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**Confessions of the Mad Wife in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Assad Fouladkar's *Lama Hikyt Maryam***

by

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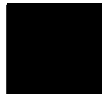
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To my parents,

Thank you for your endless support and love; I am so grateful. I sincerely dedicate this work to you.

To Zaher,

I couldn't have done it without your love and constant support. Thank you for always being there. You really gave me peace in the times I was confused; I truly dedicate this project to you.

To Dr. Seigneurie,

Thank you for your encouragement and support; I promise you that this work is just the beginning of my journey.

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## Abstract

*Confessions of the Mad Wife* deals with Jean Rhys's 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Assad Fouladkar's 2001 feature film *Lama Hikyit Maryam*. Although the two works are different in many respects, they share a curiously similar plot: a mad woman recounts the events of her miserable life, which caused her downfall and led to her tragic end. Both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikyit Maryam* are stories of cultural and patriarchal conflicts conveyed through the story of the failure of love between a man and a woman. A remarkable aspect of these works is the way complex narrative structure develops these conflicts. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the story is narrated by a number of unreliable narrators whose accounts are very often contradictory. In *Lama Hikyit Maryam* the main story is constantly interrupted and framed by a meta-narrative that is only revealed at the end of the film. The purpose of *Confessions of the Mad Wife* is to understand how the powerful and disconcerting effects of these works relate to their complex narrative structure, which affects our interpretation of the plot. More specifically, this study examines the role of polyphony and unreliability in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and irony and embedded narration in *Lama Hikyit Maryam*. It emerges that these techniques play a significant role in the thematization of female madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikyit Maryam*. Thus the power of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikyit Maryam* lies not in their adherence to a classical story-line of the mad wife that goes back at least to Euripides's *Medea* but in the significant way these stories are plotted, such that the techniques themselves appear to bear a privileged relation to madness.

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## ***Wide Sargasso Sea and Lama Hikyit Maryam: The Madwoman Strikes Back***

Although it was first used to define a new style of architecture in the 1940s, the term postmodernism was soon used to describe a literary movement characterized by “discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy, and antitotalization” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 3). Questioning all forms of belief, perception, and judgment, postmodern narratives reflect a new understanding of reality and suggest new ways of seeing and representing the world. Thus, they replace omniscience with fallible or unreliable points of view, delve into the human’s interior psychic life, and dissolve the notions of time and space. Postmodern narratives deal in no absolutes; no longer is there a fixed truth or reality but a number of relative truths and realities that are contingent upon circumstances (Bradshaw 219). Postmodern literature traces the incongruities of a world that has lost a clear sense of bearing and foregrounds epistemological skepticism and questions of ontology. The result is a sense of uncertainty and by the same token a recapitulation of the skepticism of the age.

As a set of aesthetic practices, postmodernism and modernism seem to have quite the same aspects. In fact, this point is the cause of debate about postmodernism and whether it represents a departure from, or a continuation of, the concerns originally dealt with by modernist writers. In order to avoid any confusion, a clear standpoint on this matter is a necessity here. I agree with Linda Hutcheon concerning the relationship between two inclusive movements such as modernism and postmodernism. According to Hutcheon, postmodernism is marked by the logic of both/and rather than either/or (*A Poetics* 18). In other words, postmodernism tends to represent the two sides of an

*Poetics* 18). In other words, postmodernism tends to represent the two sides of an opposition whereas modernism represents one side that rejects and challenges the other. Therefore, I consider postmodernism as a continuation and an extension of modernism with few modifications.

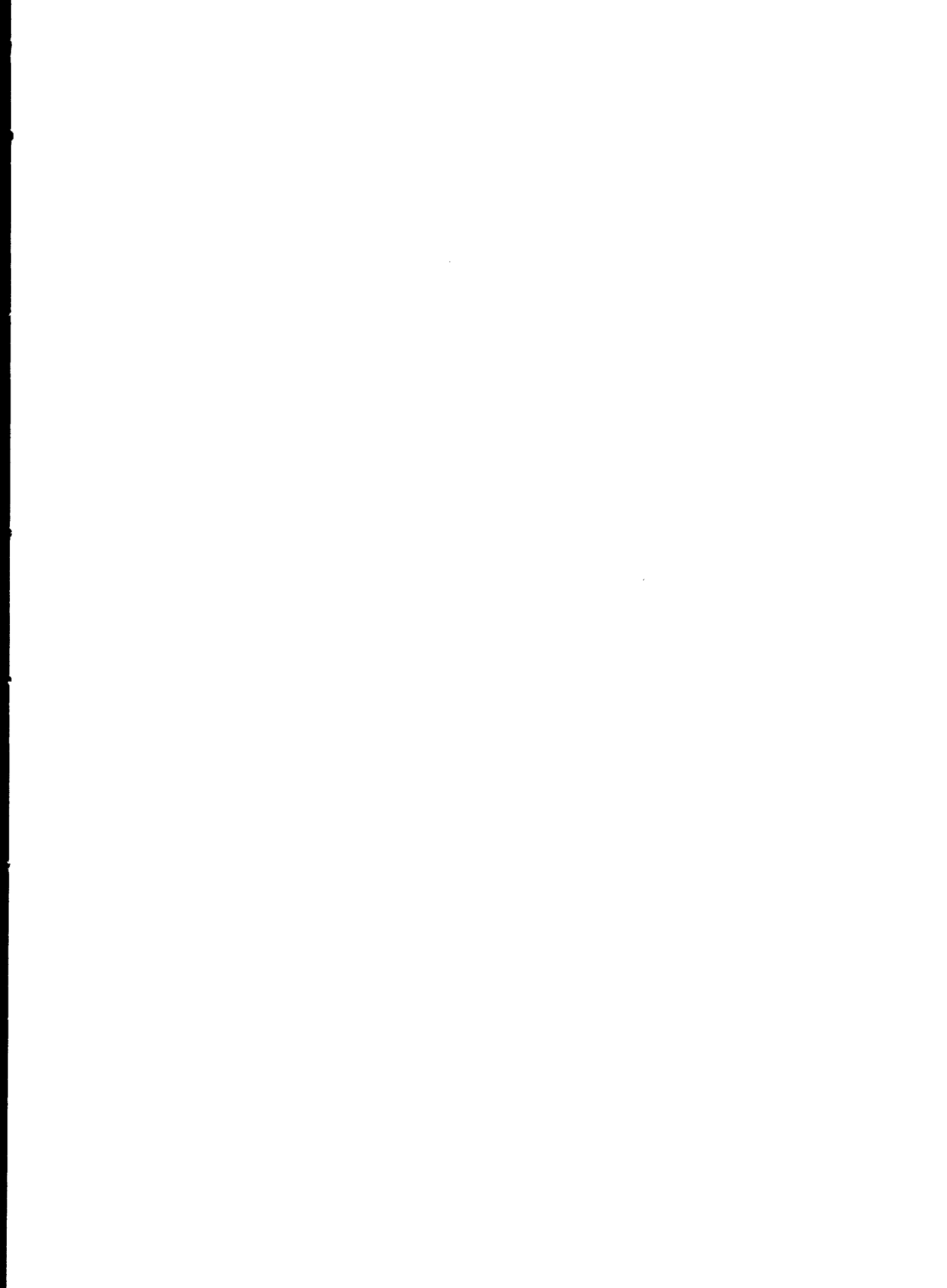
In this study, I have selected two works that embody several postmodern characteristics: Jean Rhys's 1966 English novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Assad Fouladkar's 2001 Lebanese feature film *Lama Hikiyit Maryam*. Although these two works are fundamentally different in many respects, I have selected them because they share a curiously similar plot: a mad woman recounts the events of her miserable life and failed marriage, which cause her downfall and lead to her tragic end. Both the novel and the film are about unfortunate women cast adrift into the silenced margins of the society from which they decide to strike back by telling their own stories. However, what drew my attention even more to these two works is the particular and complex way the story is presented in each medium. Although the story in both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* rehearse the classical "madwoman in the attic" topos, the complex form or structure in each work defies the traditional narrative logic of realist novels and films. *Wide Sargasso Sea* features a number of unreliable narrators whose accounts are very often contradictory. *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* frames and constantly interrupts the main plot via another equally-important meta-narrative.

Within such complex narrative structures, I see more to these works than a mere flashback of events recounted by the women themselves. Why would a classical story such as that of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* be plotted in such complex

ways? What does the complex plot structure add to the story? What is the message underlying Antoinette and Maryam's unreliable voices and fragmented flashbacks?

It is a methodological hypothesis of this study that the best way to understand the powerful yet disconcerting effects of these two works is to analyze more thoroughly their complex narrative structures in order to identify the effects they have on our interpretation of the plot. The purpose of this study is to show how *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikyit Maryam* thematize epistemological instability and doubt through structural features that not only manifest postmodernist thought but also convey other relevant and important cultural discourses. Specifically, Rhys and Fouladkar construct an awareness of the problematic role of culture in interpersonal encounters and relations. Both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikyit Maryam* are stories of cultural and patriarchal conflicts conveyed through the story of the failure of love between a man and a woman. Underlying the complex structures of these works is, I believe, an implicit criticism of the way culture in the form of social beliefs and norms affects behavior and determines a person's social relationships.

My analysis relies on selected contemporary theories of narratology dealing mainly with unreliable narration. In both works, I consider the narrator to be the most central critical concept in the analysis of narrative texts. My approach emphasizes focalization which, according to Bal, determines what we commonly call narration (Bal 19). Therefore, mediating events from an unreliable point of view becomes a meaningful part in a narrative, especially that the relationship between the agent that sees and that which is seen is a major component of narrative texts (Bal 146). In both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikyit Maryam*, my analysis focuses on the point of view from which the



events are presented, namely that of the mad Antoinette and Maryam. In both cases, unreliability gives the plot a challenging turn and a new meaning. Moreover, my choice of these texts gives this study an interdisciplinary dimension; an analysis of a similar plot in two different media offers enriching insights on the role of narrative structures in both the novel and the film in foregrounding cultural discourses.

The following study consists of two main chapters, each one dealing exclusively and intensively with one of the works. Chapter I deals with Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. With its publication in 1966, *Wide Sargasso Sea* brought a sudden revival of interest in Rhys after almost twenty years of obscurity and won her the W.H. Smith Literary Award and the Heinemann Award of the Royal Society of Literature. In fact, the novel was written with Rhys's intention of telling her own version of the mysterious Creole woman in Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason (Frickey 8). *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the story of a white Creole heiress, Antoinette Cosway (who later becomes Bertha Mason), married for her money to an English businessman, Edward Rochester. However, the marriage is doomed to fail as the story takes a tragic turn. The work is set in the West Indies, during the turbulent years succeeding the emancipation in 1830. Interestingly, Rhys was born and raised in the West Indies. Thus, Rhys's ability to represent two worlds, in this case Europe and the West Indies, gives her work more complexity, as she skillfully manages to convey the cultural and social conventions of both worlds. Hence, *Wide Sargasso Sea* becomes Rhys's crowning achievement and masterpiece.

The publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* brought about an outpouring of articles and books highlighting very different aspects of the work. In the late 1960s and 1970s,

particularly when the Feminist movement was receiving growing attention, *Wide Sargasso Sea* was interpreted as indicative of the destiny of a woman in a man's world. In fact, *Wide Sargasso Sea* was briefly discussed in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's feminist, revisionary book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, in which the authors consider the novel to embody all the signs of women's rebelliousness carried out against a text by another woman this time, namely Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Gilbert and Gubar mention *Wide Sargasso Sea* only once, saving their emphasis for the characters of Jane and Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. According to them, Bertha Mason represents Jane's repressed dark double (360), the voice of every repressed woman living under the pressures of patriarchy.

Also, more recently, Coral Ann Howells adds an interesting insight to her feminist reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Howells analyses Rhys's novel from a more contemporary and critical framework, taking into consideration three interrelated elements: gender, post-colonialism, and modernism. In fact, Howells sees in Rhys's text a version of fragmented female subjectivity within the modernist European context, "where a sense of colonial displacement and dispossession is focused on and translated into gendered terms" (5). This aspect is expressed in Antoinette and Rochester's relationship, which not only represents the relation between man and woman but also between the colonizer and the colonized. Howells's reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* combines both the feminist and colonial approaches; for her, the novel describes the mystery of a female colonial sensibility and provides its own critique of patriarchy and imperialism (123).

What is interesting about the feminist readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that the woman is always represented as a victim and the man as victimizer despite Rhys's

statement in one of her letters about *Wide Sargasso Sea* claiming that the novel is as much about Rochester's misfortune as it is about Antoinette's, both of whom she pities (qtd. in Frickey 12). I believe that the conflict in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not caused by gender although feminist readings prove to be quite plausible. Rochester fails to love Antoinette because he is not able to relate to her as a person the same way he is not able to relate to her world.

While many critics called for a feminist reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, others such as Mary Lou Emery and Gayatri Spivak paid more attention to the West-Indian character of Rhys's writings, especially with the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In her book *Jean Rhys at "World's End,"* Emery discusses how the tensions of West Indian colonialism and modernism in Rhys's fiction yield "new ways of seeing the world, of constituting identity in the previously occluded, marginalized, or in-between social spaces inhabited by Jean Rhys's protagonists" (xiii). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette inhabits the in-between space or "elsewhere," as she experiences with Rochester a life of enslavement that parallels the history of the Jamaicans among whom she lives, and from whom she learns the different forms of resistance. Therefore, Rhys's fiction responds to the dominant representation of the colonial woman as the overdetermined other by revealing her cognitive complexities and, as Antoinette does, discrediting the dominant discourse and opposing it from the "elsewhere" she inhabits. The Caribbean setting of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, according to Emery, "allows Rhys to articulate the complex interrelationship between the condition of oppressed races and cultures under European imperialism and the masculine oppression and silencing of women within European society" (62).

This in-between space also represents a major point in Gayatri Spivak's discussion and analysis of Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Spivak interprets the novel as the narrative of a white Creole woman "caught between the English imperialist and the black native" (126). According to Spivak, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a re-writing of another text, *Jane Eyre*, in which implicit criticisms of imperialism and patriarchy are manifested. In fact, Spivak points out that imperialism was for long understood as England's social mission, and that this mission was delegated to Rochester, who stands for the many young men dispatched to the colonies to buy heiresses (113). I find most persuasive Spivak's interpretation of Antoinette's and Rochester's relationship, which she defines in terms of the self (the English imperialist that Rochester represents) and the alien other (embodied by Antoinette). For instance, Spivak suggests that the couple's relationship is based on power relations, especially when Rochester changes Antoinette's name to Bertha, showing that even personal identity is determined by the politics of imperialism.

Clearly, Rhys's critics seek to analyze her work from different feminist or post-colonialist perspectives and approaches. My study of *Wide Sargasso Sea* seeks to redeem a more formalist approach; in fact, I give primary attention to the text's structure which, I argue, plays a major role most interpretations of the plot. To be more specific, I see in *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s polyphony and unreliable narrative structure a recapitulation of the distance and incompatibility between Rochester and Antoinette. My analysis focuses on the couple's relationship and aims at revealing the factors behind the failure of their love and marriage. While not going so far as to say that the couple's incompatibility depends on narrative structure, I do argue that Rochester is unable to accept or understand Antoinette, for she comes from a different culture and background than his. This fact



made him reject her and reduce her to madness. My aim in chapter I is to build upon the significant corpus of work done by other critics of Jean Rhys to show that a formalist approach to this text can represent a valid means to context interpretation.

Chapter II deals with Assad Fouladkar's 2001 Lebanese feature film *Lama Hikyt Maryam*. Although the 98-minute film was made on a low budget and shot with a video camera, it actually won a total of 21 awards at various film festivals around the world. For instance, it was named Best Film at the Alexandria International Film Festival in Egypt and the Real to Reel festival in Ohio. The film is about the struggle of Maryam, a Lebanese woman who gets divorced by her beloved husband and rejected by the rest of her society because she is infertile. Just like Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Maryam finds in madness the only place where her misery and loneliness can make sense. The film raises questions on the condition of marginalized women who try to construct an identity for themselves other than the overdetermined one prescribed by traditions and social conventions.

When it first came out in 2001, *Lama Hikyt Maryam* was widely and favorably received; however, the many magazine articles and film reviews written about it often failed to provide a critical and thorough analysis of the film. Most summarized the plot and communicated general statements on its implications. This fact made my work on *Lama Hikyt Maryam* challenging, but it also gave my study the advantage of being the first to provide an intensive, critical, and literary analysis of the film.

I see in *Lama Hikyt Maryam* a film that communicates more than a flashback of events. Like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the film is marked by a complex narration that plays a significant role in creating and sharpening its moral appeal. Underlying Maryam's

flashback is an implicit criticism of conservative Arab culture in which people consider social beliefs and conventions to be natural and unchanging. Moreover, I believe this message is rendered more powerful via the film's ironic structure and embedded narratives. Irony, as Linda Hutcheon states, "happens as part of a communicative process; it is not a static rhetorical tool to be deployed, but itself comes into being in the relation between meanings, but also between people and utterances and, sometimes, between intentions and interpretations" (*Irony's Edge* 13). In *Lama Hikiyit Maryam*, irony happens without it being necessarily intentional, giving the film a broader sense, for irony defies fixed notions by presenting an either/or option and showing that two contradictory meanings can emerge from the same word or scene.

Although irony can confuse the audience by not presenting a certain idea in a direct and clear way, and although the content of irony can be lost if it is not instantly caught by the receiver, it has the power of sharpening an idea or more specifically the effect an idea has on the audience. In *Lama Hikiyit Maryam*, I argue that irony confuses the viewer by mediating the events through the point of view of a mentally-unstable person whom viewers strongly identify with. At the same time, it reveals the problems, such as infertility, marriage and divorce, which exist at the heart of these social beliefs. These problems are, in fact, the main factors that lead to Ziad and Maryam's divorce.

Although *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* are different in many respects, they both skillfully explore the dark spaces between madness and sanity, reality and illusion, and life and death. *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* are narratives that question "the things [that] happen and are there for always even though you forget why or when," as Antoinette tells Rochester once (50). The following chapters

show how the importance of both works lies in their unique narrative structure that becomes in itself a major and significant component of the plot.

## Polyphony and Intercultural Communication in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

“It snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as mane, hid its head and face” (Brontë 258). These are the famous words by which, Bertha Mason, the legendary mad woman kept in the attic of Thornfield Hall, was introduced in *Jane Eyre* in 1847. These are also the words that vexed Jean Rhys a hundred years later and brought about her well-known novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. For over a century, Brontë's monstrous mad woman remained locked up in the attic, “a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie...” (Rhys 112). A curiously silent and unintelligible figure, Bertha “groveled,” “snatched and growled,” (Brontë 258) set the house on fire and died. Her life remained as mysterious as her death, although her presence is at the heart of Brontë's plot. Seeking to humanize the general understanding of Bertha, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* explicitly reverses Charlotte Brontë's text to tell the story from the point of view of the mad wife, displacing by that the center of interest completely. With *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha finally “escapes out of the attic into fiction” and becomes “a speaking woman with a history and a logic of her own” (Howells 108). Published in 1966, *Wide Sargasso Sea* supplies *Jane Eyre* with a prequel that renders justice to Bertha by presenting the alien woman's perspective and providing a valid explanation of how she and her husband have reached the pathetic state evident in *Jane Eyre*. However, it is not easy to say that *Wide Sargasso Sea* explains what *Jane Eyre* leaves unexplained or even that Rhys's novel answers the questions raised by Brontë's text. In fact, *Wide Sargasso Sea* seems to provide a more challenging, complex, and also distorted account of Bertha's

life than the one in *Jane Eyre*. If Jean Rhys considers Bertha's story in *Jane Eyre* as a deficient and obscure one, the story presented in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not complete or fulfilling either. Marked by a haunting narrative insecurity, *Wide Sargasso Sea* leaves its readers with a disturbing sense of bewilderment: a mad female narrator on one hand, and a very often drunk, almost always drowsy and significantly unnamed male narrator on the other. In other words, by juxtaposing two interwoven yet sometimes contradictory accounts of the same story, the novel acquires a particular polyphonic structure that prevents the construction of any authorized version of what happens. Numerous events remain purposively blurred while others are surreptitiously hinted at, leaving the readers with no authoritative version to restore their certainty. However, this unreliable structure presents in itself a meaningful aspect of the novel. In fact, once polyphony and unreliability are looked upon as part of an intentional act rather than just a mysterious and unintelligible one, the novel acquires a broader sense. To consider the narrator's telling as unreliable generally presupposes that the reader expects reliability (Currie 23), and *Wide Sargasso Sea* definitely does not offer its readers this satisfaction.

The following essay examines the particular unreliable narrators and polyphonic narration of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Although it first confuses readers, unreliability will prove to play an effective role in the interpretation of the novel in terms of plot and structure. The essay will then attempt to show how a specific narrative device, such as the unreliable narrator, can yield a new appreciation of the problematic role of culture in interpersonal encounters.

In fact, unreliability in *Wide Sargasso Sea* has two simultaneous yet contradictory functions: whereas it first seeks to challenge the habitual dichotomies by blurring the line

between male and female, sanity and insanity, reality and illusion; it reinforces and thickens another line between the self and the exotic other. In other words, unreliability first challenges the coerciveness of the common beliefs by exposing their limits and by showing that “there is always the other side, always” (Rhys 82). Nevertheless, this unreliability reinforces Rochester's awareness of cultural differences, his fear of the unknowable other, and the sudden rage for order that becomes his obsession. These are, in fact, the main factors that drive Rochester to reject Antoinette and reduce her to madness.

Underlying its complex narrative, *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells the story of Antoinette Cosway, an English white Creole heiress who grew up in Jamaica shortly after the Emancipation Act was passed in 1830. Due to the subsequent civil disorder that impoverished their financial status, Antoinette and her mother soon find themselves rejected not only by the former slave population but also by their white neighbors. However, when her mother gets remarried to the English Mr. Mason, their fortunes improve for a short time, until some vengeful Jamaicans burn down Antoinette's beloved home at Coulibri. With this incident, Antoinette's life takes a new bearing: her house is burnt, her disabled little brother Pierre dies, she gets injured and is seriously sick for a long time, and her mother goes mad. Antoinette is sent then to convent school while her mother, who has been kept in a private confinement, dies shortly afterwards. Later, Richard Mason, her stepfather's son, arranges for the impoverished Rochester to marry Antoinette, knowing that she was entitled to thirty thousand pounds from her stepfather, Mr. Mason. After their marriage, slanderous rumors begin to circulate as Rochester learns

from Daniel Cosway, Antoinette's Jamaican half-brother, that he has been tricked into marrying the daughter of a mad woman. Although he remains sexually attracted to her exotic beauty, Rochester realizes soon that he does not love her and turns away from her in disgust, leaving her in a state of panic and loss as she vainly wonders about the causes of her husband's sudden change. Gradually, Rochester also gathers that his wife might have been unfaithful to him and decides to take action, but Antoinette's unfaithfulness remains among the blurred and uncertain aspects of the novel. As a result, he changes Antoinette's name to Bertha, takes her to England and imprisons her in the attic of Thornfield Hall, the estate that devolved upon him after the death of his father and elder brother. Abandoned and imprisoned for a reason she cannot figure out, Antoinette eventually turns mad.

In terms of structure, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is “a mosaic of narratives which, at times, complement each other and, at others, repeat each other” (Maurel 129). In fact, the novel's multiperspectival accounts of the story are deliberately presented in a way that cannot be synthesized. To start with, the novel is divided into three main parts: the first one narrated exclusively by Antoinette, and the second one is narrated by her husband, unnamed in the novel but recognized intertextually as Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. However, this second part differs from the other parts of the novel in that Antoinette's voice, unexpectedly and without any warning, interrupts Rochester's to recount her visit to Christophine – her black nanny and one of the most influential characters of the novel. In the last part, Antoinette resumes the narration again, after a short passage narrated this time by Grace Poole, mad Mrs. Rochester's keeper in *Jane Eyre*. This three-part structure, doubled by the intrinsic unreliability of the narrators, creates a narrative instability that

prevents any decisive or definite version of an absolute truth. At first, the readers might be tempted to trust Antoinette who seems to report “objectively” the events of her childhood: the first part that she exclusively narrates is marked by a particular use of short simple sentences, avoiding connectors such as coordinators and subordinations that usually imply hierarchy and subjective reasoning. Instead, Antoinette projects herself as a mere observer; her account of her childhood is characterized by the use of the direct speech, a narrative technique used to report the actual words of a speaker without modifying them. And when this technique is not used, free indirect speech is employed. For instance, in her recalling of a little argument between her mother and Christophine, Antoinette says, “Christophine told her loudly that it shameful. She run wild, she grow up worthless. And nobody cares” (Rhys 11). Here Antoinette reports the exact words of Christophine, with her Creole language as she leaves out the verb and misuses the tenses. Antoinette projects herself as an observer in the theater of her life; her aim is to communicate events while she stands at a distance from them. Consequently, Antoinette gives the impression of being reliable especially in this first part, but this impression is soon perturbed when, in Part Two, she is said to be “uncertain about facts – any fact” (54) and that she is like an “obstinate [child]” with her “fixed idea [that] would never change” (58). As the novel moves on, Antoinette's visions (that first tempted the readers to trust them) turn out to be full of gaps while other suspicious voices surprisingly present themselves as more trustworthy. For instance, when Daniel Cosway alludes in his letter to the fact that Antoinette had had an affair with Sandi, readers might at first consider it a rumor aimed at turning Rochester against his wife, especially that Daniel asks for money at the end of his letter. But then again, this same point is hinted at by Amélie, whom most



readers would also distrust especially after she and Rochester sleep together. However, it is in Part Three that Sandi's name comes out again, this time by Antoinette herself, and suddenly all the doubts about this mysterious relation with Sandi get confirmed as Antoinette's reliability becomes a questionable and problematic aspect of the novel. And this is how the whole novel proceeds, saying one thing and contradicting it few pages later, manipulating the readers and deliberately misleading them. As a result, the readers find themselves struggling with the multiple, limited, and unreliable narrations that prevent them from deducing what "really" happened. Moreover, the fact that the story involves deviations from the habitual narrative voice – such as drunkenness or madness, extreme anger and revenge – raises questions about what is normative in the fiction. However, this aspect of the novel, with its unreliability and multiperspectives, is in itself an intentional act that is strategically employed to challenge the coerciveness of definitive interpretation. By leading the readers to believe one thing and then deliberately contradicting it, the novel ostensibly challenges the habitual concept of truth of the time. In fact, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not a novel that uncovers the truth about what happened to the mad locked-up Bertha who haunted the life of her tormented husband in *Jane Eyre*, nor is it a story that exposes the probable factors behind her tragic fate, for the novel's open-endedness leaves such questions unanswered. There is no definitive truth in the novel; instead, there are a number of truths that are at times contradictory and at others complementary.

This unreliable narration is a concrete reflection of the postmodernist understanding of reality, where the human's cognitive and epistemological limitations are major concerns. The diegetic reality that is presented to the readers through the voice of a

certain fictive character is just a subjective account presented from within a given point of view. In other words, what *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals with its unreliable narration, and very often with the embedded voices such as Daniel's letter, is that whenever events are presented, they are presented from within a certain vision that is infused with subjective judgments and that effectively renders the search for what truly happened a hard and impossible task.

This idea of the elusiveness of the definitive truth is also particularly stressed in Part Two when Rochester, who has just received Daniel Cosway's troubling letter, takes a symbolic walk in the forest. It is worth mentioning that the letter represents a turning point in Rochester's life, for it is right after this that his attitude changes toward everything. Confused by the perplexing words he has just read, Rochester distressfully realizes that he was tricked and that "they all knew" (65) about Antoinette's past and her mad mother except for him. Significantly, the scene takes place in the depths of a "hostile" (65) forest, darkened by the haunting shadows of some tall trees covering the sides of an unclear yet visible path overgrown with shrubs and wild tropical plants. This "thematized space" or acting place (Bal 136) is symbolic and dovetails with the content of the novel. In fact, this expressionistic scene echoes Rochester's perplexed state of mind, confused and unclear just like the path he is walking on and hardly trying to follow. As Rochester walks deeper into the wild forest, his most obscure thoughts slowly convey his panic as his concepts and beliefs get all of a sudden shaken. Reflecting anxiously on his disappointing state, Rochester wonders whether an individual can possibly discover the truth, but "that thought led [him] no where" (65). And it is actually at that thought that he stumbles and nearly falls, realizing that the truth is unattainable

and cannot be easily uncovered; it is an aimless thought that seems to confuse more than solve mysteries. With both its dense content and unreliable structure, *Wide Sargasso Sea* seeks to expose the limits of the knowledge by blurring the dividing line between what is and what is not. For instance, as Rochester continues his walk into the forest confused by his raging thoughts, he comes upon the vestiges of a paved road, and there he loses his way back. It is the servant Baptiste who finds him hours later. And when Rochester asks him about the history of that paved road, Baptiste relentlessly denies its existence and persistently repeats that “there is no road,” refusing to provide any explanation and claiming that he “[knows] nothing about all this foolishness” (66). This paved road is a concrete symbol of a failed attempt to bring a Western notion of civilization to primitive areas; what remains is a deserted paved road absorbed by the forest. This paved road foreshadows Rochester's inability to adapt or even survive in Jamaica. Just like the readers, Rochester never knows whether that road existed or not, or whether Baptiste knows something or not, or whether Daniel's words are reliable or not, and many other questions that remain unanswered. It seems that the novel purposefully dissolves the line between what exists and what does not, showing that such questions can remain unsolvable mysteries and that it is not a question of either/or. The novel's unreliable narrations, doubled by the numerous voices that curiously seem to withhold information, suggest that the quest for truth and objectivity is misleading.

Not only does the novel challenge the standard of absolute truth with its polyphonic structure, it also challenges the traditional concept of gender. In fact, with its three-part structure and its multivoicedness, *Wide Sargasso Sea* challenges the binary oppositions of the male versus female. The constantly shifting points of view in the novel

from Antoinette at one time to her husband at another dissolve the line that separates the male from the female. In fact, as the novel unfolds, readers wade their way through the multiple perspectives presented to them. For instance, Part Two starts with the voice of Rochester, but the readers knows it only a few lines later when he says that he is with “[his] wife Antoinette” (39). Pages later, in Part Two, and in the same sudden way, Antoinette's voice interrupts that of Rochester to narrate her own visit to Christophine's house. Antoinette's voice does not logically belong here, but it is against this logic that this section is constructed. Without warning, points of view in *Wide Sargasso Sea* keep shifting and readers find themselves struggling with an “I” that sometimes refers to Antoinette, then to Rochester, Daniel, Grace Poole, and back to Antoinette. This narrative strategy, with its constantly shifting voices that shock and confuse the readers, serves to challenge the common male-versus-female dichotomy by juxtaposing different voices using the same pronoun “I.” This technique blurs the line that divides the male and the female in order to defy the habitual concept of gender the same way it did with the concept of truth as it was previously shown. It is interesting how the novel shakes the common standard of meaning by manipulating the readers, shocking them, and pushing them to reconsider their logic that is constantly deceived by the innovative and defiant narrative techniques.

Another common dichotomy that is challenged in the novel is that of reality versus illusion. By challenging the expected relations between signifier and signified, *Wide Sargasso Sea* brings about unpredictable signifying combinations and attempts to pin down the usually blurred and elusive ones. As the plot unfolds, reality and illusion become two very easily confounded notions. For instance, while Antoinette childishly

wonders whether it was true that England is like a dream, Rochester answers her by saying that he feels the same about her island which, for him, is also “quite unreal and like a dream” (49). In this particular scene, two separate and different places interestingly become close and even the same. The novel erases the limit between what is considered as fiction and what is considered as reality. For instance, the non-diegetic England in the novel is a fictional place for Antoinette, but for Rochester it is a reality. As a result, England and Jamaica become both an illusion and a reality depending on two close terms that can easily be interchanged.

Moreover, with the recurring dream of Antoinette, reality and illusion are confused again. The dreams in *Wide Sargasso Sea* break up the narrative to communicate the possibility of another reality. In fact, the novel's structure runs on two distinct levels: the flashback of the protagonists as they recall events from their lives on one hand, and the embedded dreams of the protagonists taking the readers to a different reality on the other. In other words, *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents the readers with two realities: the diegetic flashback of the main plot and the three dreams that interrupt the sequence of the plot and constitute three departures from the present/past of the novel. However, these two realities are not divergent. Although each one operates on a different level – namely reality versus illusion – they both work hand in hand to give the plot a logical continuity.

In fact, these two realities parallel each other; each aspect or person present in one finds a counterpart in the other. The events that take place in the dreams allude to the reality of the protagonists' lives. Antoinette's dream actually occurs three times throughout the novel; however, she wakes up the first two times terrified from her nightmare that is still without an end. In her dream, Antoinette sees herself in a dark

forest following passively the person who hates her as though it is all part of a predestined fate she must undergo. In fact, the forest of Antoinette's dream is the same "thematized space" Rochester goes to when he gets Daniel Cosway's letter. Indeed, Antoinette's dream foreshadows her life with Rochester, the man "who hates [her]" (11) and who eventually causes her downfall. Rochester, who is significantly unnamed in the novel, is also referred to as "someone," (11) "the man who hated me" (123). Unlike the novel's open-ended structure, the dream is the only embedded story that achieves closure in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The third time Antoinette has her dream, at the very end of the novel, is when she is able to know the end. The dream, as Antoinette who has now become a mad woman, corresponds precisely to Brontë's description: Antoinette setting fire to the house and throwing herself in the flames despite Rochester's attempts to save her. At first, the readers are led to believe this scene to be a diegetic reality, especially that it is vividly described and corresponds to the same scene in *Jane Eyre*, until Antoinette suddenly says, "and woke" (124). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's dream that she describes in a long passage full of sensory details, is just a dream. But then again, this dream represents the reality of another significant novel, *Jane Eyre*. In this sense, the novel presents readers with two intermingled realities, and Antoinette is finally awakened by the reality of her dream, the only reality she trusts. As a result, readers are left in a state of confusion, for what is believed to be real turns out to be illusory in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Again, the line between reality and illusion is blurred.

The novel also challenges the dichotomy of sanity versus insanity by exposing the contradiction between those two terms. In fact, it is Rochester who reduces Antoinette to madness in a violent attempt to appropriate to himself the mysterious and the exotic.

However, in Part Three where the madwoman's voice strikes back, Antoinette does not sound mad but is not completely sane either. Interestingly, Antoinette “[pretends] to be asleep” (116) sometimes and is able to get out of her room where she is imprisoned for “it is easy to take the keys” (117) when Grace Poole falls asleep. Antoinette is able to expose Grace Poole's unprofessional behavior as she constantly drinks gin, “that white drink” (117) and dozes off, making it easy for Antoinette to sneak out of her room.

Instead of keeping her eye on Antoinette, it is Antoinette who keeps an eye on Grace Poole, waiting for her to fall asleep in order to sneak her way out of the attic. Antoinette is not a totally mad woman; however, she is unstable for she forgets some events and her ideas are quite disconnected. But the readers never get the chance to know whether Antoinette's forgetfulness is an intentional act or just a symptom of her distorted and unstable mental state. In Part Three Antoinette is very assertive, active, and determined, unlike the way she is presented in the other parts of the novel. This particular section is marked by the repetition of the statement “I know now” (119) that reveals Antoinette's decisiveness for once, especially after she has been a passive follower and a mere observer in the theater of her life. Even her death takes the shape of a strong act that she chooses to undertake. In fact, Part Three of *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows that there exists a possibility for a new signifier that is neither madness nor sanity, but somewhere in between, in that blurred area that Antoinette obviously inhabits.

To sum up briefly, the first part of this essay demonstrates the interesting role of the unreliable narration of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in challenging the common concept of truth as well as the habitual dichotomies of gender, reality and illusion, and sanity and insanity. Interestingly, the line between what is acceptable and what is not suddenly

dissolves, stripping away all the certitudes and leaving nothing but doubt. Such a technique is in fact employed to expose the limits of common reason that is very often considered fixed and unchangeable. However, unreliability also plays a prominent role in conveying what *Wide Sargasso Sea* unavowedly emphasizes: the irreconcilable encounter of cultures that represents the main factor behind Rochester's rejection of Antoinette. The following part of the essay will show how the line between the self and the exotic other is sharply demarcated and how strangeness as well as the fear from the alien other make Rochester unable to accept or even love Antoinette.

In fact, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the story of complex intercultural encounters and the problems of cross-cultural understanding that very often lead the individual to follow a strategy of containment by reducing the alien other to irrationality in order to satisfy his/her mad craving for order. In her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak mentions the idea of the containment of the other and discusses how Christophine, Antoinette's nanny, cannot be contained in Rhys's novel (130). However, I believe that Rochester's mad craving for order and orientation drives him to contain Antoinette, Christophine, and even Jamaica.

This idea is in fact embodied in the character of Rochester and his relationship with the land – Jamaica – his Creole wife, and some servants, mainly Christophine. In fact, in her book *Jean Rhys at "World's End,"* Emery considers Rhys's novel to be a text on colonial and gender relations in the context of a male-dominated colonial system. Certainly, such insights are very significant, especially that Rochester belongs to the colonizing country whereas Antoinette belongs to the colonized one. Also, the colonizer is a powerful male controlling and abusing the vulnerable female that represents the



colonized. The characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* represent the implied hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized; Rochester and Antoinette's marriage is a concrete symbol of the typical colonial power relations, especially when Rochester imprisons her and makes her his property. However, my study does not look at the couple's relationship from this perspective. Rochester does not imprison Antoinette because he is a powerful male exerting his authority on the vulnerable female. In fact, I believe that the fear and confusion that Antoinette arouses in Rochester are the main reasons that drive him to reject her so strongly. For Rochester, Antoinette is not a helpless female that he wants to dominate; she is in fact a powerful other that he just fails to understand. His failure is what leads him to all his subsequent irrational behavior.

It is mainly in Part Two that the idea of the irreconcilable encounter of cultures is revealed. By exposing Rochester's inability to be part of Antoinette's world, the novel accentuates the dichotomy of the self versus the alien other and the complexities of intercultural relations. Rochester's feeling of alienation is expressed in three different forms: his relationship to the land, to his wife Antoinette, and finally to Christophine.

First, Rochester's description of the place constitutes a prominent aspect of Part Two. In fact, "a fundamental aspect of the cross-cultural dynamic is the relationship to the land, to the place" (Ashcroft 147) and Rochester's perception of the new setting represents the first aspect of his encounter with the other. For instance, everything is described as intense: the nature is of an "extreme green," while other aspects of the landscape are "too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (42). Even the food is "too highly seasoned," (49) the coffee Christophine makes is "delicious," (52) and the sound of the crickets is

“deafening” (49). This vocabulary of intensity marked by the repetition of the intensifier “too” and the use of words that communicate extreme feelings accentuates Rochester's feeling of alienation and the realization that he is in a world different than his, where everything is foreign, unknown. Rochester is aware of his displacement and the use of such syntax emphasizes the alienation of his vision which is a fundamental aspect of cross-cultural encounter (Ashcroft 9). The geographical remoteness represents a “necessary conceptual category in the constitution of the other” (Hallam 3) where light is shed on the feeling of displacement of the perceiving individual. For Rochester, Jamaica is in itself a foreign other and progressively the intensity and the strangeness of the land turn into menace, as everyone around Rochester becomes a symbol of mystery and threat. The native population is described as “sly” and “spiteful,” the forest is “hostile” and the trees are “haunting.” Soon, even the freshness becomes “intoxicating” (44) and everything “was all very brightly colored, but meant nothing to [him]” (46). Unable to understand or even tame the wildness and exoticism of his surroundings, Rochester realizes that his values are disturbed as he finds himself unable to understand or even categorize the wildness of Antoinette's uncharted world. Gradually, this turns into a disturbing obsessive thought. In an interesting scene towards the first half of Part Two where Rochester is trying to relate to his surroundings, he describes the landscape as “wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing secret loveliness. And it kept its secret” (54). And suddenly, he communicates his longing to understand this secret that seems to confuse him more and more, “What I see is nothing – I want what it hides – that is nothing” (54). For Rochester, Jamaica represents that new land waiting to be explored, uncovered, and even penetrated. His description of Jamaica is similar to the

description of a young virgin, “wild and untouched,” what draws attention to the colonizer's representation of the colony as a female, a land “not yet under the control of a Great Power and is transformed into [an] object of desire” (Bongie 18). However, Rochester remains unable to uncover the “secret loveliness” of the land that he cannot explain or describe further for his language, the medium through which conceptions of truth and order are founded, seems “inadequate to describe a new place” (Ashcroft 9). Unable to apply his cultural code to decode the other, Rochester finds the denial of the strangeness a way to understand Jamaica. His honeymoon house becomes “an imitation of an English summer house,” (43) he compares St Pierre to Paris (49), and the weather for him becomes similar to an “English summer” (107). It seems that Rochester can only understand the other in terms of association and by analogies; he relates whatever he sees to aspects from his background. Rochester follows a strategy of containment to understand Jamaica, by indirectly labeling it as “the imitation of the West.” Confronted with a geographical/ cultural otherness, Rochester can only understand this other, Jamaica, in comparison to the same, England. To satisfy his rage for orientation, Rochester transforms Jamaica into a mere imitation of England, “absorbing this other into the body of the same and thereby effacing the very ground of exoticism” (Bongie 18).

Moreover, Rochester's relation with his Creole wife Antoinette is the second form of expression through which he expresses his alienation. This relationship accentuates the idea of the complex intercultural encounters and the problems involved in the understanding of the other. From the beginning of Part Two, Rochester communicates his obsession about Antoinette's race. His anxiety that Antoinette's ancestry may not be entirely white is translated when he says, “creole of pure descent [...] but they are not

English or European either” (40). It seems that he is restraining himself from developing any bond with her, for he is very much aware that she is not English. His wishful thinking is also communicated when he says, “she might have been any pretty English girl and to please her I drank,” (43) showing how much he wishes to overcome this cultural wall but is unable to. He cannot accept Antoinette the way she is, and he wants her to be up to his standards – a purely English lady. This is why he also tries to undo her plaits when he hugs her towards the middle of the novel (52). Antoinette's problem is in her lack of an essential component: she is not English. Although Rochester is the one to benefit financially from his marriage with Antoinette, he still looks at her as inferior only because she does not come from his same background and is supposedly of a different race. For instance, when she expresses reluctance before accepting to marry him, the offended Rochester refuses to go back to England “jilted by this Creole girl” (48). It is obvious how the issue of race constitutes a major obstacle for Rochester which he eventually uses as a pretext to justify his odd behavior. Also, Rochester is very silent; his discussions with Antoinette are very mundane – food, weather, nature – and he rarely asks her questions about herself or her past. It seems that he is not interested in bonding with her, for she is simply a stranger who “never had anything to do with [him] at all” (46). In fact, Antoinette hints to her major childhood incident, the fire at Coulibri, but it is Rochester who interrupts her before she even starts, asking her not to tell him sad stories (50). He is not interested in her past and prefers to deny it; maybe by sequestering her past Rochester thinks it can be actually erased. Rochester sees Antoinette as a person without history, a person whose life only started the minute he married her; no wonder he changes her name to Bertha later in the novel.

However, Rochester is not the only one to be blamed, for Antoinette also keeps her distance from him too. For instance, when Rochester asks her about Sandi, she answers him abruptly, “a boy you never met” (54). Here, Antoinette's answer teases both the readers and Rochester. Her use of the adverb of extreme negation “never” stresses the line that she draws to separate Rochester from her mysterious past that neither he nor the readers have access to. Also, Antoinette gives Rochester directions most of the time, “look for the red ant that is the worst [...] be careful” (53), reminding him of his strangeness and indirectly assuming her own superiority, for she is the one who knows facts and he does not. Both Antoinette and Rochester fail to bridge the gap between them: Rochester always keeps his distance from Antoinette who also reminds him that they are different, what eventually leads them to drift apart. For Rochester, Antoinette remains a “stranger who did not think or feel as [he] did” (58) despite the time they have been married for. Antoinette becomes as mysterious to him as the whole land: her eyes are disconcerting (58) and she has a secret that she won't tell (111) the same one as the “secret loveliness” of Jamaica that he longs to understand. Rochester's description of Antoinette is similar to his perception of the land (wild, untouched, and with a secret) and eventually his relation with her becomes a concrete symbol of his relation to the alien island. Antoinette is, just like Jamaica, an unintelligible other. The couple's sexual experience is in fact as violent and intense as Rochester's will to uncover the secret of the place's loveliness. For him, it seems that the only way to tame that world (or the other) is through sexual violence, which he ostensibly exerts on Antoinette in an attempt to penetrate her world through her. But his sexual attraction to her could only add more to his confusion; especially when “Desire, Hatred, Life, and Death” (58) become the same

when he is in her arms. Bitterly, Rochester figures that Antoinette is “part of those who know the secret and will not tell it,” (111) what drives him to resent her. Rochester is jealous of her because she knows something and he does not or even because she is something he does not understand. Even when he sleeps with her and is close to her physically, he realizes that he is still very far from her mentally. This is why he hates her. In fact, Daniel's letter is not the main factor that leads Rochester to reject Antoinette, for he “felt no surprise” when he received it and was actually “waiting for it” (62). For Rochester, Daniel's letter is an excuse that provides him with a justification for his behavior on being confronted with a cultural and geographical otherness. Noticeably, he does not give Antoinette the chance to explain herself and when she does, he pays no attention and asks her to “talk about it tomorrow” (87). Rochester only wants to put an end to his feelings of disorientation and confusion from a world beyond his grasp, and Daniel Cosway's letter awakens in him the urge to take action. For Rochester, Antoinette is the unintelligible other that he fails to understand. When his strangeness takes the form of estrangement, he suddenly resumes the conventional role of the male imperialist authority and violently rejects all the aspects of the strange world he got tired of trying to relate to, and reduces Antoinette, who is the concrete symbol of that world, to madness. It is the unbridgeable cultural difference that drives Rochester to such a violent reaction that he communicates towards the end of Part Two, as he says, “I was tired of these people. I hated the place. I hated the mountains. I hated the sunsets [...] I hated the beauty” (111). As a consequence, in a desperate effort to restore his distorted power, Rochester denies his experience that takes the form of hatred and strives to possess what he never really could. Eventually, Antoinette becomes the only place for Rochester to fix his lost

authority. He first reduces her to madness to separate himself from her, for “in labeling a phenomenon irrational, that is outside the speaker’s own belief system, it is held at a distance” (Hallam 254). After he distances himself from her by labeling her as mad, Rochester appropriates her. Hence, Antoinette, whose property is passed to her husband in accordance with the English law, becomes Rochester’s own property as he paranoically repeats, “my lunatic...my wife...mad, but mine, mine” (107). Not only does he reduce her to madness, he also denies her human nature. In fact, “a central problem in cross-cultural understanding is the tendency to constitute the Other as a scientific object,” (Hallam 261) and Rochester gradually reduces Antoinette to a doll (96), then to a marionette (96), a lunatic, and finally a mad girl. Unable to understand her otherness and her alien logic, Rochester follows a strategy of containment by reducing Antoinette to a mad person because it is the only rational way she could be categorized or even understood. Rochester also gives her a new English name, Bertha, trying to erase all the signs of her otherness and designing her to fit his own needs and standards. Rochester who “learns that mastery is not only an illusion but something altogether unattainable,” (Konzett 137) finds in the imprisonment of Antoinette a restoration of his manhood. His rejection of her as well as of Jamaica – the country he associates Antoinette with – drives him to master her completely by sequestering her and silencing her voice that echoes the sound of Jamaica. But then again, the novel ironically challenges the idea of repression, for here comes Part Three with Antoinette's voice striking back and eluding the concrete barriers imposed on her by her husband. In fact, the unpredictable and arbitrary structure of the novel reflects the unpredictable nature of Antoinette who, just like this novel, has a logic and a style of her own. The unreliable structure of *Wide Sargasso Sea* embodies in

fact the unpredictability of Antoinette; she is as unknowable as the form of the novel. On the other hand, the unreliable narration also embodies Rochester's doubt and loss; the novel's circular plot structure and the fact that it does not advance in a developmental way – starting with Antoinette and ending back with her voice – recapitulates Rochester's feeling of being stuck, unable to cope with his present condition and unable to move on. Also, the polyphonic structure of the novel, where both Antoinette and Rochester have the chance to present their points of view, seeks to humanize both characters. Antoinette is no longer the mad silenced mysterious “creature,” and Rochester is no longer the irrational male patriarch. Polyphony uncovers the characters' complex human nature; it gives voice to the silenced Bertha to explain events from her perspective, but it also shows Rochester's inner conflict: his rejection for Antoinette stems from his inability to accept the fact that there is another side to his ultimate truths.

If Rochester follows a strategy of containment with Antoinette so as to erase her strangeness, with Christophine he adopts a totally different strategy: mystification. In fact, the only character that challenges Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in a face-to-face encounter is Christophine. Although she is a commodity – a wedding gift for Annette, Antoinette's mother – Christophine plays a prominent role in the novel. Christophine's life has not been easy, for she has spent time in jail because of her Obeah practice. As a result, she becomes an outcast, being a Martinican Obeah woman living in a society of Jamaicans who avoid her out of fear. However, her tough experiences only make her stronger. Unlike her white mistress Antoinette, Christophine defies the laws and does not accept to live at the mercy of a man: “I keep my money, I don't give it to some worthless man,” (69) she says to Antoinette during one of their talks. Christophine has a very



important effect in the novel and is the only character who is not afraid to speak her mind freely. In fact, when Antoinette turns to her for help, it is Christophine who acknowledges the difference between cultures and who strongly claims that the black ritual practices are cultural specific and are not to be used for evil purposes such as making Rochester fall in love with Antoinette. For Rochester, Christophine represents the intimidating and dreadful other who embodies both power and strength. Unlike the other Jamaicans who shyly looked away when Rochester's eyes met theirs, the first time she met him, Christophine looked at him steadily and made him "look away first [as she] smiled to herself" (44). From the very first encounter with Christophine, Rochester gives her a mystical presence. Interestingly, she "[disappears] into the shadows at the back of the house," (44) and when she speaks, "her dark voice [comes] from the darkness" (101) and her words leave him hypnotized (101). On their last encounter, just before Rochester returns back to England, it is Christophine who puts an end to their talk and "[walks] away without looking back" (104). Christophine is a person that Rochester is not able to contain; therefore, he exoticizes her by presenting her as a mysterious person with hidden powers: she is dark and scary just like the darkness, she has a ghostly presence ("she disappeared in the shadows"), and her words are hypnotic. As a result, she becomes a source of threat and fear to him. In fact, Christophine is the only character who provides "a hard analysis of Rochester's actions" (Spivak 129) and who fearlessly faces him in a long discussion. When Antoinette collapses after she learns her husband has cheated on her with Amélie, it is Christophine who offers help and stands up in the face of Rochester to set things clear. Her long dialogue with Rochester at the end of Part Two is a very influential scene in the novel. In fact, Rochester describes himself as spellbound and

“hypnotized” (101) by her words that keep echoing in his mind. It is with Christophine that he becomes vulnerable and unable to answer, for she seems to speak his mind, leading him to agree to whatever she is saying. Thus, Rochester yields to Christophine’s mesmerizing talk; for the first time in the novel, Rochester actually admits that he has been wrong and that he has hurt Antoinette by cheating on her, and says, “yes, that didn’t just happen, I meant it” (99). Christophine has a mystical and powerful presence that weakens Rochester, and when he realizes how weak she makes him, he resumes again his typical role and follows the same strategy of containment he followed with Antoinette and claims again, “she is as mad as the other” (104). But Rochester knows that she is not so. As a matter of fact, Christophine is the “other” that Rochester cannot categorize or reduce to a scientific object; she remains the mystified and unattainable other. When Rochester decides to separate Antoinette from Christophine, he is actually trying to divide in order to rule. In other words, by reducing Antoinette to madness and getting rid of Christophine, Rochester is seeking to divide their power and undermine it in order to restore his own power and affirm himself in the position of dominance.

Rochester’s main problem and the factor behind his unsuccessful marriage and journey is his inability to accept otherness. If he fails to love Antoinette, it is because of his obsessive awareness that she is different and that she comes from a different culture and race. He tries to understand her but is never able to, for he is stuck with hyper-rationality that does not give way for innovation and only works by strategies of reduction and containment. As a result, Rochester appropriates Antoinette, trying to possess what he really never could. His mad craving for order and orientation makes it

possible for him to reduce Antoinette to madness and close her file after her death at the end of *Jane Eyre*.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is the story of the complex relations between the self and the exotic other and the consequences such problems have on human relations. The novel's unreliable narration and polyphonic structure are of particular significance, for they not only reflect the postmodernist understanding of reality where uncertainty and the human being's cognitive and epistemological limitations are stressed, they also represent the unbridgeable gap between cultures. In fact, the novel's multiple and contradictory accounts of the same story concretize and reinforce the sharp differences between cultures. The plot in *Wide Sargasso Sea* cannot be synthesized because it is narrated by different voices, each coming from a different background. As a result, we end up with a number of contradictory stories about one story. The novel's unreliability is the effect of juxtaposing different voices from different cultures: each voice speaks out of its own different logic. Consequently, readers are left with a confusing plot with no authoritative voice to restore their confusion. In fact, unreliability is the concrete result of intercultural encounter that *Wide Sargasso Sea* strongly thematizes. It might be a narratological device employed on purpose so as to emphasize cultural differences, but it is no doubt the result of juxtaposing two culturally different narrators and having them narrate the same story. Whether it is an intentional act or not, unreliability in *Wide Sargasso Sea* stands out of the novel and casts the issue of intercultural relations into high relief.

## Irony and Embedded Narratives in *Lama Hikiyit Maryam*

She is desperate and bitter, she believes in superstition, she is an outcast gone mad, and above all she is dead: Maryam, the narrator of Assad Fouladkar's 2001 feature film *Lama Hikiyit Maryam*, is the only source of information available to the viewers. From her small empty room in the clinic where she has been kept and where she is receiving her psychiatric treatment, Maryam breaks her silence to tell the story of her failing marriage and her gradual breakdown, which eventually lead to her death. Using the Lebanese local dialect as its main language, *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* is a Lebanese-made film that tells the story of the struggle and suffering of Maryam, a young woman who is rejected by her beloved husband and condemned by the rest of her society because she is infertile. Seeking to humanize the general understanding of marginalized women, Fouladkar's *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* renders justice to the incriminated and silenced Maryam by presenting the alien woman's perspective and by exposing the dilemmas she lived through trying to adapt to the laws set by contemporary Arab societies.

Although *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* deals with a classical story, its actual representation or form presents itself as remarkably unusual. In fact, the film consists of an embedded flashback intercut by short scenes of storytelling in which Maryam, who is speaking from her room in the mental asylum, is the narrator. Both the flashback and Maryam's scenes of storytelling are part of a larger narrative frame that is only revealed at the end of the film when Ziad, Maryam's husband, turns out to be silently watching Maryam's story on a videotape on his own television screen. In a film where the narrator

is mentally-unstable and where flashbacks reveal more about the present than about the past, the interpretation of the plot becomes a complex task.

However, once this complex structure doubled by the unreliable narrative voice of Maryam is regarded as an intentional narrative technique rather than just random one, the film becomes more suggestive and acquires a significant sense. Even though it appears quite uncommon and transgressive at first, the fact that *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* is narrated by and focalized through a mentally-unstable woman contributes greatly in bringing out the film's sharply anti-patriarchal moral appeal. Being an outcast labeled as incomplete and therefore different, Maryam is in a position that enables her to set herself apart from the rest of the society and question from her alien point of view the common social laws and norms. As a result, Maryam becomes both a victim of the society where she is classified as insane and by the same token an ironic subject with subversive and skeptical statements that we cannot simply disregard.

Just like Maryam who can be regarded as both a victim and a rebel, the film in general communicates two simultaneous messages of different meanings. In fact, *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* consists of a double-message: it is both the story of Maryam's miserable life and confinement and the story of Ziad's realization of the unfairness of the patriarchal laws of his society. This double-plot is manifested via the film's embedded structure, making the plot in *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* an ironic one. Irony is the making or inferring of meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid (Hutcheon 11). In *Lama Hikiyit Maryam*,

irony challenges and reveals the common social laws of patriarchy in order to accentuate the film's moral appeal.

In the following study, I will first examine the way irony affects our viewing of Fouladkar's *Lama Hikyit Maryam*. Although it first confuses viewers and challenges their common thinking processes, irony plays an important role as means to context interpretation by revealing the limitations of the commonly accepted social norms and beliefs. I will then attempt to show how the use of rhetorical devices such as irony and embedded narratives creates a sharply anti-patriarchal moral appeal and yields a new understanding of the problematic role of culture in interpersonal relations.

More particularly, irony in *Lama Hikyit Maryam* has two contradictory functions that operate simultaneously throughout the film: whereas it first challenges the habitual categories of signification by defying the common understanding of reality, gender, and insanity; it actually exposes and reveals the incongruities at the heart of patriarchy. In other words, the primary function of irony in *Lama Hikyit Maryam* is to intentionally confuse the audience by challenging the common thinking processes through the character of Maryam, in order to expose the limits of hyper-rationality. Nonetheless, irony reinforces Ziad's awareness of the contradictions of his society and reveals his sudden realization of the importance of Maryam in his life, especially that her death brings about his belated awakening and tragic self-knowledge.

In brief, *Lama Hikyit Maryam* tells the story of Ziad and Maryam, a blissfully happy couple who, after three years of marriage, discover that Maryam is infertile. At

first, Ziad is compassionate; he assures Maryam that he loves her regardless of her infertility. Maryam consults several doctors, but they all confirm her infertility. Then, her simple-minded mother convinces her to visit Abu al-Faraj, a person who is believed to have hidden powers and who might find the cure. Meanwhile, Ziad starts to consider adoption as an option, but his mother quickly interferes, explaining to her son that adoption is against the Islamic law and that he has the right to a natural paternity. Ziad's mother also explains to Maryam that the only reason Ziad is still with her is because he pities her; Ziad has the right to have his own child even if this means marrying another woman. In a culture where infertile women are considered inferior and incomplete, the idea of divorce gradually takes hold of Ziad who starts insinuating it to Maryam. Unable to escape the increasing familial and social pressures and afraid of losing the love of Ziad, Maryam accepts that he marry another woman who can bear his child. Convinced that the marriage is only pretence and that Ziad will be back with her when everything is over, Maryam accompanies Ziad to pick a bride and even attends his wedding. However, she soon realizes that Ziad's marriage is as real as her divorce, especially when his new wife Souraya turns out to be pregnant. In a world where she is doomed to loneliness, Maryam finds in her unconditional love for Ziad a reason to live. But the disappointments caused by Ziad's abandonment, her mother's death, and the fact that Abu al-Faraj is a charlatan, gradually lead to her insanity. Maryam is then sent into confinement where she reacts by deciding not to talk, for talk is useless. Shortly afterwards, she dies, leaving Ziad a video tape and a note in which she asks that he wash and bury her dead body.

In terms of structure, *Lama Hikyat Maryam* is a film of embedded narratives or a discourse within the discourse. The film consists of an extended flashback intercut by

five shorts scenes in which Maryam, the character-narrator, faces the camera to recount her story from her room in the mental hospital. However, the end of the film reveals another narrative frame when Maryam, whom viewers might think is addressing them at first, turns out to be on a recorded tape that Ziad is watching on his own television screen.

Although the main action takes place in the flashback, the film channels the story of Maryam into a number of frames. The first part of my study deals with this particular form and seeks to demonstrate how this layered structure is ironic, as it challenges the coerciveness of common reason to bring out a strong moral appeal.

The first common notion that the film challenges with its structure is that of reality. In fact, the film opens with a medium shot of an emaciated woman with disheveled hair facing the camera and flipping through some pictures. Without introducing herself or her interlocutor, she holds one of the pictures forward near the camera and enthusiastically says that it was taken on her birthday. She also puts forward another picture of herself – this time veiled – with her fiancé and gives a long sigh that triggers the film's flashback. The beginning of the film projects Maryam's story as the only diegetic reality and presents Maryam as the sole source of information available to the viewers. In the scenes of storytelling, Maryam seems more alive and existent than any of the other characters she talks about in her flashback such as Ziad, her mother-in-law, or Souraya. However, the end of the film shocks the viewers when Maryam turns out to be dead and when they learn that she is an image on Ziad's television screen. In fact, the end of *Lama Hikyat Maryam* presents viewers with another diegetic reality, that of Ziad watching Maryam's videotape. As a result, the viewers find themselves faced with multiple realities, the one framed by the other. Thus, the use of such an embedded



narrative strategy becomes a challenging yet disconcerting aspect worth examining. By leading the viewers to believe Maryam's flashback to be the only diegetic reality in the film and then presenting another reality at the end, *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* ostensibly challenges the general concept of reality. There is no fixed reality in the film; instead, there are a number of intermingled realities. This layered structure is in fact a concrete manifestation of the postmodernist understanding of reality that emphasizes the human being's doubt, his/her cognitive and epistemological limitations. When viewers learn that Maryam is already dead and that her story is transmitted through the perspective of Ziad, the understanding of the film takes a new dimension. In other words, *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* seems to blur the line between what is real and what is not; Maryam's story turns out to be an non-diegetic reality inscribed in Ziad's silent discourse and therefore becomes in principle fictive. The end of the film leaves the viewers in a state of confusion, not knowing whether Maryam's story is a diegetic reality or not.

Moreover, the structure of the film challenges the idea of the monologic realist narrator embodied by Maryam. At first, Maryam seems to control the setting parameters; for instance, she selects, interprets, and determines what the viewers can see. Also, she controls the arrangement of space and the duration of the events presented. For instance, towards the end of the film is a quite striking ellipsis of two years that Maryam chooses not to cover in her narration. Unlike the other events that the film dwells upon such as Ziad's wedding party or Maryam's long visits to Abu al- Faraj, a whole period of two years is purposively left out and rendered mysterious. By omitting some events, Maryam creates a long-term narrational gap that the viewers are only able to understand at the end of the film. As a result, Maryam's manipulations of her story order prove to function in

relation to her narrative strategies and show that she controls the narration – of her flashback at least. However, this image of Maryam is soon perturbed by the film's frame-narrative structure. If Maryam seems to have total control of her flashback, the film soon creates a rhetorical appeal that ironizes on this idea. When Maryam's flashback turns out to be a videotape that Ziad is watching on his television, Maryam's narrational power is suddenly undermined. If Maryam has the authority over her story, Ziad has in fact the authority over the transmission of this story to the viewers. As a result, Maryam is a controlling figure who also has to yield to the authority of Ziad who is allowing her videotape to play on his television screen. Although Ziad does not interfere with her flashback, we still cannot deny his presence at the end of the film and the twist it creates in terms of our view of Maryam and interpretation of the plot.

In view of this, my analysis partly departs from David Bordwell's definition of the cinematic narrator that he believes is the result of the spectator's construct. According to Bordwell, "the narrator does not create the narration; the narration creates the narrator" (Bordwell 62). In other words, Bordwell's chiasmic statement explains that the cinematic narrator is just another character in the film, who is manipulated and controlled by a more complex system, maybe the film director, producer, or even costume designer. Therefore, he becomes another character with limited privileges. I partly agree with Bordwell's statement, for I believe this cannot be applicable in all situations. In fact, the narrator can be the result of the narration only in films that do not contain explicit character-narrators such as Maryam, and in which no voice or body "gets identified as the locus of narration" (Bordwell 61). In this case, the narration creates the narrator who becomes part of the general narrational process of the film. In *Lama Hikyat Maryam*, Maryam is an explicit

and personified narrator, but she is still part of the narrational process. However, Maryam does not create the narration especially when, in the film's last scene, we learn that she is dead and that her story is a videotape that Ziad is watching. Suddenly, she becomes the object of Ziad's focalization. Just like Bordwell's cinematic narrator who is part of the narrational process, Maryam, who seems to be the film's utmost explicit narrator, is also part of the whole narration.

Moreover, the film challenges the common understanding of the predetermined marginalized women. In fact, one of the effects of ideology is to make the cultural and therefore changing look natural and therefore indisputable (Barthes 81). Also, films very often embody some ideological practices whereby the woman is constructed as "eternal, unchanging, an essence or a set of fixed images and meanings" (Kuhn 77). However, Maryam challenges the dominance of some social forms of signification through which the woman is perceived as a fixed signifier by exposing the preconceived processes of meaning construction that the other characters in the film are engaged in. For instance, Maryam's infertility transforms her into an outcast that her family and other members of her society label as "incomplete." For instance, in a dense conversation she has with her son, Ziad's mother refers to Maryam by calling her "an incomplete body" (*Jesmā nā'is*). This definition of infertility is a result of the fixed ideology that governs the individual's thinking activities and makes such ideas appear natural and legitimate. Consequently, the general perception of Maryam becomes conditioned by the value placed on her biological condition. However, in the scenes of storytelling, Maryam challenges the fixed image of the incomplete woman set by her society and presents herself as a thinking being with complex and logical thoughts. She even strikes viewers with her awareness of her

unstable mental state, especially when she admits at one point that she has suffered from a nervous breakdown and had to be treated in a medical institution. By talking about her breakdown, Maryam draws attention to her self-consciousness and awareness of her condition and shows the viewers that she is not just a mad placed in an asylum, but that she is aware of it. As a result, Maryam challenges the general perception of infertile women in her society, showing that infertility is not a crime.

Not only does Maryam challenge the common understanding of infertile women, she also defies the general definition of madness. In fact, by admitting that she has been treated in a mental hospital and that she has had a breakdown, Maryam strikes the viewers as a self-conscious character who is able to distinguish between sanity and insanity. For instance, in a clever attempt not to break the trust she has established between her and her addressee, Maryam never mentions that she is speaking from the asylum. She leads her addressee on to believe her story, her arguments, her point of view of things, and then suddenly shocks him/her at the end when she turns out to be placed in a mental institution. Maryam projects herself as a common individual who thinks and acts the way everybody does, but this image is soon perturbed and rendered ironic when, towards the end of the film, viewers learn that Maryam has been using the name of Ziad's second wife, Souraya Sleiman. By using Souraya's name, Maryam, who gave the impression of struggling against the unjust laws of her society, reveals her acceptance of the society's values and her wish to conform to them. The pressure caused by her society and by the closest persons to her – Ziad – lead Maryam to deny her own identity and to choose to live by somebody else's name. With this information revealed at the end of the film when the nurse explains to Ziad about Maryam's condition, the perception of

Maryam suddenly changes, and she is no longer the self-conscious person she presented herself as.

In addition, in the last scene of storytelling, Maryam addresses Ziad and calls him, “You madman!” ( *Yā majnūn!* ) In an ironic statement, the insane Maryam calls another person insane, which draws attention to Maryam’s position of skepticism and her ironic attitude to existence. In this final scene, Maryam openly expresses her love for Ziad, but this time she does not call him by his name, instead she calls him “madman.” In fact, by calling Ziad insane, Maryam defies the common definition of insanity and calls for a reconsideration of the term. With this irony, Maryam draws a line between her and the rest of the society and allows herself to question from her alien point of view the social norms and laws that are usually perceived as natural. As a result, the irony in Maryam’s statement functions subversively as “provocative, disruptive, but also hierarchical – setting itself above everyday life and opinion” (Colebrook 122). Although it is challenging, Maryam’s statement does not seem provocative to me. In fact, Maryam’s unconditional love for Ziad and her inability to accept that he take another wife are quite logical and not insane. Arguably, the only insane act, which happens to be a naturalized truth in Maryam’s society is to divorce a woman or judge her in terms of her biological condition the way Maryam is judged. Consequently, many questions are raised concerning Maryam’s mental condition. Although she is in a mental asylum, Maryam’s point of view is valid and convincing, and it seems that there is a kind of truth in her madness, especially in her implicit criticism of the common social ideology. Consequently, the insane character of Maryam in the film is an intentional rhetorical device employed to challenge the coerciveness of the common reason and to show that

notions such as sanity and insanity are equivocal terms that are used to label and classify people in an attempt to preserve the social order.

Finally, the film challenges the traditional concept of gender. Whereas Maryam's infertility transformed her into an object of the male gaze in her society, she tries to defy this dominant social activity in the scenes of storytelling. Although the lingering close-ups usually constitute the woman as an object in film, the lingering shots of the scenes of storytelling in *Lama Hikyat Maryam* are controlled and directed by Maryam herself. In fact, towards the end of the film and particularly in the fifth and last scene of storytelling, the plaintive Maryam grabs a remote control device and turns off the video recorder in front of which she has been telling and recording her story. In her videotape, Maryam eventually returns the gaze as she willingly looks straight into the camera and speaks. Moreover, she becomes in control of the viewers' gaze, for not only does she willingly face the camera and subject herself to their gaze, she also decides how and for how long the viewers' gaze should last. Maryam is the one who has the controlling device; therefore, she is the one who has power over the spectators' viewing activity.

However, Maryam's power is again ironized by the frame narrative technique, especially when Ziad appears to be at the other end of the narrative process. It seems that Maryam's power does not reside in her control of the means of cultural production, for her activity is determined and conditioned by the presence of Ziad who has an equally-important role in the narration. Although Maryam has the remote control device in her hands, it is Ziad who actually controls her videotape that is running on his own television screen. In fact, Maryam's interlocutor remains a mystery throughout the film although the viewers might in fact believe that they are the ones being addressed. However, character-

narrators “who are seen as well as heard are more likely to address not the audience but another character,” (Fleishman 25) and this is the case with Maryam who, in her fifth and last apparition on the screen, turns out to be addressing Ziad. Although Maryam is addressing Ziad throughout the film, Ziad remains absent from the scene and therefore silenced. Interestingly, Maryam seems to be both addressing and indirectly silencing the person who has condemned her and whose rules she had to abide by previously. Moreover, the fact that the scene of storytelling does not include a reverse-shot of Maryam’s addressee –Ziad – conveys the implied hierarchy that Maryam covertly establishes between herself and Ziad. However, this image of Maryam as the independent and rebellious woman trying to defy and subvert patriarchy is ironized by the film’s frame-narrative technique. In fact, at the end of the film and without warning, the camera slowly pans out to reveal the film’s major twist: Ziad watching Maryam, who is dead and who has left him a videotape, on his own television screen. Suddenly, the focalizer in the film changes from Maryam to Ziad, and suddenly the line that divides the male and the female is blurred, challenging the common concept of gender that Maryam resists against. Consequently, Maryam is no longer the one in control of her narration, for the transmission of her story to the viewers becomes conditioned by Ziad’s presence and his willingness to report it. Although viewers are led to believe that Maryam manages to defy and resist against patriarchy, the end of the film conveys a rhetorical appeal marked by the frame-narrative technique and the use of irony and shows that Maryam’s voice depends on Ziad’s willingness to report it.

It is certainly important to identify an irony in a given work especially that “the final responsibility for deciding whether irony actually happens or not rests solely with

the interpreter,” (Hutcheon 45) but an equally-important task would be to recognize its function. In *Lama Hikyat Maryam*, irony has an “oppositional function,” for the same utterance or scene has controversial effects. In fact, irony can be both transgressive and subversive, but also offensive, especially when it challenges the dominant thinking process while it is “positioned within the dominant ideology” (Hutcheon 52). The first use of irony in *Lama Hikyat Maryam* is to challenge the common social norms and show that they are not natural but rather socially-construed and therefore changeable. For instance, Maryam’s madness is subversive. The fact that she is mad, speaking from a mental clinic and calling Ziad a “madman,” is a rhetorical technique used to defy and expose the common thinking activities that control individuals. Ziad represents the majority of the society who believes in the dominant social norms, and by addressing him, Maryam seems to be addressing the audience as well. As a result, Maryam’s statement and position seem provocative at first, but the irony is that there is a truth and sanity in her words, contributing highly to the film’s moral appeal.

Although the primary use of irony in *Lama Hikyat Maryam* is to challenge the common categories of signification by blurring the line between reality and illusion, the male and the female, and sanity and insanity, irony also plays a role revealing and shedding light on the incongruities at the heart of the patriarchal society. However, Ziad only gets this tragic knowledge with the death of Maryam, an act that ironically symbolizes and triggers his awakening.

As a method of expression, “irony filters the interpretation of a content through binary opposition,” (Kaufer 456) and this is the case in *Lama Hikyat Maryam* especially with the scenes of love-making. In fact, an interesting montage characterizes the scenes



in which Ziad and Maryam are making love. These scenes are continually intercut by shots from one of the last scenes of the film, the scene of the washing in which Ziad is washing Maryam's dead body as part of a religious ritual. This juxtaposition of sex and death is a metaphorical depiction of Ziad's regret and sense of loss. In fact, the shots from the washing that repeatedly interrupt Ziad and Maryam's love-making are characterized by their strong sensuality, the affectionate strokes of Ziad's hands on Maryam's body, and his passionate caresses such that one can easily depict his longing for those forever lost moments with Maryam. By juxtaposing shots of opposing content, the film creates an irony that climaxes at the end when the viewers learn that the sensual scenes and Ziad's gestures of adoration correspond to the death of Maryam not to their intimate moments together. The juxtaposition of these shots conveys a double message; they suggest Ziad's love and adoration for Maryam and by the same token his despair and longing for the past. Although the scenes of love-making suggest physical closeness, it seems that Ziad and Maryam connect more spiritually after her death.

Not only does the scene of the washing interrupt the scenes of love-making, it also recurs repeatedly throughout the film, eventually becoming the film's major leitmotif. As a matter of fact, the water imagery plays an important role in the interpretation of the film and conveys a more fundamental ironic statement. Throughout the film, close-ups of water dripping on several parts of a female's naked body intercept the main plot. However, their meaning is constantly deferred thus maintaining the viewers' interest and increasing their curiosity. Consequently, when the broader context is finally revealed, the viewer is "forced to evaluate early material in the light of new information about prior events" (Bordwell 78). This is the case with the water imagery in

*Lama Hikyat Maryam*, for it is only at the end of the film, when all the mysteries unfold, that the water imagery becomes more and more meaningful. In fact, when the scene of the washing takes place at the end of the film, our understanding of the previous scenes in the film is suddenly changed and the recurrent shots of dripping water become quite significant in the interpretation of the film. First, the fact that water, which is a symbol of fertility, is dripping on an infertile and dead body draws attention to the irony embodied in these shots. This irony in which fertility and sterility are opposed suggests despair and hopelessness; Maryam's body is already a dead body and this idea is suggested from the beginning of the film.

Water is not only a symbol of fertility; it also symbolizes the act of purification. This idea actually reaches its peak towards the end of the film, mainly in the scene of the washing. In fact, the scene is marked by the intensity of Ziad's strokes, his abundant tears mixed with the water on Maryam's dead body, and his conflicted feelings of sadness and regret. By washing Maryam's body so intensely and affectionately, Ziad seems to be washing away his guilt. It is only with Maryam's death that Ziad recognizes the injustice he has inflicted on her, and washing Maryam's body becomes the act by which Ziad strives to wash away his sins and guilt through the water on Maryam's body. Her dead body becomes the only place for Ziad to repent.

This scene of the washing stands in opposition to an earlier scene in the film, that of the scandal in which Ziad's second wife Souraya catches Ziad cheating on her with Maryam whom he had divorced. The scene begins with Ziad asking Maryam to accompany him home and assuring her that it would be safe since Souraya has left to her parents' house after she and Ziad had had an argument. Once they arrive, Ziad and

Maryam sleep together in what is now Souraya and Ziad's conjugal bed. After that, Ziad takes a long hot shower while Maryam is still in bed, naked. It is then that Souraya unfortunately returns home to find the half-naked Maryam in her bed. Shocked at the sight of Maryam in her bed covered with bed sheets, Souraya loses control of herself and starts crying in such a loud and uncontrollable way, muttering various insults to the woman who has just ruined her marriage. Ashamed and humiliated, Maryam paranoically flinches in the bed with an expression of panic on her face while Souraya's cousins, who have been waiting for her in the car and who have overheard her loud cries, brutally barge into the room to attack Maryam and violently beat her up. Interestingly, Ziad is physically absent from the whole scene of Maryam's humiliation, but his presence is strongly implied in the medium shots of the closed bathroom door through which the sound of the water is heard. The scene of the scandal is characterized by the shots of the women in a hysterical state – Souraya is crying, her cousins are violently hitting Maryam, and Maryam is collapsing – as opposed to the shots of the bathroom's closed door. In fact, the juxtaposition of these shots conveys an irony expressed mainly in the opposition between the women's hysterical reaction and that of the unperturbed Ziad. Whereas Maryam is being defiled with all kinds of insults and subjected to humiliation, Ziad is peacefully taking a shower, washing and cleansing himself of the whole problem he has actually caused. After this incident, different decisions are made: Maryam is turned into a fallen and disrespected woman while Ziad is given the chance to make up for his mistake by choosing to stay with his wife Souraya. In this scene, Maryam actually exposes and questions the validity of the social norms whereby the woman, not the man, is the one who is punished for adultery. We do not see Ziad being blamed for his act; we only see

Maryam being beaten-up and despised for having slept with Ziad. In this scene as well, the water with which Ziad is showering incriminates Maryam and leaves him innocent unlike the water used in the scene of the washing with which Maryam is finally purified and Ziad is rendered guilty.

The water imagery also recurs in one of the film's major scenes and its main turning point: the scene of Ziad's wedding to Souraya. After Ziad leaves off to the wedding party that Souraya's parents have organized, Maryam grows restless. Unable to imagine that her husband is marrying another woman while she is still at home pretending that everything is all right, Maryam decides to follow Ziad to the wedding. Once there, Maryam is shocked at the sight of her husband next to a beautifully-dressed bride. Realizing that her life will never be the same now that Ziad is not solely hers, Maryam decides to leave the wedding. On her way out, Maryam is stopped by a woman who kindly invites her to dance, and so she does. Maryam dances to Elham al-Madfai's *Sharabtak al-May* (I gave you water), a song that links up with the leitmotif of the water imagery in the film. In fact, the song holds an apologetic statement, and the lyrics express the speaker's regret for unintentionally having caused suffering and sadness to his beloved. This song expresses Maryam's feelings to Ziad: whereas she gives him water, the symbol of life, he gives her only death. In other words, Maryam gives Ziad the means to revive her – that is love – but he eventually does not do anything with it, and leaves her to wither alone. However, Maryam's dance carries more meaning than just a dance. In fact, the scene is marked by non-static camera movements that convey Maryam's conflicted feelings, and the discontinuous montage also replicates Maryam's disconnected thoughts raging through her mind, eventually leading her to a frantic state.

Suddenly, Maryam loses control of her actions; her dancing moves become very quick and disorderly, which pushes Ziad to interfere in an attempt to stop her. As Ziad is trying to drag Maryam from the dance floor where she made a spectacle of herself, Maryam turns against him and gives him a strong slap on the face. At this point everything freezes: the music stops, Ziad is unable to move, and the audience is unanimously in a state of shock. In fact, this slap represents a significant turning point in the film, for it is right after this incident that Maryam's life takes a tragic turn: she gets a divorce, Ziad's wife becomes pregnant, and Maryam turns mad. Just like many other scenes in the film, the slap in the scene of the wedding is ironic. Whereas Maryam slaps Ziad out of anger, it seems that Maryam is the one who is really slapped. In other words, by slapping Ziad literally, Maryam is the one who receives the stronger slap – metaphorically – that awakens her to the dreadful reality she has to face: her unjustified loss of Ziad, her humiliating divorce and miserable fate. Maryam's increasing fear and anger expressed in the discontinuous montage find a climax in the slap, the actual point where she is suddenly awakened.

If the film's leitmotif conveys irony, the general structure of *Lama Hikyt Maryam* is also ironic. The end of the film, in particular, reveals all the postponed events and withheld information, creating both a sense of shock and surprise. In fact, in her last scene of storytelling, Maryam reveals the identity of her addressee for the first time in the film as she uses the pronoun "you" to refer to Ziad not the viewers. It is then that the camera slowly pans out to show Maryam on a small television screen in front of which Ziad is watching quietly. Suddenly, the viewers realize that Maryam, who has been telling her story directly and who seemed more alive than anyone else in the film, is a

dead character while Ziad is ironically the most one alive. Ziad is not part of Maryam's story; instead, she is part of his. The viewers also come to another realization at the end of *Lama Hikiyit Maryam*: the story that Maryam has been narrating so intensely throughout the whole film is actually channeled into the perspective of Ziad. In fact, when Ziad goes to the hospital to see Maryam's dead body, the nurse tells him that Maryam had left Ziad a note and a videotape. Ziad is the first and only one to watch the tape, and therefore the viewers cannot have access to the tape unless Ziad makes it possible. As a result, the film turns out to contain a "complex embedding" (Bal 46): Maryam's enacted flashback that is embedded in her scene of storytelling, and these two stories – the flashback and the storytelling – are framed by Ziad's silent discourse. This complex structure gives the film a broader meaning and conveys the fundamental irony underlying its structure. The film's first and most obvious message is that of Maryam's tragedy; however, this message is suddenly challenged and made ironic by the framed-narrative technique. With Ziad on the chair silently watching Maryam's tape and crying over her death, the film becomes the story of Ziad's embarrassment as he realizes the emotional harm he has caused Maryam by choosing to follow the laws of his society even when these laws were unjust. Maryam's story represents her resistance against her tragic fate, but it is also the only way she makes Ziad realize the unfairness of the society to women like her.

Nevertheless, *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* does not lead us to dislike or even blame Ziad for Maryam's death; in fact, the film presents Ziad as a pivotal character who surrenders to the pressures of his society and who chooses to live his life the way it is "supposed to be lived" in his society. For him, marrying another woman seems the only natural option

a man can choose when his wife is infertile. It is not a coincidence that he works at a copy center; as a matter of fact, Ziad's job is a concrete reflection of his life. In other words, Ziad's life is a copy of the life his mother and the society in general has conceived for him. Just like his job where there is no chance for individuality, Ziad's life is a fixed image that copies other people's lives. He does not see another option than to accept the life that is envisioned for him. However, it is obvious that Ziad, who thinks that a child is the key to a happy family, does not find this happiness in his second marriage. In a scene toward the end of the film, Ziad and his wife Souraya are having breakfast with their two-year old son Nadeem. The scene emphasizes Ziad's distance from Souraya and the couple's incompatibility. For instance, when she complains to him about her severe headaches and tells him that she needs to take some serious medical tests, Ziad does not show concern; he keeps eating his food and only offers her some money. He actually throws the money on the dining table and leaves the house, after having quickly cuddled his son. It seems that Ziad and Souraya's marriage is like a business transaction; she bears his child whereas he provides her with food, money, and shelter. It seems clear from this scene that Ziad is unhappy and that he does not love Souraya; we can clearly depict the opposition between the lively dinners he used to have on the same table with Maryam (at the beginning of the film) and the dull ones he is having with Souraya. His unhappiness is a result of the disappointment caused by his second marriage, for he thought this marriage would be the key to happiness, the evident solution to his problem. However, Ziad seems to realize that his new life lacks an important element: love. By marrying Souraya, Ziad does what is considered to be socially-acceptable, but it seems that he realizes that such a decision is not appropriate for him. Personally, if Ziad is to be

blamed, it is only for being too passive and for indisputably yielding to the naturalized laws of his society without argument. For instance, he chooses to marry another woman without thinking whether this decision is appropriate, or whether it would hurt Maryam's feelings or even undermine her. However, Ziad only realizes this fact when Maryam dies, and it is then that he also acknowledges her as his wife after he has denied her for a long time. The tears that he sheds at the end of the film are like water sprayed on his face that finally awakens him to reconsider his beliefs, his society, and his life.

The presence of Ziad at the end of the film accentuates his regret and sheds light on his embarrassment and disgrace for having succumbed to the laws of his society and for believing that these laws are inflexible and legitimate. In fact, in the last scene of *Lama Hikyat Maryam*, the camera slowly pans out of the television screen on which Maryam's story is playing only to catch a view of Ziad's back. Interestingly, it is the first time in the film that Ziad turns his back to the camera to face Maryam. It seems that Ziad is turning his back to the audience (representing his society) in an act of withdrawal; his act reflects both his feeling of shame and his disappointment from his society. He even tries to reach Maryam with his hand, but his hand only touches the screen and he realizes that she is no longer accessible to him. As a result, *Lama Hikyat Maryam* becomes the tragedy of both Maryam and Ziad: it is the tragedy of Maryam because she loses the person she loves and her right to live a decent and normal life; and it is the tragedy of Ziad because he finally realizes that he has been responsible for Maryam's desolation.

However, Ziad does not know from the start that he is the main factor behind Maryam's downfall; he only realizes it after her death when he watches the tape she has left him. This is why Ziad is a critical character in the film. Ziad is a round character; he



develops throughout the film and eventually changes completely. In fact, Ziad realizes the important role Maryam plays in his life, for she unintentionally plays the sacrificial role to his self-knowledge. Ironically, Maryam's death triggers Ziad's awakening and brings about his tragic knowledge.

*Lama Hikiyit Maryam* is not just a film about the struggle of a marginalized woman who refuses to give in to the pathetic fate set by her society; it is also about the unvoiced sympathy that Maryam's story creates in us. Moreover, the importance of *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* lies in its ironic narrative structure marked by the embedded narratives and the unreliable voice of the mad character-narrator Maryam. In fact, not only does this complex structure reflect the contradictions and injustice of patriarchy, it also recapitulates the complexity of the culture itself. The film's layered structure reflects the implied hierarchy within the culture, and the significant use of irony challenges the fixed ideology and seeks to expose the common social beliefs. With irony, the film's moral appeal is rendered stronger and even more powerful. In *Lama Hikiyit Maryam*, irony creates a feeling of confusion especially when very common concepts such as reality and insanity are strongly challenged. As a result, irony creates an intentional ambiguity that provokes the audience in order to draw attention to fundamental social problems like the unjust condemnation of infertile women. It is only by shocking the viewers that the message becomes more influential. *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* is a film with a content that is ultimately and simultaneously challenged by its structure and the various narratological

techniques such as irony and unreliable narrators, creating both a surprising and a shocking effect.

## Formalism as a Means to Context Interpretation

This study has shown how structural features in literary and cinematic narratives can convey relevant themes and contribute to a more critical understanding of a text. This study of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikyt Maryam* tends some way towards a formalist approach and reveals the validity of such an approach as a means to context interpretation. I have tried to analyze the two narratives by examining their structural features, which play a significant role in foregrounding major and pertinent textual themes. Thus, the complex structural features in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikyt Maryam* communicate a double-message: on the one hand, the unreliable narrators scrutinize and challenge the canonized social norms and conventions, such as gender and marriage. On the other hand, polyphony and embedded narration also offer an insight into the complexities of intercultural encounters and gender relationships.

My analysis of the narrative organization in *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows that the unreliable structure and narration of the text function in two ways. First, the unreliable narrators in the novel challenge the common social norms relating to madness, gender, and race, and expose the limitations of hyper-rationality. For instance, Antoinette and Rochester represent the only available source of information in the novel despite their potential unreliability. As an incarcerated and mad woman, Antoinette represents a transgression of the habitual narrative voice and challenges the common understanding of madness. Also, Rochester reveals the restraints of common reason, especially through his inability to understand a new culture and even accept Antoinette. Consequently, unreliability creates a feeling of confusion and uncertainty because these narrators are the

only source that can possibly provide orientation in the novel. Although they confuse the reader at first, the lack of orientation and the effect of defamiliarization caused by the intentional unreliability in *Wide Sargasso Sea* reflect the epistemic crisis characteristic of the postmodern era. This is how unreliability in *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes on an important function within the postmodern context of the novel, for unreliable narration and polyphony come together in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in so far as they are means of transgression that create epistemological and cognitive doubt, replicating the modern loss of ultimate truth.

The second function of unreliability in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a concrete embodiment of the complexities of intercultural relations. The uniqueness of the novel lies in Rhys's ability to represent the collision of two worlds, Europe and the West Indies, through the marriage of opposites and its failure. In this case, unreliability in *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals (rather than blurs or confuses) the irreconcilable oppositions between people from different cultures and backgrounds. In other words, unreliability recapitulates the irreconcilable differences between Antoinette and Rochester, who stand for two very different cultures: England and Jamaica. The fact that the accounts of Antoinette and Rochester are contradictory and filled with gaps is the result of the couple's different backgrounds and ways of thinking. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is full of contradictions because the story is narrated from different perspectives, each one infused with its own culture's thinking and rationality. In this case, unreliability becomes an effect not a cause; it is the effect resulting from the narrators' different backgrounds, cultures, thinking, and points of view. The gap between Rochester and Antoinette's accounts of the same story is the same gap that exists between the two cultures each of

them represents, England and Jamaica. Therefore, unreliability in *Wide Sargasso Sea* becomes inevitable as long as Antoinette and Rochester are different, and it is a concrete representation of an “intercultural collision.”

My analysis of unreliability and its function in a literary narrative shows that it is a powerful narratological tool that recapitulates and foregrounds fundamental cultural discourses, such as epistemological doubt and intercultural relations. Thus, unreliability in *Wide Sargasso Sea* blurs the thick dividing line set by the society to separate male and female, sanity and insanity, and other common dichotomies. Simultaneously, unreliability draws and thickens another line, this time between the self and the alien other, a complex relationship embodied by Rochester and Antoinette.

Irony in *Lama Hikiyit Maryam*, like unreliability in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, has a double function. The first function of irony in the film is subversive and transgressive. Irony in *Lama Hikiyit Maryam* seeks to challenge common social norms and conventions by ostensibly transmitting the main events of the story through the distorted perspective of Maryam. As a mad and marginalized woman, Maryam challenges the notion of the reliable narrator, yet she is the viewer's sole source of information. Interestingly, the viewers tend to believe, sympathize, and even trust the narrator whom they realize is a mad woman at the end of the film. Delaying Maryam's madness is a strategic move that seeks to shock the audience by showing that Maryam's speech is ironic. Although Maryam is able to persuasively expose major social problems such as infertility, marriage and divorce, her words are those of a mad woman. The irony in Maryam's speech confuses the audience, for there is truth in Maryam's words despite her madness and unreliability. This madness is strategic because it makes the viewer identify not with a

common person but a mad one. Maryam's madness exposes the common social concepts and traditions, creating both an effect of defamiliarization and a sense of doubt. In *Lama Hikyt Maryam*, irony transgresses the bounds of the socially-acceptable and challenges the audience's cognitive frames and references. By doing this, irony draws attention to the shortcomings of the accepted social conventions and beliefs and seeks a redefinition of them.

On the other hand, irony in *Lama Hikyt Maryam* emphasizes the incongruities and problems at the heart of conservative Arab society. In *Lama Hikyt Maryam*, irony highlights not only Maryam's misery but also that of her husband Ziad, who ironically enjoys all the advantages a man can have in the patriarchal society. For instance, according to the common social customs, Ziad has the freedom to marry another woman when he learns his wife is infertile. Polygamy, despite its unfairness to women, is a natural act in Ziad's society. Although it seems that Maryam is exposing the unfairness of such a custom, this message is rendered ironic when the viewer discovers at the very end of the film that Ziad is at the other end of the narration. Suddenly, *Lama Hikyt Maryam* becomes as much the story of Ziad as it is of Maryam. Ziad's presence in the narration is not a reinforcement of patriarchy (although it seems to be) but a verification of Maryam's words. Ziad does not interfere with or modify Maryam's speech; instead he gives her a voice by playing her tape and becomes a listener like the viewers themselves.

Briefly, irony in *Lama Hikyt Maryam* plays two equally-important roles. It first challenges the common social notions such as madness and gender relations. Second, it reveals the problems at the heart of patriarchy, this time not from the point of view of a woman but that of a man.

Far from formalist hermeticism, somewhat a close attention to structural elements of narratives can, paradoxically, convey important social contextual information and contribute to a better understanding of the text and the society from which it emerges. It appears from this study that irony, polyphony, and the unreliable narrator play a significant role as narratological instruments in the analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikyat Maryam*. The power of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lama Hikyat Maryam* is not in their classical story but in the significant way the story is plotted, such that the technique itself becomes a means of thematization making these works both challenging and powerful.

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