 14, no. 3 (2020), pp. 1-9.

¹⁰ Naomi Breslau, ‘Epidemiologic Studies of Trauma, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, and Other Psychiatric Disorders’, *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 47, no. 10 (2002), pp. 923–929.

as the aftermath of sexual and domestic abuse against women and children. However, Caruth notes that though fragmentation or detachment is commonly depicted as the universal reaction to trauma in literature, it should not be considered as the only possible response to trauma.¹¹ This being said, PTSD remains the main medical paradigm through which trauma is discussed, and as such will be used in this article. Another crucial note is that trauma and memory are inextricably linked, as it is the memory of a traumatic experience that keeps haunting the victim consciously or unconsciously in form of dreams. This returns us to literary studies, and the use of trauma studies analyse the behaviors of characters in light of their experiences. This allows us to consider how particular behaviors were approached during different periods of time. For instance, through her experiences and subsequent behaviors, Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be identified as displaying symptoms consistent with PTSD.

Trauma in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Wide Sargasso Sea is a gripping tale encoded with issues of history, politics, gender, and culture of the Caribbean, in which Rhys artistically portrays the suffering and trauma of the Creole protagonist, Antoinette. Perhaps none of the spaces that anyone can occupy is more highly problematic and traumatic than the home space. This is invariably where one's history, early memories, and formative relationships, as well as any traumas resulting from these, take place.¹² The relationship of Antoinette with her family is significantly more problematic. Her family consists of a pleasure-seeking father, a sick brother, and a mentally unstable mother. The family's unfortunate end has a significant impact on Antoinette's life. Her mother, Annette marries a wealthy Englishman, Richard Mason, after the death of her first husband, in the hope of safeguarding her family's future, but it further problematises their lives. The entire family suffers in the aftermath, and even her neighbours and maids mock her. Antoinette's biological father was a slave owner who indulged in sensual pleasures and married Annette, a lovely young woman half his age, after the death of his first wife. They had two children, Antoinette and Pierre. Cosway continued his bad habits and died soon after during a slave revolt. Antoinette's brother, Pierre, is developmentally disabled, and eventually dies in a fire ignited by slaves on

¹¹ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 87.

¹² Shweta Chaudhary and Smarika Pareek, 'Subaltern perspective in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: An Insight to the Plight of Antoinette', *New Literaria*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2022), pp. 90-95.

the Coulibri estate; Antoinette and Annette survive but are both traumatised. Antoinette describes the scene with great emotion: “The house was burning, the yellow-red sky was like sunset and I knew I would never see Coulibri again. Nothing would be left, the golden ferns and the silver ferns, the orchids. The ginger lilies and the roses, the rocking chairs and the blue sofa, the jasmine and the honeysuckle, and the picture of the Miller’s Daughter.”¹³

Antoinette later experiences further trauma as a direct result of her mother’s symptoms of trauma. She is chased by two other children as they mock her: “Look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother. Your aunt frightened to have you in house. Your mother walk alone with no shoes and stockings on her feet, she sans culottes. She try to kill her husband and she try to kill you too that day you go to see her. She have eyes like zombie too.”¹⁴ Additionally, Antoinette’s nurse Christophine, in conversation mocks the idea of justice for Annette and her madness.

‘I’ve heard that word. It’s a cold word. I tried it out,’ she said, still speaking in a low voice. ‘I wrote it down. I wrote it down several times and always it looked like a damn cold lie to me. There is no justice.’ She drank some more rum and went on, ‘My mother whom you talk about, what justice did she have? My mother sitting in the rocking- chair speaking about dead horses and dead grooms and a black devil kissing her sad mouth. Like you kissed mine.’ She said.¹⁵

Antoinette’s traumatic experiences cause her considerable mental distress. In particular, she often dreams of these events, which is a key signifier of PTSD.

Before fully considering the manifestation of Antoinette’s PTSD, it is necessary to acknowledge her worldview, and especially her sense of self. Rhys writes Antoinette in such a way that she appears to belong to everyone in her life except herself. Antoinette has never been able to understand herself realistically, and has only been able to do so through the filtered gaze of another; her dreams are the only route by which she is free of external influence and from the voices of her family and friends Antoinette has her first significant dream when she is a young girl. Tia, a black Jamaican girl she intended to befriend, betrayed her by robbing her of her money and clothes, as well as calling her “white nigger.”¹⁶ Antoinette’s apprehension of what happened earlier in the day, as well as her childlike innocence, are vividly depicted in her first dream; “I dreamed that I was walking in the

¹³ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 38.

¹⁴ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 42.

¹⁵ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 121.

¹⁶ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 23.

forest. Not alone. Someone who hated me was with me, out of sight. I could hear heavy footsteps coming closer and though I struggled and screamed I could not move. I woke crying.”¹⁷ This dream gives Antoinette her first warning of impending jeopardy. “I woke up next morning knowing that nothing would be the same. It would change and go on changing.”¹⁸ These words anticipate future events, including Coulibri’s burning, Tia’s second betrayal, and her final departure from Jamaica. Her first dream has opened her eyes to the possibility that not everything is as it seems.

Rhys skilfully exploits every image to point towards a larger, more looming terror in her second dream, which is significantly more symbolic than the first. Antoinette narrates: “I am wearing a long dress and thin slippers... following the man who is with me and holding up the skirt of my dress... I follow him sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself. Now I do not try to hold up my dress, it trails in the dirt, my beautiful dress.”¹⁹ Rhys utilises Antoinette’s second dream as a psychological manifestation of the anxieties she wishes she could express vocally but cannot. There is little evidence to support the assumption that Antoinette is reserved; she answers to everyone, but her responses are always courteous, but her vocalisations are subdued. In her third and last dream, Rhys purposely blurs the line between wakeful existence and dreams:

That was the third time I had my dream, and it ended. I know now that the flight of steps leads to this room where I lie watching the woman asleep with her head on her arms. In my dream I waited till she began to snore, then I got up, took the keys and let myself out with a candle in my hand... There was a wall of fire protecting me but it was too hot, it scorched me and I went away from it.²⁰

This is possibly the best example of restraint. The first and foremost objective of this text is to underline the unique aspects of Antoinette’s lived experiences. This dream sequence in particular accentuates the merger of the objective exterior and the subjective interior, which is based on the concept of lived imagination. Antoinette incorporates her real life into her dream world or vice versa. Although she expressly defines the reported events as a dream at the start of her narration, this becomes increasingly unclear as the narrative unfolds.

This textual evidence clearly points to Antoinette suffering from

¹⁷ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 23.

¹⁹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 50.

²⁰ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 155.

PTSD. Her traumatic experiences have resulted in isolation that leads to the process of behavioral and emotional change in her personality. The “behavioral shutdown theory” of depression posited by Gregg Henriques describes depression as being characterised by a basic change in psychological activity away from the positive-approach motivational system and toward the negative-avoidance, motivational-emotional system.²¹ Antoinette suffers from a feeling of helplessness, panic, dissociation, fright, self-loathing, and social maladjustment, which are all symptoms of trauma, and eventually falls prey to the most devastating state of split self-identity.

Conclusion

Human nature has always been and will always be an area of interest and study amongst academicians, artists and philosophers, and literature has become the most significant way that can assist in understanding human nature with the help of the panorama of characters that it imbibes in itself. Literature serves as a palpable tool of cultural and artistic legacy that can be investigated as a source of human creativity. Literature offers a wide range of themes and ideas concerning man's feelings, reactions, tensions, fears, impulses, wants, and a variety of other events. Psychology is one of the primary subjects with which literature is intertwined, and it even utilizes classic literary works as models to provide multi-faceted studies of the human psyche and spirit. In conclusion, a well-written piece of literature can accurately portray the behavior and mindset of an individual suffering from PTSD, allowing the reader to better comprehend the victim.

A better understanding of the clinical criteria represented by characters of literary texts can be useful as it can help researchers and doctors for diagnosis of PTSD which emerges as a repercussion of traumatic experiences. Moreover, literary language at the hands of skilled authors becomes a medium that effectively represents the victim's inner status and helps to create an interaction that leads to a better understanding of the person who is suffering from this disorder. *Wide Sargasso Sea* gives a more personalised perspective on mental illness, as well as analysing the traumatic background that led to PTSD in Antoinette. As a result, reading such works, in addition to becoming familiar with literature also prepares for dealing and interacting with individuals suffering from such psychological imbalances in

²¹ Gregg Henriques and Mariafe Panizo, ‘The Behavioral Shutdown Model: A Consilient Biopsychosocial View of Depression’, in *Sociological Theory, Methods, and Perspectives*, ed. Joseph H. Michalski (London: Hardcover, 2018), pp. 159-187.

real life. Reading such texts is recommended for people who work with such patients as it inculcates the emotion of empathy and may provide a solution to help victims in getting out of the trauma thus saving their lives.