

Exploring Intersectionality of Women's Mental Health And Gender Norms in Literature

By

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requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my original work while completing my degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material that has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Abstract

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of Intersectionality discusses how different aspects of a person's identity, such as race and gender, intersect and influence a person's experience of discrimination. This study explores the intersectionality of gender norms and women's mental health through an in-depth analysis of three literary works: *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys, *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) a play by Tennessee Williams. These three books were selected to analyse how female characters in literature deal with the social complexities that create diverse impacts on their mental health. Kate Millett's concept of sexual politics and the social construction theory by Simone de Beauvoir from her book *The Second Sex* is used to discuss the female protagonists' sufferings caused by social gender norms and examine how these women as dynamic multifaceted individuals, continuously challenge cultural perceptions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Women experience practical dominance in a variety of ways that feed an unfair cycle of inequality and male domination that adversely affects their mental well-being. This connection between the emotional and mental well with adverse male domination is well documented in literature and can be discussed through the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality explores the interconnectedness of women's mental health and their struggles due to gender inequality. It is a literary framework that can help analyse the identity formation of women who undergo mental duress for the reasons mentioned above.

1.1 Overview

“Intersectionality” is a term invented by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), which indicates how different social categories—like gender, race, and class—intersect and interact, affecting people's viewpoints and experiences. It points out the framework for exploring how unfairness or discrimination is derived from simultaneous multidimensional oppression and not just one fixed form of injustice (Crenshaw 1244). Intersectionality posits that individuals experience unique forms of discrimination based on multiple factors such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and physical ability. To comprehensively analyze these experiences, it is essential to consider all intersecting factors that may contribute to exclusion. For instance, while a European woman may encounter challenges within a patriarchal society, an African woman's experience of misogyny will be further complicated by the additional layer of racial discrimination prevalent in a predominantly white society.

Intersectionality is related to feminist literary text, women's mental health, and gender norms. Because women with different backgrounds such as black-white, middle class-upper class, etc.

have their own unique experiences of inequality and analyzing their experiences and struggles considering all the interconnected systems of discrimination is necessary. An American scholar, Kathy Davis has discussed the connection between feminist theories and Intersectionality theory. She underscores the intricate nature of gender by illustrating how it intersects with various facets of identity. Davis recommends that scholars first grasp the notion of intersectionality, select a medium like a text or film exploring gender themes, and then scrutinize it from this perspective, taking it into account. Most of the feminist theory talks about women as a homogenous category. But Intersectionality considers the effects of race, class, etc. on shaping women's identity and it also opposes universalism (Davis 67-85).

Women in patriarchal societies encounter various forms of domination that perpetuate an unjust cycle of inequality. Historically, women have faced oppression in numerous ways, including restricted access to educational institutions and economic dependency on men. For instance, during the medieval period, women were deemed inferior to men, lacked significant societal roles, and were unable to freely express their opinions. Their primary role was to be ideal mothers, and their value was largely determined by their sexual purity. Similarly, in ancient Greece, women were denied fundamental rights such as property ownership and political participation, and they faced restrictions on public presence (Napikoski 231).

In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir talks about how men shape the idea of being a woman to benefit themselves. This idea is not based solely on biology but is mostly influenced by society. Men want women to fit certain roles and look a certain way, so women are encouraged to prioritize their appearance. This starts from childhood, with toys and societal expectations reinforcing gender stereotypes. The media also plays a big part in continuing these stereotypes as people grow up. According to Beauvoir's Social construction theory, a patriarchal society

manipulates and teaches women to be passive and focus on how they look, limiting their potential (Beauvoir 80). She talks about how men shape the idea of what it means to be a woman to benefit themselves. This idea is not based solely on biology but is mostly influenced by society. Men want women to fit certain roles and look a certain way, so women are encouraged to prioritize their appearance. This starts from childhood, with toys and societal expectations reinforcing gender stereotypes. The media also plays a big part in continuing these stereotypes as people grow up. According to Beauvoir's Social construction theory, patriarchal society manipulates and teaches women to be passive and focus on how they look, limiting their potential. Gender norms, societal expectations, objectification, artificial beauty standards, etc. preserve a social structure where women are not valued for their authentic selves. In literary works, women's limitations and vulnerabilities frequently drive the narrative, often positively or negatively shaping the story. Historically, women in literature have often been depicted as the weaker sex, even when they are the protagonists. Despite holding central roles, their lives frequently revolve around male characters. For example, in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt, is depicted as a central figure. However, her actions and decisions are predominantly influenced by her relationships with powerful men such as Mark Antony and Caesar Augustus. Her fate, ultimately determined by Antony's struggle against Caesar, leads her to choose a tragic death rather than capture by Caesar's forces. Similarly, in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess, while a central character, is portrayed as vulnerable and powerless against societal expectations and male dominance. Her struggles and eventual submission to her circumstances illustrate the pervasive challenges women face in literature are mostly portrayed in domestic roles such as wives, mothers, lovers, etc. Their roles revolved around the domestic sphere, depicting them as *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 80).

In Addition, Kate Millet's theory of sexual politics highlights the suppression women face in sexual stems. Sexual politics is about looking at who has power in relationships and in the patriarchal society it is the men who have the power. Millett says men often have more power because of how society is set up. This happens because men are given more freedom and authority. Millett thinks this is not because men are naturally better, but because society is made that way. So, according to her theory women being treated unfairly in a patriarchal society is the result of culturally constructed ideas, not because men are naturally dominant (Millet 194). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft explores how society taught women they were only valuable if they were pretty and got married, while men were encouraged to pursue careers. She called marriage a form of exploitation because it was the only way women could support themselves financially. Wollstonecraft felt that women were treated like toys for men's entertainment, instead of being respected as equals. Women are often taught to present themselves as weak to attract men, which ultimately harms them in the long run. Also, women face severe judgments from society based on their sexual relations, which men do not have to deal with.

In ancient periods, female writers got limited or no opportunity to write as their participation in the public sector was restricted and they hardly had education opportunities. Even if some women managed to write, their contributions were often overshadowed. That is why many female writers in the past used pseudonyms to manage the struggles faced due to discrimination due to gender norms of society. Famous examples are the Brontë sisters using pseudonyms like Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. A few female writers broke with social conventions and rose to prominence during the Renaissance. A shift occurred in the 19th century with the exploration of feminine viewpoints by authors such as Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters. Not only had the Female writers struggled due to the existing gender discrimination in society, but women in

literature have been affected by the gender norms. Female characters in literature are portrayed in ways where they suffer a lot due to patriarchal domination in society. Using the theory of intersectionality, the thesis looks at how different aspects of a patriarchal society serve as a major factor causing her oppression and keep a negative impact on their mental health. This study uses *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), *The Bell Jar* (1963), and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) to explore the intersectionality of women's mental health and gender norms in literature.

Wide Sargasso Sea is written by Jean Rhys. Jean Rhys was born in Dominica, Caribbean, in 1890. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys portrayed a Caribbean woman, Antoinette Cosway, whose childhood was traumatized because of her white Caribbean background. She portrayed Antoinette Cosway as a sufferer of multiple oppression. Antoinette's mental instability is shaped by her struggles due to her white Creole identity, social limitations, etc.

The next novel is *The Bell Jar*, written by Sylvia Plath. It was initially published in January 1963 under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. It was only in 1966 that the book was finally published posthumously, with her real name displayed on the cover page. This novel is a semiautobiographical work. Esther, the protagonist's life was largely motivated by Sylvia Plath's own life story. The author's life experiences motivated her subject matter for *The Bell Jar*. Plath continued to write poetry but tragically ended her life in 1963 when she was just thirty-one. (Stevenson 178). In this novel, the characterization of Esther Greenwood reflects the oppression caused due to societal expectations from women during the 1950s and its impact on a young woman's mental health. Esther was always in a dilemma whether to adopt the ideal social role expected from women or to follow her heart's desire. The pressure of being a perfect woman, the struggles she faced on the way of pursuing her career, etc. eventually render her mentally vulnerable.

A Streetcar Named Desire is a play by Tennessee Williams. The author Tennessee Williams, presents different female characters with significant roles, such as Stella (the victim of a patriarchal society as she faces suppression at the hand of her husband) and Blanche Dubois the protagonist. Blanche is portrayed as a fallen woman who is not ethical and pure according to societal stereotypes and eventually suffers a tragic ending because of being the victim of social stereotypes. The framework of intersectionality will explore her struggles from multifaceted factors. Not only the male characters but also the female characters from her surroundings remain silent and passive when she suffers. According to some critical analysis, Tennessee Williams showed the misfortune and struggles of Blanche in the patriarchal domain. On the other hand, some research says *A Streetcar Named Desire* instead of portraying Blanche's suffering being a woman, provokes the idea that because of her being ethically immoral she deserved that punishment. Blanche faced constant obstacles such as the death of her husband, economic struggles, in fact being raped. Blanche was entitled as a crazy woman at the end. It was not merely a punishment only because she held an immoral character it was the result of her interconnected experiences when her husband died, her affair with a young boy, perception of men.

If we analyse the characters of the mentioned literary works, we will see the leading female characters find themselves disadvantaged by various sources of oppression that directly or indirectly have an impact on their mental health. The framework of intersectionality will help to find out the visible and invisible sectors of oppression that women have to deal with. This paper intends to analyze the intersectionality of women's mental instability and gender norms by exploring three literary works, which give a floor to analyze how women's mental instability results from the intersection of their struggles due to gender norms. Either it is Antoinette from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, or it is Esther from *The Bell Jar*, or Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire* all

experience psychological instability not from one specific event or particular reason, but rather from the ongoing continuous challenges and as women, they face existing gender stereotypes in the society. Their identities are shaped by the constant pressures they encounter due to these stereotypes.

1.2 Literature Review

Intersectionality indicates how characters in literature may face disadvantages from multiple sources of oppression. Instead of talking about one particular form of oppression, it incorporates the idea of how violence against women varies according to different perspectives of their lives, different discrimination they face, different norms they have to deal with, etc. This research aims to explore the intersections between the impact of gender norms on the experiences and mental instability of the leading female characters in the mentioned novels. It inspects how the mentioned literary works presented the leading female characters and how their identity is shaped by multiple factors of their life such as gender norms, mental conditions, etc. The framework of intersectionality aids in identifying both visible and invisible forms of inequality by exploring how different types of oppression intersect to influence characters within specific texts and the impacts on their mental health. Stephanie A. Shields said in her “Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective” that analyzing through intersectionality means studying how different aspects of identity relate to each other. Whether on an individual, interpersonal, or structural level, we need to understand how different aspects intersect. She thinks it is important to consider the historical and contextual aspects of each identity category. Intersectionality shows how various combinations of identities can lead to unique situations of disadvantage, but gender often plays a significant role. She also gives an example of how the challenges of different women in the same society may differ from

one another. She adds, that the challenges faced by working poor women and professional women might differ, even though both groups of women may experience marginalization (Shields 305).

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys is one of the primary texts of this paper. This book has received much attention from critics and in most of the critical work on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, authors wrote either about the feminist perspectives or the post-colonial impacts on Antoinette's life. However, Antoinette's life was not only impacted by her Caribbean background. Her identity in this novel is shaped by economic dependency, her white Creole woman's background, mental instability, etc. The framework of intersectionality will give a floor to inspect all the sectors of discrimination faced by Antoinette which ultimately shaped her character, bringing on a tragic end for her. Scheherazade Khan says that Rhys portrayed Antoinette's character in such a way that even though some might see her actions as a form of madness, she lets the readers think about it. Antoinette, who is portrayed as Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, is represented as a mad woman and does not provide the details of Antoinette's identity. According to Scheherazade's work, in contrast to Jane's belief that Antoinette couldn't help being mad, Rhys suggests that her madness was a result of the difficult time she was born into. By choosing to fulfill her expected role, Antoinette shows a stronger mental capability than others give her credit for. In addition, Antoinette's madness becomes a form of resistance, acknowledging the sacrificial role she plays for *Jane Eyre* and the liberation of Western women (Khan S. 7). Fann Oudah Aljohani says that European patriarchal culture influenced women by impacting how they saw themselves, maintaining the existing gender norms in society. This is seen in Rhys's portrayal of Antoinette, a Creole woman, who got caught up in white supremacist and patriarchal systems (Aljohani, 2019, p12). The theory of intersectionality will give a framework to analyse Antoinette's character from multiple dimensions.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath is another novel from the 20th century, which is going to be analysed in this novel. The female author, Sylvia Plath, portrayed Esther as a character, who continuously being in a dilemma between societal expectations and her true self, becomes a mental patient with suicidal intentions. This novel deals with the other side of obstacles towards women that end up destroying Esther's mental stability. In the 1950s, when Plath wrote about it, racism and classism ideas were still a big deal. Her mental unsteadiness was shaped by the dilemma she faced of being the perfect woman. Cedergren's research claims that Esther's mental health is related to cultural standards of femininity. Her theory suggests that Esther's primary cause of mental distress is her desire to be free to pursue poetry. It is implied that Esther purposefully defies the gender expectations that society has placed on her (Cedergren 56). In addition, Manuela Espinosa's research says that the main focus of this novel is on how Esther and others do not realize that different aspects of a woman's life can overlap. They believe a woman can only be one thing at a time – either a wife or a career woman, a mother, or someone with a job. Esther feels trapped by these expectations from society that affect her mental health. When she befriends two very different girls, she feels stuck between categories, and this ongoing feeling adds to her struggles (Espinosa 21). But is Esther's character in *The Bell Jar* only a woman's desire to be successful in her career or the hope to be the perfect woman according to societal rules? Intersectionality will incorporate divergent facets of gender norms that framed her character and strongly impacted her mental stage.

Blanche, the protagonist of *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, eventually turned into the mad woman in this literary work, why was she considered as a fallen woman in society's eyes from the beginning of the novel? According to Georges-Claude Guilbert, Blanche boldly rejected society's expectations by having sexual encounters with numerous men after

becoming a widow instead of conforming to the expected social behavior of women. He added in 1947, men could freely engage in such behavior without much consequence, whereas women had to face harsh scrutiny (Guilbert 297). Blanche's not conforming with the societal rules and having relationships with multiple men were not the only reasons for her struggles. We cannot deny the fact that her husband's death for his heterosexuality was a major reason for her struggles. Lauren Seigle has narrated in her paper that there is ample evidence in this literary work suggesting that the profound loss of her husband played a significant role in Blanche's descent into despair, ultimately leading her to seek refuge at Stella's doorstep (Seigle 31). She has also added that Blanche's most serious victimization in the play is her rape. Stanley's assault on her is an antagonistic act of cruelty and not a reflection of Williams's misogynistic notion that only because Blanche is flirtatious, she deserves this punishment. Blanche's identity is molded in this play by all these forms of experiences she had to deal with according to her surroundings. The framework of intersectionality will create an interconnection between her mental unsteadiness and her experiences due to existing gender norms in society.

Most of the critics talk about different forms of oppression women face due to gender discrimination. Some critics also talk about how women's psyche is often manipulated and negatively affected by their family, friends, lovers, etc. But now the question comes whether the vulnerability of women's psychology emanates from a certain particular occurrence in their lives. Women's mental health does not result from one particular form of oppression on them, rather multiple interconnected oppressions due to patriarchal dominance in society shape their identity and depict them as mad women in literature. When it comes to women's experiences in literature and women's psychological health, the framework of intersectionality explores their complex relationships with factors such as gender, race, and class that are constantly changing. Examining

the various gender norms and societal expectations that affect women's mental health, this research paper emphasizes the complexity of the intersection between women's mental health and gender norms in literature.

Chapter 2

TRANSITION FROM ANTOINETTE TO BERTHA

Antoinette Cosway is the main character of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This novel can be read contrapuntally to *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. On October 16, 1847, Smith, Elder, and Co. released *Jane Eyre*, written by Charlotte Brontë under the pseudonym Currer Bell. The reason for taking a pseudonym is also connected with the existing gender stereotypes in society. Back then female writers were judged easily. The readers were not interested in female writers' works because of the existing gender biases in society and publishers were not interested in publishing female writers' work seriously, except for certain types of writing like romance or fluffy stuff. Female writers took pseudonyms so that readers could judge their works based on their merits, not being biased by gender norms. In *Jane Eyre*, we encounter a woman named Bertha Mason. Charlotte Brontë portrayed Bertha as a West Indian woman, who is married to Mr. Rochester. Their marriage is unhappy as Rochester has not married Bertha out of love. He finds Bertha peculiar and the only reason for marrying Bertha is that she is rich and beautiful. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is portrayed as a completely mad woman who behaves like an animal and attacks Mr. Rochester. But why is she called the mad woman? Is it completely without a reason, just an inherited disease? Bertha Mason's character is notably silent, leaving her perspective largely unexplored and her voice unheard.

However, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, often viewed as being contrapuntal to *Jane Eyre*, provides Bertha with a voice by presenting Antoinette Cosway as a character who parallels Bertha. This prequel delves into Antoinette's experiences and perspectives, offering insight into the background and inner life of a character who is otherwise marginalized and voiceless in *Jane Eyre*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* was written in 1966, over a hundred years after *Jane Eyre* by Jean

Rhys. Still, it got an almost equal response from the readers. The novel is set in Jamaica after the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 had been passed. Slavery officially ended in the British Empire in 1834. The story begins shortly after the time when slavery was no longer allowed by law in Jamaica and other British territories. Rhys' work gives voice to the former slaveholders' families. Jean Rhys was born Ella Gwendolyn Rees Williams in Roseau to a Creole motherland Welsh-born doctor. Growing up as a white girl in a mostly black community, she felt isolated. She had complicated feelings about her birthplace, but the Caribbean greatly influenced her. She felt an attraction to the lively black community but also struggled with the violent history of the Caribbean. Her personal experience worked as the thematic background for her book, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She gave Bertha's character a strong voice and beautifully explored the challenges faced by Bertha (Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*) which eventually led her towards madness. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's arguments in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, explore the women writers' narrative strategies to express their experiences (Gilbert, Gubar 49). Jean Rhys's childhood experiences motivated her to this narrative, disrupting the linear, male-centered storytelling. Rhys provides a strong backstory for Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and as Gilbert and Gubar argued on the reconsideration of classic texts' so that marginalized female characters within them get the chance to keep their voice. This literary work holds a strong background of intersectional perspectives and as Kimberle Crenshaw says the framework of intersectionality can serve as a tool for social change by giving voices to those who are often silenced or marginalized.

Intersectionality offers a lens through which we can analyse how different forms of discrimination intersect and affect individuals within a particular context. It works as a tool for dissecting how various factors blend together to shape someone's self-identity. It underscores the

multiple layers of oppression they may experience. Starting with Antoinette Cosway's childhood, Antoinette is a Creole from Jamaica and her upbringing was at Coulibri estate during the 1830s. After the Emancipation Act of 1833, her father drunken himself towards death, which brought hardship for her family. Her family includes her mother Annette and her mentally disabled brother Pierre. Antoinette's mother was neither cordially accepted nor Antoinette herself. She was raised between black people with a family background of former slave owners, so there was always a gaze of hatred on her. In the novel Antoinette recalls "I never looked at any strange Negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches." (Rhys, 7). She had a good friend, Tia, a black girl. But eventually, Tia also ends up hating her. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explores in her *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, how women in colonized nations frequently face a dual sort of oppression. Not only the colonized, but even the women from colonizers had to deal with this subjection. The racism and class struggles make additional struggles for women in those societies, which is exactly what happened to Antoinette. (Spivak 252). Antoinette's status as a white Creole woman in Jamaica positions her on the margins of society. Despite her belonging to the Creole elite, she faces rejection both from European colonizers due to her mixed ancestry and from the black Jamaican community because of her privileged position. This in-between status subjects Antoinette to an even more complicated marginalization and oppression in the colonized social structure (Spivak 253). So from the very beginning of Antoinette's life, she has grown up with a complete hatred of society for her family. This complex hatred and a mixed background are intersecting factors that have affected her experience.

Along with Antoinette's mixed ancestry, another factor that must be addressed is her married life, which intersects with her identity and affects her mental health. Why is she married

to Mr Rochester? It did not happen because she wanted to get married, not due to Mr Rochester's love interest towards her. After Antoinette's mother's mental sickness, she joins a convent school with other young Creole girls. She stays there and keeps learning various things, like how to act like a proper lady and the stories of female saints. Her family does not pay much attention to her. When Antoinette is seventeen, her stepfather, Mr Mason, tells her that friends from England will visit soon. He wants to show her off as a refined lady who's ready to get married. Perhaps because Mr Mason wants to get rid of Antoinette and she has no other option than obeying Mr Mason. It evokes the fact that women like Antoinette, are marginalized both economically and socially due to systematic factors. According to Simone de Beauvoir, a woman is an autonomous freedom, but there is no evidence of a historical period when women were free (Beauvoir 71, 80). Their lack of access to economic resources, and political representation has always been keeping them in subordinate roles. On the other hand, Rochester marries Antoinette because she is rich and pretty. Rochester says to his father, "And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me. I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl is thought to be beautiful." (Rhys 41). Antoinette is nothing but objectified and used by both her family and husband. Rochester marries her to access her properties in Jamaica which ultimately makes her dependent on Mr. Rochester. And after the marriage, she is not accepted cordially by her husband. As Beauvoir says women's wings are cut and then they are blamed for not knowing (Beauvoir 344). Rochester finds Antoinette like an alien and from the very beginning of their marriage Antoinette knows she is not much liked by her husband. The way Antoinette is treated even after her marriage also intersects with her childhood trauma. The framework of intersectionality sees that individuals can be oppressed by different sorts of discrimination and as a woman, Antoinette is suffering both in her personal and social life.

Representational intersectionality indicates that it is important to represent people of different races, different classes, different backgrounds, etc. through different characters in literature so that readers can relate with them. In this novel undoubtedly, Antoinette is presented as a subaltern. Even towards her husband, she is a vulnerable character. Rochester does not love Antoinette from the beginning and then he receives the letter from Daniel. Daniel says, “I hear you young and handsome with a kind word for all, black, white, and also colored. But I hear too that the girl is beautiful like her mother was beautiful, and you bewitch with her. She is in your blood and your bones. By night and by day. But you, an honorable man, know well that for marriage more is needed than all this. Which does not last. Old Mason bewitches so with her mother and looks what happen to him” (Rhys 58). Daniel’s later makes the doubt stronger in Rochester's mind that perhaps Antoinette inherited madness from her mother. Antoinette is hurt continuously by her relatives. Daniel shows his grudge and hatred towards Antoinette’s mother and eventually, it makes Antoinette’s married life bitterer. The blame for inherited madness becomes a regular weapon for Antoinette. She cannot deal with it and she explains to her husband the deep emotional distress caused by experiencing rejection from both the Black and the English. But her husband does not become supportive towards her, instead, he remains unable to grasp the depth of her suffering and the complexity of her situation. Jean Rhys presented Antoinette's character in such a way that her mental health is continuously disrupted by her surroundings, by her family, and by her husband. As Gilbert and Gubar says, “the distinctive female writing is not created by contaminated language or the awkwardness of inexperience, but rather by a subtle inwardness, by the careful portrayal of subjectivity and the representation of psychic states” (Gilbert, Gubar 473). Antoinette does not protest when her husband becomes careless towards. Because she is dependent entirely upon her husband in terms of economy and terms of love. Instead, what she does is try managing a love potion so that she can make

Rochester fall in love with her. According to Beauvoir, romantic love acts as a liberating force for women. It perpetuates male dominance and is frequently used as a means to control and confine women within the domestic sphere. She also points out women's tendency to derive their sense of self primarily through their desirability to men. Women are confined in such a way that they evaluate themselves according to the fact that how desirable they are in the men's eye instead of their personal and intellectual development. (Beauvoir 609). That is exactly the case with Antoinette, she is confined in such a way that she just wants to be desired by her husband. She ignores her husband's misbehavior and does not protest against it. The framework of intersectionality talks about the presentation of the female character and how they are captivated from every side possible. At the very last stage of the novel, Antoinette finds herself trapped in the attic of her husband's house. From England, where she is imprisoned in a garret room in her husband's home and kept under the watchful eye of a servant named Grace Poole. Antoinette is a concealed hostage who has no idea about time or place. When Grace informs her that she is in England, she cannot even believe it. In the third part, readers find out. Antoinette's thoughts. She is lost and confused, exploring the house at night. Grace, the servant, says Antoinette attacked someone, but she does not remember. She finds there is no mirror in the house. It is like first they take away her freedom and now they want to erase her complete existence. Antoinette feels in her entire life she has to depend on others and now she is going to be removed by them.

Due to the emptiness of her days and her isolation from the outside world, Antoinette loses track of time and place. However, despite this disorientation, Antoinette questions why she is being kept captive and mistreated. But there is no answer actually. She travelled from the Caribbean to England. But the tyranny of slavery has not actually ended in her life. She just turned into a submissive slave in her husband's hand. The novel ends, with Antoinette dreaming

of burning the house and she comes downstairs holding a candle. It is perhaps the sign given by Jean Rhys that Antoinette is going to burn all her problems and be free from captivity. But in a patriarchal society, is it possible for women to get rid of captivity? Patriarchy is a social structure in which men have primary power, authority, and domination in almost every facet of society, including politics, economy, culture, and family. Men are frequently considered as the primary decision-makers, providers, and holders of authority in a patriarchal society, while women are confined as the subordinate. What intersectionality does is talk about how the characters in literature are shaped by multifaceted oppressions and struggles in their life. If the feminist perspective is considered through the lens of intersectionality, it becomes crystal clear that female characters are oppressed by ethnicity, social class, unequal educational opportunities, unemployment, etc. Along with all of these facts, being a woman adds more suffering due to existing gender stereotypes, expectations from society, artificial beauty standards, etc. Antoinette fits as a great example of how women are discriminated against in so many ways that it becomes hard to hold sanity. Rhys portrayed Antoinette in a way that readers realize her mental instability is not something inherited from her mother, rather it is the result of different discrimination she has to deal with from her childhood. Through the framework of intersectionality, it becomes evident that the tyranny of slavery, the ancestry of white Creole, economic dependency, the social expectation of being a perfect woman, flawed marriage, unsupportive partner and his brutality, etc. all these interconnecting oppressions towards Antoinette, gradually shaped her mental instability or in other words made her Bertha from Antoinette.

Chapter 3

ENTRAPMENT IN THE 'BELL JAR' OF SOCIAL NORMS

The Bell Jar is Sylvia Plath's only novel. It was first published in 1963 under a different name, Victoria Lucas. This is a semi-autobiographical novel. The story reflects Plath's struggles with mental illness and depression. Plath died by suicide shortly after it was published in the UK. It wasn't published under her real name until after her death. The book has been translated into many languages. Esther Greenwood is the main character and storyteller in *The Bell Jar*. The story revolves around her journey during her college life and the subsequent stages of mental illness. She continuously faces struggles while growing up and learning in college or pursuing a career does not become very positive for her. She eventually has no other choice but to learn from the struggles. The novel begins with disappointment and Esther finds New York strange. Here she works as a guest editor for a fashion magazine. Esther says, "I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty" (Plath, 7). Esther's expectations of a glamorous and exciting life in New York are shattered by reality. She should be happy and excited, but she feels isolated. She finds a friend, named Doreen. Doreen is considered unethical by her society. She is bold, rebellious, and loves sporting daring clothes. At first, Esther admires Doreen's boldness, but later she finds it inappropriate after seeing the sexual encounter of Doreen with her boyfriend. Then Esther notices her other friend, Betsy. Esther tries to imitate Betsy's lifestyle, which according to social rules is ethical and modest. Esther suffers on which path to choose. She struggles to conform to social expectations and to choose her heart's desire. Women in society always have this issue of being the ideal woman according to society. They struggle to choose between the social gender norms and their hearts' content. Most of the time if they choose their own desire, they fail to

become the ideal woman according to social expectations. Simon de Beauvoir said in *Second Sex*, that women are not born as women, instead for becoming the ideal woman they have to become vulnerable and subaltern due to the dominating patriarchal society. Beauvoir said, “The triumph of patriarchy was neither an accident nor the result of a violent revolution” (Beauvoir 85). Patriarchal society has limited women’s agency and their freedom. However, from the very beginning of the novel, Esther is doubtful about what to choose, becoming a free woman or becoming an ideal woman. Her mental instability gets its root amid her uncertainty, a reminder of the burden women bear as they have to deal with the extreme pressures of social expectations, which take away their inner peace and psychological well-being.

Intersectionality highlights how various forms of oppression impact women and influence their character development in literature. Esther's struggles become heavier for her from multiple sources. Along with the confusion of whether to conform to social expectations or not, she has to deal with the pressure of pursuing a suitable career and being economically stable. She grew up poor, so she knows the value of everything she has. Esther is a good student not because she wants to be, but because it is the only way of surviving. Esther relies on help from others to afford school and living in New York. If she loses her scholarship, her mom cannot afford to keep her in her expensive school. She feels a lot of pressure to do well in school and feels jealous by seeing the rich girls who do not have to deal with this pressure. Economical dependencies have always been the prime issue for women's freedom. In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett explores the economic dependencies of women and how traditional gender norms of society confine women to lower-paying jobs or unpaid domestic labor. As a result they do not have economic freedom and they are confined by a circle of never-ending struggles. She argues that capitalism benefits from the unpaid or underpaid work performed by women in maintaining

households (Millet, 434). To bring a change in this situation, women's economic autonomy is needed first. Esther is the victim of these economic dependencies. She wants freedom and wants to enjoy life, hanging out with friends. She feels a sense of lacking seeing rich girls. But she does not have that autonomy which keeps a strong disappointment in her brain. She wants to enjoy her youth but there is always a pressure of economic struggles on her head. Economic pressure is not something that only men have to deal with. The way patriarchal society is presented, it seems only men struggle and deal with economic issues. But what about women? To be economically independent, they either have to deal with struggles more struggles than men or they have to struggle for a lifetime because of being economically dependent. In many cases, they lose their desires and every decision of their life is taken by those men who are providing them with financial support. In Esther's case, she endeavored to solve her economic problems. But as a result, she is failing to complete her desires. Eventually the rich girls around are giving her more inferiority complex. As a result, her mental health is being negatively affected and the framework of intersectionality takes it as a serious cause of Esther's mentally unstable identity.

Esther feels a big difference between what society expects from her and how she truly feels inside. Everyone expects her to be confident and happy. But she is sad inside. She feels her reactions towards social orders are not justified according to social laws. This feeling of disconnection grows until she starts to feel like nothing around her is real. Buddy Willard, who is Esther's so-called first love, makes her doubts even stronger. Buddy Willard is portrayed as the perfect example of a typical 1950s American man. At first, Esther admires him from a distance because of his apparent perfection. As she gets to know him better, she realizes he has flaws. Buddy behaves in ways that were considered normal for men at that time, like sleeping with another woman while dating Esther without feeling sorry about it. But when it comes to Esther,

he wants her to be a virgin. As Simone de Beauvoir says, women are not born but rather made. Buddy is the perfect example of how society wants women to be submissive and vulnerable. De Beauvoir describes women as “intent on struggling against a misfortune that was mysteriously disfiguring and deforming her” (Beauvoir 595). In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett argued that patriarchal norms regulate and control sexuality, sexual behavior, and the objectification of women's bodies for the pleasure of men. Millett's theory focuses on how these power dynamics emerge in numerous ways, such as unequal economic opportunity and unequal power allocation between genders. Exactly that happens with Esther. She feels that burden. Esther's interactions at Buddy's medical school highlight the doctors' lack of compassion, especially in situations like childbirth. It reflects how women's bodies are treated as vessels for giving birth to children. Society takes it so for granted that people do not even realize how much a woman has to sacrifice physically and emotionally. This objectification of women's bodies provokes Esther's disrupted mental state. Also, Buddy does not understand Esther's love for poetry, thinking she will give it up once she becomes a mother. So, Esther feels even more pressured because she fears she will not be able to complete her dream of becoming a poet if she gets married to Buddy. Simone de Beauvoir says that women should have the freedom to pursue their own goals and dreams without being defined only by their relationships with men. Women have this tendency to value themselves only by the fact that their relationship is with males in society (Beauvoir, 73). If men find them beautiful, only by then do they consider themselves worthy. From here the cycle starts where they have to choose between their desires and pleasing the men. At one point in life, most women have to face when they have to choose between their dream or their relationship. Eventually, they end up choosing their relations keeping the wound of not being able to complete their ambitions. What Intersectionality says about women's mental health is that their mental health is shaped by multiple factors of the society. The burden of constant social stereotypes

where being puppets by their relations, women have to compromise their authentic selves and it is one of the major causes of women's disturbed mental health.

“To the person in *The Bell Jar*, and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream.” (Plath). In the book *The Bell Jar*, “The Bell Jar” symbolizes Esther's feeling of being trapped and isolated in her own world of mental distress. It's like she's inside a glass jar that distorts her view of reality and makes it hard for her to connect with others. The glass jar symbolizes the entrapment she feels due to existing gender norms in society. Intersectionality gives a framework for analyzing mental health issues in minority groups. Women, being a minority in terms of economy and social positions, are more vulnerable to mental hazards. Esther's suicidal attempts were the symbols of her destroyed mental health. When she was admitted to a mental hospital, her first doctor was Mr. Gordon. Esther finds her doctor not sympathetic towards her. Instead, she senses the traces of male chauvinism. The electric shock therapy she underwent for the first time hurt her well-being. Feeling different from others, Esther retreated further into her "bell jar," cutting herself off from the outside world. At this point, Esther's suicidal thoughts could have been reversed, but the poor care she received from health professionals led her to attempt suicide. Is it, not the common scenario of how women are treated in most of cases? The author Sylvia Plath attempted suicide herself. Plath tried to end her life multiple times. In 1953, she took too many sleeping pills. Then in 1962, she intentionally drove her car into a river. In January 1963, she told her doctor and friend that she had been severely depressed for months (Gary 145). Plath gassed herself and died. After her death his husband, Ted Hughes expressed his sadness. Later on it was revealed that Hughes was in a relationship with another woman named Assia Wevill. It was a matter of real shock Assia Wevill also died by suicide using a gas stove (Gifford, p15). Plath's own death proves the fact of how strong impacts

of social expectations can be implemented on a woman's mental health. It gives also a glimpse to the fact how the romantic love affair mentally disturbs women. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther begins to get better towards the end of the story, it feels like *The Bell Jar* is slowly lifting. But it was not gone. She still senses its shadow reminding her that her mental health challenges could resurface at any time. Esther's mental health is the result of interconnected issues including social expectations, gender norms, male chauvinism etc. Even at the last stage, Buddy feels he has got something special that drives women crazy. Esther denies the fact but according to the lenses of intersectionality it is clear that the existing male gaze of the society destroyed Esther's mental balance. Esther's identity is molded by intersectional factors where multiple sides like her economic struggles, love life, desires etc. forces her towards the suicidal attempts and perhaps exactly those reasons provoked Plath to commit suicide.

Chapter 4

ILLUSION AND FEMALE DESIRE

A Streetcar Named Desire, a play by Tennessee Williams, delves into the lives of Blanche DuBois, her sister Stella, and Stella's husband, Stanley. *A Streetcar Named Desire*, set in New Orleans in the late 1940s, reflects the complex social dynamics of the American South during a period of significant transition. The DuBois family, originally from Belle Reve, represents the old Southern aristocracy that had historically amassed wealth and status through the exploitation of enslaved labor. With the abolition of slavery and the subsequent societal changes, the DuBois family struggles to adapt to the rapidly evolving social and economic landscape characterized by the emergence of the American Dream—a vision of success rooted in self-made prosperity and merit rather than inherited privilege.

Blanche DuBois, the female protagonist in Tennessee Williams' play, becomes emblematic of this struggle. Her inability to reconcile with the new social order leads to her clinging to the traditions and ideals of the Old South, which are becoming increasingly irrelevant and impractical in a modernizing society. Blanche's desperate attempts to preserve the dignity and grandeur associated with her family's past only serve to alienate her further from the reality around her, thus intensifying her conflicts and making her life increasingly untenable. Her inability to confront painful realities leads to a progressive detachment from the world around her, ultimately resulting in a decline in her mental stability.

The struggles of Blanche, the protagonist of this play highlight the deep impact of patriarchal oppression on women's psyche. Tennessee Williams realistically portrays her madness as a result of the interconnectedness of her multiple struggles. When the play begins, Blanche is seen as someone who has already fallen from society's eyes. The reason for her lost

reputation is her flirty nature, her relationship with young a man, her affairs with multiple men, etc. which are considered unethical for a woman, but not for a man in the patriarchal society. She has also lost her family's wealth and estate, her husband died by suicide years ago.

In the very first scene, Blanche arrives in a highly distressed state at Stella's home and reveals that their family estate, Belle Reve, is lost. Blanche blames Stella for leaving her to marry Stanley in New Orleans, which upsets Stella. From the very beginning of the play, it is clear that Blanche is going through financial difficulties. That is why she had to move in with her sister. Here, she eventually has to deal with a lot of taunts by people and also violent physical abuse and sexual aggression by Stanley. But the root of her suffering is her weak financial condition. Women in the patriarchal society are always bound by their financial needs. Simone de Beauvoir says how according to history, women have never been freed (Beauvoir 71, 80). Economic disparities influence women's psychology as they have to go under the feeling of subordination due to their dependency on others for their livelihood. Blanche's husband's death was a sudden pressure on her, she became economically unstable. Perhaps that is the beginning of her hardship. In addition, Blanche wants to get married to Shep Huntleigh because she wants to have a better and more settled life. So there is an economic background that is provoking Blanche's mentality. Kate Millett has explained in *Sexual Politics* that traditional gender roles allocated to women are domestic and childcare tasks, while males were generally the primary breadwinners. Eventually, unequal earning opportunities contribute to women's economic dependence on men. Lower pay for women hindered their financial autonomy, making it difficult for them to achieve financial independence. This subordination due to the economic crisis works as a fuel for Blanche's desperation to get married to a financially solvent man. As a result she is considered a morally wrong female character in the society. But her circumstances cannot be avoided, which gradually

shaped her character as the framework of intersectionality talks about the interconnected factors that mold a character in literature.

Along with financial issues, another factor that intersects with Blanche's struggles and provokes her mental health is her sexual behavior. Blanche is considered as the immoral female character of the society from the very beginning. Stanley learns about troubling details from Blanche's past. Stanley shares that Blanche gained a scandalous reputation while staying at the disreputable Flamingo Hotel. The authority of the hotel eventually asked her to leave because her behavior was considered unacceptable by its standards. Blanche became known as unstable by the locals, and soldiers from a nearby base were forbidden from visiting her home. She lost her teaching job not by leave of absence, rather it was discovered that she had a relationship with a seventeen-year-old boy. Blanche's desires are considered the dark side of her character. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft talks about the disastrous effects of society's emphasis on women's reputation and how society defines the virtuousness of a woman based on her sexual purity (Wollstonecraft, 299). Blanche finds her husband in bed with an old man and reveals that her husband is gay. But the play does talk much about her husband's sexual orientation. In addition, Mary Wollstonecraft objects to the way society primarily evaluates women based on their reputation and level of sexual purity. She believes that this emphasis on appearances limits women's freedom and causes them to rely too much on males (Wollstonecraft 300). Blanche becomes vulnerable due to her sexual desires and struggles to deal with the socially acceptable criteria. In her mind, she is always fighting with her sensuality and the role of an ideal woman. Blanche loves to stay in the bathroom to take a hot bath. It gives her an illusionary feeling that the dirt of her carnality is cleaning and calms her nerves. Why does she need to wash that? Because she herself wants to portray herself as an Ideal lady in front of

society. By doing so even she also supports the fact that women's worth is based on their sexual behavior or reputations. Framework of intersectionality explores these factors as well and expects society to change how it sees women. Women should not be judged just by their sexual behavior or reputation. Instead, women should be valued for their intelligence and morals. For Blanche, she does not get the chance of sexual freedom as male characters like Stanley, her husband, etc. Though she secretly tries to fulfill her desires, she suffers a lot as a consequence of that just like she lost her job due to having an affair with a young boy. The affliction she feels due to having sexual desires, triggers her mental instability even more and shapes her identity as a mad woman.

Objectification of the female body and oppressive behavior by the male characters is another aspect that affects Blanche's psychology. Women have this tendency to portray themselves as beautiful according to the desires of men. They take so much pressure to maintain that beauty standard that they often forget about their spiritual development. In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir talks about "feminine narcissism," which is when women mainly define themselves based on how attractive they are to men. She says society teaches women to focus a lot on their looks and being appealing, which can stop them from pursuing their own goals and intellectual growth. This strong emphasis on seeking approval from romantic relationships limits women's freedom to act for themselves and keeps them being seen as objects for others' desires (Beauvoir 595). Blanche is an unsettled person who feels out of place. She is an older woman from the South who constantly worries about losing her looks. She acts delicately and wears flashy yet inexpensive evening outfits. She just wants to portray herself as desirable in men's eyes. Blanche seems proper on the outside, but inside she feels unsure and unconfident. She is getting older and worries a lot about not looking beautiful anymore. So complying with the theory of

intersectionality, Blanche deals with the mental burden of being attractive to men's eyes. Moreover, oppression from male characters like Stanley Kowalski, Harold Mitch, etc. is a severe theme of this literary work. Blanche is a faulty woman according to social laws as she has a drinking problem, she has alluring and flirty habits, etc. Blanche has her own reasons behind why she wants to secure her position in society by being financially solvent. Even if she would not have any reason, it could be her autonomy like males in society. Her habit does not give any of the males in the society the authority to physically abuse her or to force her into sexual relations. But Blanche has to deal with that. Mitch, who at one point wants to marry Blanche and claims that he loves Blanche, refuses to marry Blanche when he learns about Blanche's troubled sexual history, he feels hurt and embarrassed. He no longer sees her as worthy of being his wife. The objectification of women's bodies is clearer from the beginning of their relationship as in Mitch and Blanche's relationship all is about sex. Mitch always wants to sleep with Blanche but she refuses to be physically intimate with him. In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett talks about the objectification of women's bodies and how in sexual relationships women are always submissive. Millett explores that men often have more freedom and control over women because of societal structures that favor male authority. Millett emphasizes that women's oppression is not something natural or biological but is instead a product of cultural norms (Millett 27). The males of the society sexually dominate and cross the boundaries because they are powerful groups of the society. The portrayal of Stanley brings out the dominating males and their oppression on women. He finds joy in simple pleasures like gambling, bowling, sex, drinking and insoluble lacks in moral values. Still, he judges Blanche and insults her because of Blanche's sexual relations. On the other hand, he forcefully rapes Blanche without even regretting it. He feels his actions are justified and it is not wrong to sexually abuse Blanche as she is already a fallen woman. Blanche suffers a lot in the hands of the male characters around her in terms of being

sexually abused by them, being cheated on and being ditched by them. These create deep wounds on her mental health and trigger her madness characterizing her as a mad and ethically fallen woman.

Along with this oppressive behavior of the male characters, Blanche deals with the passivity of the female characters of her surroundings. Stella, who is Blanche's sister, is torn between her sister Blanche and her husband Stanley. At the last when Blanche accuses Stanley about raping her, Stella does not believe. Perhaps she has no other option than believing Stanley as she is pregnant. Women in patriarchal society most of the time are dependent on men in terms of financial support, family etc. So they fail to protest against men as they are scared of losing their family, financial support etc. Stella's reluctance to believe Blanche's accusation may reflect her desire to maintain her life with Stanley. She needs Stanley to be with her as she is unable to take the responsibility of the children on herself. Stella presents the traditional character of a woman, who is loyal to her husband. Even though her husband is violent and oppressive towards her. She is attracted to his rough and violent behavior, finding it exciting. Blanche tries to motivate her to fight back and take stands against Stanley's oppression, but Stella does not do that. When Blanche is taken to the mental hospital, Stella feels heartbroken but she does not protest, as she wants to save her own family. This side of Stella in this play focuses on the fact, how women do not get support from another woman when it is needed because the existing norms in the society stops women from standing against their husbands, fathers etc. Another female character Eunice, neighbor of Stella, holds the existing values of a ethical woman according to the social norms. Eunice's reassurance to Stella that she doesn't have to believe Blanche's claim of rape by Stanley. She indirectly supports Stanley's terrible actions and reinforces the idea that marriage is essential for a woman's survival. Despite experiencing abuse

from her husband, Eunice avoids confronting this reality because acknowledging Blanche's story would mean facing the truth about her situation, which could threaten her survival. So after being a woman herself, Eunice does not support Blanche. Regarding that situation Beauvoir said in *The Second Sex*, society defines femininity by portraying women as passive and only valuable when they are loved and desired by men. This idea makes women dependent on others for their self-esteem. Beauvoir says romantic love does not free women it often makes them stick to traditional roles and keeps men in charge. She thinks love is often used to control women and keep them focused on home life (Beauvoir 612).

Just like Stella and Eunice are bound to their domestic life and behave ethically according to the rules of the patriarchal society, Blanche does not conform to the existing stereotypes of being an ideal woman but she wants to portray herself as a noble lady. She takes frequent hot baths with an illusionary hope that it will remove impurities from her. But then again she uses her physical charm even on the delivery boy when she fails to pay the bills. She does not have another option as she is financially broken just like how Eunice and Stella depend on their husband. But the illusion does nothing but triggering her madness. Intersectionality approaches a range of identity factors, such as gender, race, nationality, class, sexuality, age etc. interact to shape a character. Blanche is declared as a mental patient at the end but is her not being virtuous according to society, responsible for her madness? Undoubtedly, she is the sufferer of multiple oppressions like physical abuse from males, economic struggles, her incomplete desires etc. In this literary work, femininity, being a widow without any financial support, domination of males, physical abuses, sexual vulnerability etc. has shaped Blanche's identity.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The framework of intersectionality provides a comprehensive lens through which the complexities of an individual's experiences within a particular society can be understood. It takes into account the multiple, overlapping factors that shape a person's identity and social position, recognizing that these factors operate simultaneously and interactively. Factors contributing to the formation of identity for both men and women may be similar; however, their impact can differ significantly depending on one's gender identity. A woman may face challenges not solely due to patriarchal domination but also due to other intersecting forms of inequality, such as class, race, social norms, and systemic tensions. In literature, intersectionality functions as a critical tool that allows for a multidimensional analysis of a character, revealing how their identity is constructed not merely by one aspect of society but by a confluence of various forces they must navigate. By acknowledging the diverse and intersecting oppressions that individuals face, this approach avoids the oversimplification of women's experiences and highlights the need for more tailored and inclusive strategies to address their struggles. A generalized view that assumes all women share the same experiences under patriarchal oppression fails to capture the diversity of their realities and, consequently, undermines efforts to effectively address and eliminate their specific forms of oppression.

The three dimensions of intersectionality that Crenshaw delineates are representational, political, and structural. In contrast to their white counterparts, non-white women have distinct experiences with things like rape and domestic abuse, which are highlighted by structural intersectionality. Political intersectionality examines how systemic prejudices might cause efforts to advance equality to unintentionally eclipse violence against non-white women. In order to potentially perpetuate stereotypes and erase the different realities of non-White women,

representational intersectionality studies how media representations may mask the genuine lived experiences of these women. (Crenshaw 1291). This paper incorporates the intersectionality between gender norms and women's mental health in literature.

Women's mental health intersects with different existing social stereotypes in society and as a consequence of that their mental health is destroyed or negatively affected most of the time. Everyone's psychology functions differently and if we talk about women's psychology, that also functions in separate ways. So if we consider all of women's mental conditions on the same scale, it will not be appropriate as their experiences and struggles are different according to their position in society. The existing gender norms in the society influence differently and their struggles change according to their circumstances. The three literary works that are analyzed in this paper, talk about three women, who in the end are positioned as mad women. One thing that is common between them is that being suffered due to gender norms in the patriarchal society, they turned into mad women. But what is not similar among them is that their diverse experiences shaped their identities.

Antoinette, the leading female character in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is depicted as the white Creole who loses grip on her mental stability. She suffered being a woman, but not in one particular form of oppression. Her white Creole background makes her a sufferer in both ways as a consequence of existing racism and its aftermath. She suffers at the hands of her family in terms of economic issues and her husband oppresses her physically and emotionally. She is never accepted by her husband. All her struggles emerge from the existing gender norms in society. But what if she was well treated by her husband, would he still lose her mental stability? Or what if she did not have that traumatizing experience of her childhood belonging from a mixed ancestral background, would she not become mentally stronger? Miranda Massie addressed that

Women with disabilities face a higher depression compared to, women without disabilities, and the general population. In addition, gender disparities can contribute to negative mental health consequences through discrimination, violence, abuse, and unfavorable working environments (Massie 2). With the framework of intersectionality, Antoinette's transformation to Bertha (the mad woman) becomes reasonable, and her struggles intersect with her mental health which portrays her as a mad character. In addition, In *The Bell Jar*, Esther is ultimately portrayed as a character grappling with severe mental instability. Although she does not experience racial discrimination, her suffering as a woman is deeply rooted in her struggle to conform to societal expectations. Esther's distress is multifaceted: economic hardship, confusion between her desires and socially prescribed identities, and the lack of emotional support from those she loves. A comprehensive analysis of Esther's character must consider all these intersecting factors; omitting any would result in an incomplete understanding of her psychological decline. Sylvia Plath, the author of *The Bell Jar* similarly faced mental anguish, which was compounded by these intersecting pressures, and ultimately led to her suicide. Esther's inability to navigate the intersection of her mental illness and the demands of societal norms highlights how these compounded struggles shape her experience. Intersectionality thus provides a critical framework for understanding the complex interplay of interconnected factors leading to her tragic choice of suicide. On the other hand, Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, does not choose the path of suicide, rather she becomes delusional. She fails to face the fact of her fading beauty, she struggles to deal with her sexual desire, she suffers because of her economic dependencies, she suffers as a rape victim, etc. All her toils make her delusional, taking her away from reality and till the end of the play she believes that a rich man will come and marry her. If multiple intersecting factors have not worked together, Blanche will not be mentally vulnerable. The

physical abuse and the economic turmoil she goes through, interconnect with her psychology depicting her as a mad woman.

Critics say that the framework of intersectionality often simplifies people down to just a few characteristics. Lisa Downing suggests that intersectionality's emphasis on group identities may overlook the individuality of people, reducing them to mere members of categories. This oversight can result in oversimplified analyses and incorrect assumptions about the formation of an individual's values and beliefs (Downing, 367–377). Darren Hutchinson contends that attempting to theorize or study a group is futile because each individual within that group possesses a multifaceted and ever-changing identity, making them distinct from everyone else in the world. Every woman's psychology works differently. Being women, Antoinette, Esther, and Blanche, all suffer due to unfairness and existing gender norms. But their psychology reacts separately from one another. Antoinette becomes violent when she loses grip over her mental stability, whereas Esther becomes suicidal on the other hand Blanche ends up becoming delusional.

A successful theoretical framework must go beyond merely diagnosing a problem; it must also propose viable solutions. Many feminist theories, while insightful, tend to be highly abstract and disconnected from practical realities. Intersectionality, however, offers a more comprehensive approach by examining the scope for transformation beyond existing forms of oppression that shape women's identities. It acknowledges that individuals experience oppression in varied and intersecting ways due to the interconnectedness of factors such as race, gender, class, and economic status. The core premise of intersectionality is that each individual's perspective is unique; therefore, a thorough literary analysis must account for all these dimensions to fully understand a character's struggles and how their identity is constructed.

Critics like Barbara Tomlinson) argue that the theory of intersectionality complicates the process of identifying common causes of oppression, as it emphasizes the multiplicity and uniqueness of experiences (Tomalison 143). To achieve, a comprehensive understanding of why a female character in literature suffers, it is essential to consider all intersecting factors; otherwise, the analysis remains incomplete and fails to address the root causes of their struggles. While there is debate about the practical application of intersectionality, the framework, itself, invites scholars and critics to move beyond conventional views and seek innovative interpretations.

In literary analysis, the mental health of female characters often intersects with societal expectations regarding gender, which profoundly influences their portrayal. Characters such as Antoinette from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Esther from *The Bell Jar*, and Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire* exemplify this intersectionality between gender norms and psychological distress. Their narratives provide insight into how various factors within patriarchal societies—such as race, economic conditions, social background, and marital expectations—converge to shape their identities and experiences within literary texts. This multidimensional approach allows for a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between social structures and women's psyche in the construction of female identities in literature.

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