

# A Language of Our Own

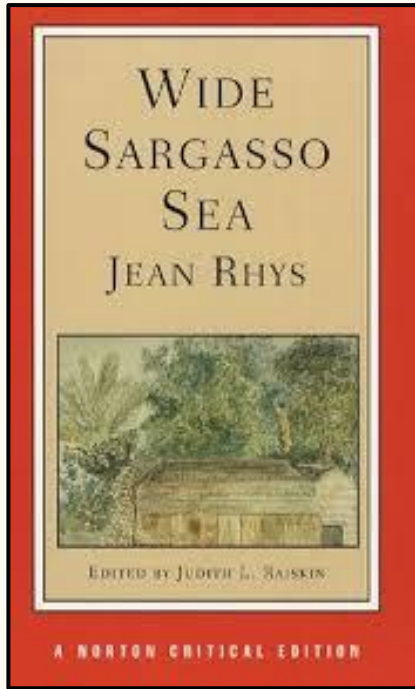
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The Importance of Unique Spaces for Female Voices  
By: Anna Brown, Madeline De Leo, and Camille Dinard

# Introduction

- Women's Voices Not Adequately Heard
  - Results in men co-opting/overpowering women's experiences
  - E.g. Western canonical literature
- “Theory of the Flesh” (Cherrie Moraga)
  - Need to create space in dominant discourses and language that center women's voices, embodied experiences, and perspectives
- Thesis: We argue for the need for an embodied women's language that is rooted in women's lived experiences and perspectives. Women's literature offers a unique, empowering space and language that enables a better understanding of women's experiences.

# Summary of the Two Works Analyzed



*Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys

Accessed via Google Photos



*The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde

Accessed via Google Photos

# Women and Illness: Historical Context

- Healthcare system developed around patriarchal norms (Aditi Sharma 3)
  - Lack of consideration extended to women of color
- Homogenization of women leads to loss of individual voices (Savannah McGinnis 16)
  - Results in women's experiences being ignored/co-opted by those without those experiences
- Examples of medical neglect
  - Gaslighting in the medical field (Miller et al.)
  - Dismissal of needs in healthcare (Moyer)
  - Misdiagnosis of hysteria (Jackson)
- Utilizing women-authored stories, such as Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, can start to combat the dismissal of women's lived experience

# Analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*

- Antoinette's personhood dictated by patriarchal forces
  - Rochester forces his idea of identity (e.g. calls her Bertha)
  - “Does it make me look intemperate and unchaste?...That man told me so” (Rhys 110)
  - Rochester consistently dismisses her personhood in exchange for his own idea of identity
- Antoinette is not allowed agency over her life
  - “...Antoinette's madness is defined by the different identities given to her, the identities she cannot keep since she cannot fit in.” (Torntorp 18)
  - “This lack of emotional stability and care led to emotional distress, including fear and betrayal, which further complicated her ability to form stable relationships.” (Segueni 37)

# What We Can Learn

- Women's experiences are overshadowed by men's voices
  - Women not taken seriously when discussing experiences
  - Or men just do not listen (Kieran Snyder)
- Health concerns co-opted by male voices
  - Women are unable to advocate for their health
  - Patriarchal influences force women to dismiss/feel bad about concerns
- Women need their own embodied language that centers and validates their lived experiences
  - Rochester's co-optation of Antoinette's story highlights the consequences of not giving women their own space within dominant discourses and systems of power

# Analysis of *The Cancer Journals*

- Shortcomings of a hetero-patriarchal medical system, specifically for women of color
  - “merely another way of keeping women with breast cancer silent and separate from each other”  
(Lorde 16).
- Staying silent prevents connection with other women
- When a woman does not wear prosthesis, she’s seen as a victim rather than a hero
  - The unique journey of grief that women go through is ignored
  - “*The Cancer Journals* was very successful in its first edition, with many women—especially lesbians — sending letters to Lorde to thank her for breaking the silence and placing her experience in a political framework” (Bolaski 113).
- Women’s discourse allows for women to be active in pushing back against the dominant narrative

# What We Can Learn

- Women's literature as linguistic tool for pushing back against dominant voices & narratives
  - Women need their own space and language within dominant discourses and institutions
  - Women's discourse offers a unique language that embodies their experiences, and in turn, challenges structures that enable men to co-opt women's experiences
  - Women's literature is powerful in creating and sustaining this autonomous space for women's embodied experiences and language
- Women have a role in not conforming to idealized beauty standards
  - Allowing spaces for women's experiences foster connection between women
  - Silence and suppression of women's voices harm understanding of their unique experiences
  - Lorde's memoir is a reminder of the power of language and need for a unique space in dominant discourses

# Implications for the Future

- Unique spaces need to be prioritized in language for women
  - Ability to share lived experiences
  - Personal testimony of experiences, without male influence
  - Means to advocate for issues women face (i.e. women's health)
- Without a language of their own, women's needs are overshadowed by patriarchal narratives and institutions
  - Homogenizing and erasing women's voices and discourses result in women's experiences being misunderstood or dismissed
- Both men and women have a duty to protect/propagate women's language

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