

## Reading Madness in Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*

Tomoko Ichtani

(Received on May 31, 2012)

The field of cultural production defined as Australian Indigenous women's writing has undergone a number of marked shifts over the last thirty years, particularly the genre of life writing which has drawn a domestic and international profile. Through a close analysis of Indigenous women's life writing including Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), Langford Ruby (Ginibi)'s *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), and Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992), Anne Brewster provides a stimulating examination of the productive role that Indigenous women play in the contemporary formation and continued survival of Indigenous communities through maintaining their families. While pointing out that the gendered practices of family relations for Indigenous women are distinct from Western feminist thinking about the oppressive nature of the relationship between women and the spheres of the domestic, Brewster argues that the "family" is a "site of resistance" for Indigenous women to draw personal sustenance and collective strategies of empowerment (9–11).

Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997) is an innovative work that challenges Anne Brewster's theoretical premise about Indigenous women's writing, while presenting different kinds of family experience for Indigenous women, particularly the experience of their alienation. Instead of depending on the motif of "family" as the traditional narrative device of Indigenous women's writing, Wright utilizes the theme of madness as a narrative tactic to explore the questions of "otherness" and "subaltern" subjectivity. In *Writing and Madness*, Shoshana Felman suggests that there is an interesting relationship between madness and literature, while madness usually occupies a situation of exclusion: "the madness that has been socially, politically, and philosophically repressed has nonetheless made itself heard, has survived as a speaking subject only in and through literary texts" (15). For Wright, the genre of fiction is an ideal literary form that gives a significant voice to subjugated people and their madness:

I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth—not the

real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell. . . . We have thousands of people who have no voice at all in today's Australia. I wonder how we are going to heal ourselves if we cannot speak about the pain of who we are? ("Politics of Writing" 14)

As seen in the quotation, Wright points to the limitation of non-fiction in which authors choose "what is safe to tell," whereas for her fiction has the power to penetrate "more than the surface layers, and probes deep into the inner working of reality" ("Politics of Writing" 14). Through the genre of fiction and the theme of madness, Wright challenges the historical silence of Indigenous women who "cannot speak about the pain of who we are" and successfully raise their existences by mapping out the areas of Indigenous women's subjugation and invisibility imbricated in discourses of race and gender.

Madness, both as literary trope and as discursive strategy, has long been considered as a resistance to social, political, and discursive hegemonies in women's writing. Nevertheless, there is an unsettled discussion about how to read madness represented by "black" or "Creole" women, while madness sometimes appears to function as symptomatic of the situation of colonized women and evokes a negative and passive image of them. Reading *Plains of Promise* in relation to other women's texts dealing with madness in the postcolonial context, the aim of this paper is to examine the way in which Wright utilizes the theme of madness as a discourse of resistance. First, the paper introduces the debates related to madness and women's writing and maps out the issues of postcolonial texts which depict women and madness. It will then demonstrate how Wright elaborates the theme of madness in *Plains of Promise*, while examining similar intertextual reciprocities existing in Jean Rhys' *Wild Sargasso Sea*, a representative woman's text that explores the theme of madness in the postcolonial context.

## I

Michel Foucault's work *Madness and Civilization* provides a useful starting point to explore the issue of madness. He reveals the history of madness which has been silenced, concealed, and consigned to oblivion by Western reason's privileging of truth. According to Foucault, increasingly objectified and diagnosed within the discourses of

psychiatry and medical science, madness has been eliminated from the realm of reason since the eighteenth century (xii). The light of “reason” needs the darkness of “madness” to exist. Similarly, the concept of a “person of reason” comes to be realized by a “person of non-reason” as the other (xii). Under the authority of reason, madness is excluded and concealed in order to remove the anxiety of a “person of reason” (xii). However, Foucault rarely mentions the gender of madness or discusses women and madness. In not only general discourses but also sociological statistics, madness has often been connected with women’s nature and has been symbolically represented as feminine. In her book *Woman and Madness*, Phyllis Chesler states that “[w]oman more than men, and in greater numbers than their existence in the general population would predict, are involved in ‘careers’ as psychiatric patients” (xxii). While analyzing the nature of the relationship between madness and women, Chesler concludes that “it is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must ‘adjust’ to and accept the behavioral norms for her sex even though these kinds of behavior are generally regarded as less socially desirable . . . . The ethic of mental health is masculine in our culture” (68–9). Elaine Showalter, who presents a feminist history of psychiatry as well as the cultural history of madness as a “female malady” in England over the past two centuries, similarly argues that the discourse of female insanity and madness has been constructed by a “male norm” and a “male-dominated profession” brought “the concepts of normality and deviance that women perform must accept” (19–20).

In the context of literary discourse, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, provide studies of nineteenth-century women writers’ texts and argue that the figure of the madwoman, such as Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, acts as “the author’s double” and “an image of her own anxiety and rage”:

In projecting their anger and dis-ease into dreadful figures, creating dark doubles for themselves and their heroines, women writers are both identifying with and revising the self-definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them. All the nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary women who evoke the female monster in their novels and poems alter her meaning by virtue of their own identification with her. For it is usually because she is in some sense imbued with inferiority that the witch-monster-madwoman becomes so crucial an avatar of the writer’s own self. (79)

The figure of the madwoman is a response to the questions about female creativity and symbolically represents a resistance against patriarchal culture: it is through the figure of the madwoman as an “author’s double” that “the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts” (85).

In the postcolonial context, however, Spivak acutely criticizes Gilbert and Gubar’s argument by focusing upon Bertha Mason’s subject in *Jane Eyre* as a native woman who is erased and sacrificed in their reading:

So that *Jane Eyre* can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction. I must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer. (“Three Women’s Texts and Critique of Imperialism” 270)

Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), widely acknowledged as a *Jane Eyre* intertext, is an interesting and important work that retells Brontë’s story through the perspective of the madwoman, as Bertha Mason is refigured as Antoinette Cosway. Whereas it has been celebrated as a feminist and postcolonial text, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been criticized because of its white female Creole protagonists who are culturally divided between the “black” and “white” world. Narain, for example, argues: “[I]t is the white Creole woman who is presented as mute and without a position from which to articulate her subjectivity. The white Creole is presented as *victim* ....” (246). As Narain points out the white Creole women in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette and her mother, are depicted as passive and fragile figures in their interaction with men (their husbands); they become insane and ultimately destroy themselves, even though Rhys tries to give a voice to a silenced character in the English canonical work. Here, madness contains a negative meaning rather than being celebrated as the resistance that Gilbert and Gubar suggest through their reading of nineteenth-century white women’s texts. In the postcolonial context then, how can we read the relation between gender and madness in “black” or “Creole” women? The following section examines the way in which madness is represented in Wright’s *Plains of Promise* and investigates a narrative tactic of madness related to the experiences of colonized women.

## II

*Plains of Promise* opens with the description of a poinciana tree brought by a missionary that has grown next to the Aboriginal girl's dormitory in St Dominic's Mission:

So God's celebratory Poinciana tree came into being, surviving the claypans, the droughts and the Wets to grow large and graceful in the presence of three generations of black girls laughing in their innocence as if nothing mattered at all. Its roots clung tighter to the earth when the girls cried out for their mothers or wept into its branches when they were lonely or hurt, enduring the frustration and cruelty of their times. The tree grew in spite of all this. Healthy and unexploited, unaffected when illness fell on all sides, witnessing the frequent occurrence of premature deaths, none of which affected the growth of God's tree. (3)

This "thirsty, greedy foreign" tree by which Aboriginal "spiritual ancestors grew more and more disturbed" is a symbol of the colonial history in which Western invaders such as Christian missionaries infringed on the Aboriginal spiritual tie with their land, culture, and tradition (*Plains of Promise* 4). As if uncovering the memory of the poinciana tree on St Dominic's Mission that has witnessed the colonial mission life of Aboriginal girls over several decades, *Plains of Promise* depicts three generations of Indigenous women: Ivy Koopundi Andrews, an inmate of colonial institutions including a Christian mission and an asylum; her mother, an unnamed woman who is forcibly removed from her ancestral country and sent to St Dominic's Mission; Mary, the daughter of Ivy, who searches for an Aboriginal identity and struggles in the sphere of contemporary Indigenous politics.

The novel is composed of four parts and the first and second parts explore Ivy and her mother's lives. Shortly after Ivy arrives at St Dominic's Mission with her mother, a black crow appears and sits in the poinciana tree's branches to mark her mother's death. In despair at being moved from her ancestral country to the mission and being torn apart from her daughter, the young Aboriginal mother immolates herself. However, no definite reason for her suicide is given. The only witness of her death in the Aboriginal camp, Old Maudie, just remarks: "She was a bad woman. Bad mother. Might be someone from her own country wanted her dead and came here secretly in the night to do bad

business on her” (15). Ivy’s mother is always an outsider, who is often abused and is segregated from both white and Aboriginal communities, not only in St Dominic’s Mission but also in her own country. She is different from other Aboriginal people in her own community, growing up in a white household and away from the native compound. Having been seduced by white men in the station, she gave birth to a “half-caste” child and this resulted in slanders from both Aboriginal and white people. In particular, for “the Protector of Aborigines,” she is an “assault matter” to be promptly removed and placed in St Dominic’s Mission where the region’s “problematic” Aboriginal people are sent (13).

In her paper “Politics of Writing,” Wright emphasizes that in *Plains of Promise*, her main concern was to represent people “ostracised” from both “mainstream society” and “Aboriginal society” and to retell hitherto untold stories:

I was interested in the notion of what it meant to be ostracised. Over many years in my work, I had seen people who had been on the outside of life, not only from mainstream society but within Aboriginal society as well. Nobody knew their story. These are the people who don’t talk and are treated like they don’t exist. I was concerned about how this could happen and what it meant to be a person who falls outside of life. (“Politics of Writing” 20)

Through her experience of working in Aboriginal organisations, Wright also wrote and edited two books, *Grog War* (1997) and *Take Power* (1998) and her second novel *Carpentaria* (2006) that won Australia’s premier literary prize, the Miles Franklin Award. *Grog War* is a documentary account of the struggles of Tennant Creek’s Indigenous community in the arenas of health, especially alcoholism, and land and cultural maintenance as well as autonomy. Similarly, *Take Power* is an anthology of political accounts by Aboriginal leaders who have fought for land rights in Central Australia. *Carpentaria* is an Australian Indigenous epic that dramatises Indigenous epistemology and knowledge systems and explores contemporary Indigenous politics as depicting the interconnected narratives of several characters who live in a fictional place called Desperance in the Gulf of Carpentaria. In every work, Wright consistently engages with the issue of Aboriginal sovereignty and the struggle to achieve some recognition for their land. In *Plains of Promise*, however, she attempts to present a more complex narrative voice, one that is not

as straightforward as perhaps an Aboriginal political representative's voice would be:

In my work I like to take the voice of the people, not an Aboriginal political or community leader, chairman of the council. The most interesting voice to me is the voice I have to search for. The voice that is silent or elusive. You may only hear this voice sometimes, and sometimes you have to travel all day and night to find the voices for your work. These are the characters I am interested in writing into a novel, because this to me, is the true face of where we are. Or, the pulse—as we say in the Gulf of Carpentaria—the pulse of our heartbeat. (“Politics of Writing” 20)

It is important to note that Wright actively and consciously participates in an Indigenous aesthetic, locating her inspiration in the stories of the Aboriginal community and understanding the role of a writer to be seeking and uncovering the hidden pulse of a story. I argue that Indigenous characters such as Ivy and her mother, who are segregated from both Aboriginal and white communities, are created as part of Wright's process of searching for “the voice that is silent or elusive”; for Wright reaching the voice is to reveal Indigenous reality as “the pulse of [their] heartbeat.”

In her influential essay, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak investigates the subaltern woman's subject by offering the fundamental question, “Can the Subaltern speak?” According to Spivak, “something of a not-speaking” lies in “the very notion of subalternity” (Landry and MacLean 289). By saying rhetorically that “the subaltern cannot speak,” however, Spivak does not define the subalternity as a “certain not-being-able-to-make-speech acts,” but tries to reveal a “transaction between the speaker and the listener” (Landry and MacLean 289–290). She challenges the naïve understanding of voice as “breaking the silence” which is often associated with the feminist movements. In this respect, Wright carefully deals with the subaltern woman's voice in *Plains of Promise*. Wright presents the voiceless and subaltern status of Ivy's mother by depicting the moment Ivy is removed by the missionaries:

‘No, don’t,’ was all she could think of to say, but the words never passed her lips. Over and over after they left, she thought if only she had said the words out loud, if she had only tried harder, then maybe they would not have taken Ivy away. She had screamed and run after them and tried to drag Ivy away until she was overcome

and locked up for a day in the black hole, a place for troublesome blacks. (13)

After the suicide of Ivy's mother, the missionary asks the doctor to write a false death certificate stating that she died a natural death. Though untrue, this document becomes her history. This women's voice is never "heard and read," which is reminiscent of Spivak, who says that "the subaltern as female can never be heard or read," and the voice of the voiceless woman is only ever expressed through her suicide ("Can the Subaltern Speak? 66). The presence of subaltern woman, such as Ivy's mother, is realized through their absence once they have committed suicide. However, her subjectivity is manipulated after her death and her voice is never heard. Here, a "transaction between the speaker and the listener" does not seem to happen. However, Wright's attempt to convey the subaltern women's voice does not cease, though what she emphasises is precisely the difficulty of the attempt to represent the breaking of the silence. Through a visual image, she presents the voiceless voice of Ivy's mother:

Before the clouds broke she threw herself in the fire. All the screaming when it finally came, and, by the time Old Maudie could get to the human fireball, it was over. (15)

The image of "the human fireball" repeatedly appears in *Plains of Promise* through a chain reaction in which several Aboriginal women of St Dominic's Mission start to commit suicide through self-immolation after the death of Ivy's mother. Those Aboriginal women following Ivy's mother are also subaltern women who have never had their voices heard through a "transaction between the speaker and the listener." Through the vivid visual image of "the human fireball," however, it can be said that a pictorial transaction between the speaker and the listener has taken place. Nevertheless, we must be careful here not to readily assume that "the human fireball" speaks to us of the silence. Rather, I want to suggest that the image of "the human fireball" embodies the difficulty of certain voices to emerge. This image also serves to highlight the danger inherent in trying to glibly represent oppression.

In *Plains of Promise*, through the persona of Ivy, Wright radically explores the question of "otherness" and subaltern subjectivity. After her mother's death, Ivy, left behind at the age of seven, is ostracized and ill-treated by the other Aboriginal inmates because

of her association with her mother, the “bad, crazy Aboriginal woman” from another county (15). Ivy is always a target of bullying by the Aboriginal girls in the dormitory and the missionaries, who regard her as a “bad apple”:

Ivy was often left semi-conscious after these attacks. A rib. A bone. A finger. Broken to mend by itself. No one bothered, not even the missionaries, to acquaint themselves with the child's injuries. Who really cared? (22–23)

Ivy endures public humiliation and is hysterically accused by an Indigenous woman in St Dominic's:

‘You come here from your Sickness country. Spredin’ it all over this place here.’ For the first time Ivy heard what the adults believed about her. ‘Sick people there dying all the time. People with no hands. No toes. No fingers. You hear that, you disease carrier!’ (56)

This scene vividly depicts the danger of attempting to lump together Aboriginal groups—here, it becomes evident that tensions exist within and among communities that are aggravated through the settler colonial structure. In the mission, the people believe that the sequential suicide of Aboriginal women is the legacy of Ivy's mother. Ivy is abhorred as the embodiment of evil and the “crow's Timekeeper” that brings death and she becomes a scapegoat for both Aboriginal and white groups as the ultimate other.

While she is segregated in the mission, Ivy obtains the concern and favour of the Reverend Errol Jipp and his wife, Beverly. This married couple live mentally apart with “silence, an undeclared agreement that there was nothing left to say each other” (20). Errol and Beverly are depicted as an unhappy couple seeking fulfilment after their children have left home. While Beverly sleeps in her daughter's bed, her husband Errol is driven to take the twelve year old Ivy as his mistress. As the local Protector of Aborigines as well as a Christian missionary, Errol Jipp has authority to govern all matters concerning Aboriginal lives in the mission. Whereas he believes that his task is to “make [Aboriginal people] Christians,” Errol abuses his power and has a sexual relationship with Ivy (28):

He had previously spent years discussing this matter with God. He told himself (and God) that his situation was different, the use of *black flesh* a necessity. God knew he would never reduce himself to their level. (my emphasis) (31)

Ivy's body as "black flesh" reflects back Jipp's perverted colonial self; a confused mixture of male sexual desire, white superiority towards Indigenous people, and a deceptive Christian belief that makes him think that he works for God to save Indigenous people. For Beverly, Ivy is a substitution for her own children who have already grown up and left home. At Ivy's mother's funeral, Beverly lets Ivy put on a white cotton dress which used to be a favourite of her daughter's. She even thinks of adopting Ivy as her own child, but she has to give up the idea due to Errol's strong opposition. While Ivy, who is "not very dark and could probably pass for white" (62), is an easy target for assimilation, she is also a presence that threatens "the 'them and us' line" (63). Against Errol's opposition, Beverly takes Ivy into the mission house to counter her emptiness and loneliness. In the context of the assimilationist period of Indigenous people, however, Beverly's affection towards a "half-caste" girl has another connotation beyond her own individual situation in which she needs a replacement for her own children with whom "she felt her own life had gone away" (28). In *Plains of Promise*, Beverly is a white female character who embodies the white women's involvement in the national and state-based assimilation policies of Indigenous people.

It could be argued that Ivy becomes the object (or victim) of colonial desire for both Mr and Mrs Jipp. Robert Young explains the mechanism of "black" women's subjugation by white males thus:

The white male's ambivalent axis of desire and repugnance was enacted through remarkable ideological dissimulation by which, despite the way in which black women were constituted as sexual objects and experienced the evidence of their own desirability through their own victimization, they were also taught to see themselves as sexually unattractive. (152)

In the persona of Errol, we can see an "ambivalent axis of desire and repugnance" towards Ivy while the "ideological dissimulation" that enables a white male's sexual abuse of a "black" woman is apparent in Ivy's consciousness. For instance, at her mother's

funeral Ivy, who is forced to wear a white dress by Beverly, recognizes herself as dirty:

Ivy was led away back to the 'redemption' dormitory, shamed that the sodden white dress now revealed every inch of her body, feeling the dirtiness of her brownness beside the middle-aged cleanliness of the white missionaries; feeling, above all, her loneliness. (18)

Here, what makes Ivy feel dirty is the "cleanliness of white missionaries," through which Beverly's exclusive role is carried out. In this context, Ivy's subjectivity is complicatedly caught between Mr and Mrs Jipp's colonial desire.

Ivy's life is controlled by her "protector" Errol Jipp and the novel traces her misfortunes and tragedy without any redemption. After several years of molestation at the hands of Errol, Ivy becomes pregnant at fourteen and is forced to marry one of the Indigenous men, Elliot. Elliot rejects Ivy and abuses her and their mismatched marriage never works out. Enduring public humiliation and a difficult marriage with Elliot, Ivy eventually gives birth to Errol Jipp's child, who is taken away from her immediately. Repeating the history of the stolen generations<sup>1</sup>, Ivy falls into madness in despair and has an argument with Elliott, after which she is dispatched to Sycamore Heights Mental Health and Research Institution.

### III

The second part of *Plains of Promise* follows Ivy's long years in Sycamore Heights Mental Health and Research Institution as well as her later life with an old woman, Bessie. In the subsequent events that include the loss of her new born baby and fatal discord with Elliot, Ivy is left traumatized:

Ivy's sense of herself was contained in far-off glimpses, like remembering distant

---

1 The systematic removal of Indigenous children under the pretext of protecting Indigenous people, which started from the late nineteenth century and lasted until the late 1960s, intended to assimilate Indigenous children, particularly those of mixed Aboriginal and white descent, into white Australian society. Indigenous children who were removed through this policy are called the stolen generations. In *Plains of Promise*, both Ivy and her daughter belong to the stolen generations.

hills seen once from the window of a car moving through the landscape. She saw a small child with her mother's arms around her. She could not make the bits in between fit with the face of the young woman she saw reflected in the window. She tried hard and often to bring back the lost memories, only to sense her mind revolving faster and faster into a black vortex, disappearing into nothing. There was nothing there to remember. (168–169)

As traumatic symptoms of her tormented experiences arise, Ivy loses her memories and her sense of self. In the mental asylum, she is an “oddity” who has lost her memory and is erased from the written records of St Dominic's Mission. Her personal information provided by the State reads: “Not to be returned to St Dominic's” (167). Ivy, who under the order of the State is “to be constrained at Sycamore Heights until possible medical discharge,” becomes an object of study for the chief administrator, Des Penguin, and the psychiatrists and medical doctors (167). Although there are not many Aboriginal inmates in Sycamore Heights, the fact of being a minority makes Ivy a “star patient” and presents a chance to improve the “study of Aboriginal mental health” (172). Penguin uses her in making Sycamore Heights a “showpiece,” relating the “well-worn story of the mystery surrounding Ivy's former life” (172). Ivy turns out to be an object for Western scientific gaze and desire.

Wright thus attempts to depict the process through which Ivy is “othered” as a madwoman by the discourses of psychiatry and modern medicine. The madness of Ivy in *Plains of Promise* can be comparable with the one which Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicts through Antoinette. The madness of Ivy and Antoinette is deeply rooted in colonial and patriarchal discourse. Both women's racial identities are ambiguous: they are neither black nor white and segregated from both societies. Although their belonging seems to be settled through a marriage or sexual relationship, they are subsequently hurt by their sexual exploiters and husbands. In *Plains of Promise*, Ivy is sexually abused and forced to marry Elliot by Jipp and later rejected by her Aboriginal husband. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette is refused by her English husband, Rochester. Rochester states: “I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did” (93). Instead of a love, these men only show Ivy and Antoinette a colonial and patriarchal desire to control the other. In her reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Teresa O'Connor

points out that “female and male versions of madness” exist in the text: Antoinette and her mother’s madness turns “inward” and hurts “the self,” while Rochester’s madness is related to “the impulse to control, to possess, and to destroy” and turns “outward, expressly wounding the females” (168).

Drawing on Teresa O’Connor, it can be said that the madness of Ivy and Antoinette results in a colonial and patriarchal desire, or a “male version of madness.” Foucault suggests that “the history of that other form of madness” needs to be understood in view of Pascal’s saying, “Men are so necessarily mad, that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness” (xi). Employing Foucault’s suggestion, I would like to argue that postcolonial women writers such as Wright and Rhys attempt to present “another form of madness.” Colonialism and patriarchy have been maintained by regarding the European male subject as “reason.” However, a “reason” that defines the “person of non-reason” as the other and controls the other is “another form of madness.” Against the Victorian (colonial) discourse represented in Rochester who associates Antoinette’s madness with her racially “impure” lineage, Rhys reveals another madness which makes women and colonized people othered. It is also interesting to note that Ivy’s mental health is viewed as an object for study, not so that she can be cured, but so that she can be studied for future cures. Here, the destruction, both physical and mental, of one woman, is deemed unimportant in the face of scientific advancement. This is highly ironic as arguably, keeping the Indigenous population dependent is of primary importance. Eventually, it is other forms of therapy that lend a glimpse towards health.

In *Plains of Promise*, the pilot project of treatment through bellydancing is introduced in Sycamore Heights and is instructed by Madame Sylvia Sadaan, a professional female bellydancer with Arabic origins:

The harsh illumination travelled deep into every open of skin, into their hair, into every cavity. It beamed through the transparent costumes to drag out and burn away every sense of inhibition and shame, the prison each of these women had created for herself. Madame Sadaan had reclaimed from a world of inhibited humanity these four women. They could now rejoin a society where the walls were much more expansive than the inner walls of their safe cell which had previously held them prisoners to their own minds. (177)

Madame Sadaan seems to be an important figure in liberating the female patients, including Ivy, from “another form of madness” that relegates them to “a world of inhibited humanity.” Although the project is successful, it eventually collapses because of criticisms of Sycamore Heights’ illicit administration. This incident leads to the closure of the institute and Ivy is eventually released from the asylum with little preparation or care. The place Ivy is sent to by the “latest policy of integration of patients back into the community” is an old Aboriginal woman’s house, which is far from the notion of “home” (181): Ivy and the woman called Bessie fall into a mutually suspicious delusion and Ivy is left isolated and in a paranoid state.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, Wright presents us with an un-thought through program of re-assimilation. Of course, this hasty program is potentially as destructive as any other as again, it does not take into account the particular context of each woman. Thus, both Ivy and Bessie suffer from their newfound coexistence. Bessie’s husband, Bob, who has been dead for eighteen years, begins to appear to Ivy at night disguised as a little dog, claiming that his wife poisoned him. According to Bessie, Bob committed suicide; however, Ivy lives in the fear that she will be poisoned by Bessie since the little dog continues to visit and accuse Bessie. At the same time, Bessie thinks that Ivy is attempting to kill her. The two women build a “world full of suspicions against the other” as time passes and it seems that the subconscious becomes more real than real life (194). It is crucial here to consider this interlude as a criticism to oversimplification. In other words, there is no quick fix solution that can address the generations of mistakes and problems that have arisen. Although she is released from the asylum and is sent to Bessie’s to be integrated into the Indigenous community, Ivy neither obtains a language to explain herself nor is she incorporated into the community.

Ivy’s life with Bessie ends in a mysterious explosion. The explosion kills Bessie and leaves Ivy to a life of scavenging with Bessie’s goats. Ivy becomes a “wild woman” and a rumour spreads among the town: “Long white hair like a goat’s, down to the ground,” “All bent over, and she runs just like a goat,” and “White skin, like she got no blood” (200–201). Ivy is denigrated and brought down to the level of the inhuman and the

---

2 I use the word “paranoia” to mean madness and all kinds of delusional conditions. This term has its origins in the Greek language and has a complicated history of usage. However, in nineteenth-century German psychiatry the word was applied to delusional states of all kinds and the meaning was given a more precise and restricted definition by Emil Kraepelin in the twentieth-century. Sigmund Freud accepted the pre-Kraepelinian conception of paranoia as a notion that refers to a wide type of delusional states.

most primitive state—a scavenger. Due to the town people's fear that the goats might spread tuberculosis, the Town Council removes the goats and Ivy, as a "wild woman," is finally discovered. We subsequently learn that Ivy does not have tuberculosis after all. Here, Wright reveals the way in which a rumour is created. This rumour can be understood as another form of madness. Rather than making the oppressed other speak, Wright's attention is to deconstruct the discourse of madness and to expose the mechanism of the construction and exclusion of the other.

#### IV

As mentioned earlier, *Plains of Promise* presents the different kinds of family experiences of Indigenous women, challenging Anne Brewster's theoretical premise of the "family" as a "site of resistance" and showing this site to be equally fraught with insecurities and challenges. Wright refuses to depict the intimate mother-daughter relationship which has characterized Indigenous women's writings. Rather, she presents an unfixed and unredeemed mother-daughter relationship. In the last part of *Plains of Promise*, when Mary, Ivy's stolen daughter, finally meets her mother who, as it turns out, was brought back to her own community and looked after secretly, there is no warm exchange of affection; she is terrified by the figure of her mother:

The old woman growled like a wild animal. Mary had never heard anything like it. She felt cold shivers running through her body. Jessie started screaming again. Mary tried to calm Jessie, but her shivers grew wilder and she began to tremble all over. Then Jessie started trembling too, choking on her uncontrollable screams. It occurred to Mary that both Jessie and the old woman were about to explode from their violent convulsions. (294)

Here Ivy is depicted as a "wild animal" who has lost any sense of connection to others and who cannot activate any maternal instincts that may be expected of her. After the transient encounter with her own mother, and before she has any opportunity to inquire into her mother's past, Mary is forced to leave the community immediately by the demand of the elders who are afraid of where this inter-generational reunion may lead. By trying not to idealize Indigenous women's family experiences, Wright explores their

alienation, placelessness, and a cultural rootlessness from place and memory.

Wright deliberately represents a subaltern woman and the difficulty in perceiving her voice. Her careful attitude towards this issue is reminiscent of Spivak's concept of the "systematic unlearning" of privilege. In order for the postcolonial intellectual to deal with the subaltern women subject, Spivak suggests:

In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* 'unlearns' female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized. ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 91)

Spivak explains that postcolonial intellectuals need to reform their social positions and learn how to "speak to" the subaltern subject by "unlearning" their privilege. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak extends her idea about subaltern discourse and remarks: "After 1989, I began to sense that a certain postcolonial subject had, in turn, been recoding the colonial subject and appropriating the Native Informant's position" (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 20). Mapping out the figure of "the Native Informant" through interdisciplinary areas such as philosophy, history, and literature, Spivak reveals the way in which postcolonial subjects have obtained a privileged position in the globalising world.

In this context, the attitude of "unlearning" their privilege is still very significant for the "Native Informants." Wright could be seen as a "Native Informant" who brings us the voice of Aboriginal people; however, as she states herself, she carries out this task not as an "academic" or "intellectual," but as a grassroots Aboriginal writer. She tries to be attentive to "the voice that is silent or elusive" rather than speaking for these subaltern women ("Politics of Writing" 20). While "unlearning" her privilege as a front line Indigenous activist, Wright struggles with the concept of "otherness" and creates a process through which we meet and talk to/with subaltern Indigenous women. In this process, she utilizes the literary trope of madness and depicts Indigenous woman's alienation and "othered" entity. However, the madness in *Plains of Promise* does not simply represent the passive and fragile figure of the Indigenous woman as victim, rather it is also developed as a discursive strategy to reveal "another madness" of the colonizers and show the

mechanism in which women and colonized people are defined as a “person of non-reason” in order for colonizers to be a “person of reason.”

### Works Cited

- Brewster, Anne. *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1996.
- Chesler, Phyllis. *Women and Madness*. Garden City, N. J.: Doubleday, 1973.
- Felman, Shoshana. *Writing and Madness: Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1985.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization*. Trans. Richard Howard. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Landry, Donna and Gerald MacLean, ed. *The Spivak Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Langford, Ruby (Ginibi). *Don't Take Your Love to Town*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1988.
- Morgan, Sally. *My Place*. Freemantle: Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 1987.
- Nannup, Alice, with Stephen Kinnane and Lauren Marsh. *When the Pelican Laughed*. Freemantle: Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 1992.
- O'Connor, Teresa F. *Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels*. New York: New York University Press, 1986.
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1966.
- Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830–1980*. London: Viago, 1987.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Colonial/Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Patrick and Laura Chrisman. New York: Harvester, 1994. 66–111.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Three Women's Texts and Critique of Imperialism.” *Writing and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1986. 262–280.
- Wright, Alexis. *Plains of Promise*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Grog War*. Broome: Magabala Books, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Take Power*. Alice Springs: Jukurrpa Books, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Politics of Writing.” *Southerly*, 62.2 (2002): 10–12.
- Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Summary

Reading Madness in Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*

Tomoko Ichitani

Madness, both as literary trope and discursive strategy, has long been considered as a resistance to social, political, and discursive hegemonies in women's writing. Nevertheless, there is an unsettled discussion about how to read madness represented by "black" or "Creole" women since madness sometimes appears to function as symptomatic of the situation of colonized women and evokes a negative and passive image of them. By reading the Australian Indigenous author Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997), in relation to other women's texts dealing with madness in the postcolonial context, the aim of this paper is to examine the way in which Wright utilizes the theme of madness as a discourse of resistance. First, the paper introduces the debates related to madness and women's writing and maps out the issues of postcolonial texts which depict women and madness. Following this, the paper demonstrates how Wright elaborates the theme of madness in *Plains of Promise*, while examining similar intertextual reciprocities existing in Jean Rhys' *Wild Sargasso Sea*, a representative woman's text that explores the theme of madness in the postcolonial context.

Wright's *Plains of Promise* is an innovative work that utilizes the theme of madness as a narrative tactic to explore the questions of "otherness" and "subaltern" subjectivity. Through the close reading of *Plains of Promise* alongside *Wild Sargasso Sea*, this paper argues that the madness in *Plains of Promise* does not simply represent the passive and fragile figure of the Indigenous woman as victim, rather it is also developed as a discursive strategy to reveal "another madness" of the colonizers and show the mechanism in which women and colonized people are defined as a "person of non-reason" in order for colonizers to be a "person of reason."