

RECONCEPTUALISATION OF THE TRAGIC FLAW: A STUDY OF THE TRAGIC PROTAGONISTS IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO AND JEAN RHYS' WIDE SARGASSO SEA

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ABSTRACT

Tragedy is an eternally powerful dramatic representation in literature that, across generations, has stood the test of time and gripped audiences with its strong and realistic protagonists whose tragic flaw may be their downfall. However, the question must be asked: how realistic is this tragic flaw put forth? Does the male tragic protagonist's tragic flaw lie solely within him and not the circumstances around him? And what about the existence of female tragic protagonists? To answer these questions, this paper first undertakes a study of the concept of the tragic flaw that is not to be confused with the term 'hamartia'. The study of the concept is then applied to two texts featuring a male and a female tragic protagonist respectively. This helps to better understand the two tragic characters beyond the narrow Aristotelian ideas concerning their tragic flaws. Enhanced by the various studies carried out on either works' protagonists by critics and popular theories, this paper aims at offering a more balanced observation of tragic characters in literature. The present study is done with the feminist aim of achieving equality of the sexes within the sphere of literary works of tragedy. Thus, the present research focuses majorly on the concept of tragic flaw with reference to the study of the male tragic protagonist in William Shakespeare's Othello and the female tragic protagonist in Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea.

KEYWORDS: *Female; Male; Tragic Flaw; Tragic Protagonist*

INTRODUCTION

Tragedy as a dramatic representation is a very powerful, very eternal one that can, across generations, stand the test of time. 'Tragedy' is a term broadly applied to literary and dramatic representations of serious actions which lead to a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist - the chief character (Abrams 405). Of course, for these pre-requisites to be met there are some conventions that were made to make a tragedy successful and truly tragic. As designed by Aristotle in his 4th Century BC work Poetics, to make a tragedy successful, the protagonist must evoke the audience's pity and terror by being a mix of the good and the bad, yet by being of higher than ordinary moral worth. Thus, the protagonist's downfall and change from fortune to misfortune must be brought about by their 'hamartia'-their fatal flaw, error, or mistake of judgment. Taking everything into account, the subsequent downfall-one that may be the physical or spiritual death of the protagonist-must give the audience a sense of 'catharsis'-a purging of the audience's pity and fear that was maintained throughout the tragedy. Over the time, upon observing various successful tragedies, it is noted that the catharsis is best delivered due to the hamartia that plays a vital role in the protagonist's judgment actions, and consequences. This hamartia, though, is tricky in nature for a variety of reasons, two of which this paper shall focus on being its implication that the tragic flaw must lie within the hero, and that the scope for female

tragic protagonists is entirely absent due to one of the criteria to be a tragic hero in Aristotle's eyes. The latter criteria results in a male tragic protagonist's fatal flaw lying within them, while the female tragic protagonist's fatal flaw relies on the patriarchy permeating into her life. The blatant imbalance and gross negligence of the female tragic hero as an individual causes her permanent existence in a patriarchal set-up. Especially in the current era of feminism that demands equality of sexes, there is, then, a dire need to break out of these limited ideas of hamartia meted out to either sex and analyse tragedies and their protagonists from a more balanced, more equal ground. Thus, this paper attempts a more balanced study of tragedies by first analysing the concept of a tragic hero, then the concept of the tragic flaw, accordingly followed by a study of the male tragic protagonist in William Shakespeare's *Othello*, and a study of the female tragic protagonist in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The Concept of the Tragic Hero

In the earliest known work on the theory of drama *Poetics*, Aristotle establishes that a tragic hero must fulfill certain criteria: he must be a man of eminence, a good man though not virtuous as such, and must have a minor flaw in his character that would result in an error in judgment and thus a tragic fall or end. A variety of tragic heroes across eras come to mind that stand as perfect examples of this definition: Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Romeo*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Jay Gatsby* and more. In many such lists of tragic heroes, it is notable that a female tragic protagonist is never mentioned. Other than the arguable dominance of male tragic heroes, there is another reason for this gross negligence of women from the sphere of tragic heroes: the inherent patriarchy in Aristotle's criteria for a tragic hero.

To understand the inherent patriarchy in Aristotle's criteria, it is important to first study his views on women. As illustrated in *Politics*, Aristotle declares that "as regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (Wikipedia). Thus, by this virtue, female tragic protagonists immediately fail the first criteria Aristotle sets for tragic heroes: these women cannot be characters of eminence, since according to Aristotle, they belong to a lower strata of society due to their sex and gender.

Moving away from Aristotle's guidelines onto the history and conventions of tragedies in English literature, popular assumption features men as tragic protagonists. In this light, tragic heroines are sidelined and seen as pawns to the game of life tragic hero's play. Moreover, these tragic heroines are written off as casualties or tragic consequences of said male tragic hero's own tragic flaw. For example, Euripides' *Media* is very much a tragic protagonist, all things considered, but is denied that visibility simply because as a woman, her courage isn't socially appropriate and she belongs to lower strata in a patriarchal society.

Considering these two studies of the concept of the tragic hero by Aristotle's definition and contemporary convention, it is safe to say that the concept itself excludes women from its sphere. For the current feminist purpose of a more equal analysis of characters of either gender as tragic protagonists, it is vital to revise the criteria set for tragic protagonists. For this, the criteria of being a man of eminence must be done away with, and a sort of sensitivity within the audience must be cultivated. Thus, in this paper, the tragic protagonists of the selected texts are to be studied accordingly.

The Concept of the Tragic Flaw

Before the concept of tragic flaw may be analysed, it must be noted that the key term used here is 'tragic flaw' and not 'hamartia', as the translation of hamartia as 'tragic flaw' has been a constant matter of debate. A tragic flaw is essentially a trait in a character that leads to their downfall, and this trait could be the lack of self-knowledge, lack of judgment, and

often it is 'hubris' or pride (Literary Devices). It is, according to Aristotle, "the intellectual failure to grasp what is right, a failure of human insight amidst the confusion of life" (Makwana 63). It must be noted that one's self-knowledge or lack of it relies heavily on the elements around them. For instance, what is one's gender? What is their sexuality? What are the opportunities offered or denied to them accordingly? Do they have a history of psychological or physical issues? What are the people around them like? What is their race? What is their economic, social, or political status? What is the kind of language the character uses? What is the kind of behaviour expected of the character? What is their past experience? Such specific details may seem to be existed only to make a character realistic or colourful, but a closer and more sensitive reading would prove these details to be crucial to the understanding of the character's psyche. Thus, these various factors of the character's friends, family, race, environment, gender, sexuality, social, political, or psychological circumstances etc. all contribute to the character's self-knowledge and makes them appear complex. This, then, makes the tragic flaw itself take on a more complex and multidimensional nature, and thus, less easy to pinpoint. There is, therefore, no one single cause or reason behind the character's self-knowledge.

The aforementioned external and the internal factors are complementary: while one may blame the internal and call it the character's 'tragic flaw' and the reason for their downfall, to call it their sole reason would be erroneous. This is as the internal was, in any case, triggered and affected by n-number of external factors influencing the character's rationale and judgment. For instance, Macbeth's tragic flaw is his ambition, which is an internal factor. It is that ambition that drives him to murder King Duncan and his men to make the prophecies come true sooner. However, one cannot deny the crucial role Lady Macbeth played with her constant nagging and persuasion when Macbeth was apprehensive about actually murdering King Duncan. This way, we can see the complementary nature of the internal and external factors when it comes to a character's tragic flaw and downfall.

It would be unfair in that case to burden the tragic protagonist alone with the fatal flaw, when their society may be at fault too for having molded the character into such a manner or situation. In cases where (a) the tragic hero is driven to lengths to commit that tragic flaw / error, and (b) the tragic hero is subjected to dehumanization of varying degrees due to society's perception of them, thus leading them to collapse under the pressure and lash out with tragic flaws/ errors-in such cases, for example, is it fair to push the burden of the tragic flaw onto the hero's self alone?

Considering all these aspects, it is essential to re-define the concept of the tragic flaw itself for the feminist purpose of this paper. This starts with revising Aristotle's criteria to avoid assuming women as being of lower social strata. Also, rather than confining the tragic flaw's scope within the mind and heart of the tragic protagonist alone, it would be more beneficial for external elements to be considered. These external elements may be the society's perception of race, gender, sex, sexuality and other aspects. Doing so would bring out the complex multi-dimensional nature of the tragic flaw, and thus allow for a more inclusive and fair study of tragic protagonists of either gender.

Now that the scope of the tragic flaw has been established in this paper to be broader than just something found within oneself, let this be applied to analyse the tragic protagonists of the two selected texts.

A Study of the Male Tragic Protagonist in William Shakespeare's Othello

William Shakespeare's Othello is a popular tragedy. To summaries the play, Othello is about the titular Moor of Venice, who is a general in the Venetian army. The primary plot circles around how the shrewd Iago decides to trick Othello as an act of revenge upon not being promoted by Othello. He tells the Moor that his fair wife Desdemona is an infidel, and even

plays on Desdemona's father Brabantio's racist sentiments towards the dark Othello. Swayed by Iago's tricks and blinded by rage, sexual jealousy, and insecurity, Othello kills Desdemona, then himself upon realizing the truth that his insecurities drove him to murder his innocent wife.

We can see here that Othello's prominent tragic flaw lies in his sexual jealousy - this is a very popular and widely accepted stream of thought. However, it must be observed that there is another more serious tragic flaw - his insecurity stemming from the paranoia on being the racial other. This is a much more threatening tragic flaw that Iago manipulates freely for his own gains. The subtitle of the play "The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice" itself nods to this insecurity, highlighting Othello's race and subjecting him to scrutiny by the characters and audience. Thus, Othello's more threatening tragic flaw i.e. his race lies not within him, but primarily within the society's perception of his race, making this an external factor.

An instance of Othello's race as a tragic flaw is in Brabantio's opposition of his marriage to the fair Desdemona. Brabantio accuses him of witchcraft and calls Desdemona's desire "unnatural". This accusation only makes sense when attributed to Othello's race (Wikipedia). The way Iago refers to their union, telling Brabantio that "an old black ram is tupping your white ewe" furthers the idea that it is Othello's race - his other-ness that is perceived negatively and affects the acceptance of his marriage to Desdemona (Shakespeare, 1.1.88). As it would for any inter-racial union facing discrimination, this causes a sense of insecurity in Othello. It implants the idea that he'd never truly have Desdemona due to this blatant difference. This vulnerability would make anyone - Othello included, despite all his professional success and nobility - an easy target for manipulation and destruction. And so, Iago plays with Othello as he wishes, convincing the Moor that he isn't good enough for Desdemona, and that she is thus adulterous.

Besides the society's perception of Othello's race as 'other' and negative, patriarchy can be seen as an external factor affecting Othello's race being a fatal flaw. Patriarchy is a construct that not only places men above women, but also imposes standards amongst men to rate their manliness. Common factors affecting one's perceived manliness include how worthy a man is of their female partner. In Iago's dialogue, Othello is called an 'old', 'black ram'. This is a blatant attack on his age and race, neither of which he has any control over. This combination puts Othello in the spotlight when set beside the fair, desirable, young Desdemona. Another factor affecting one's perceived manliness in society's eyes is whether a man is a cuckold or not, by grace of his wife's fidelity. After Iago's whispers suggesting romance between Desdemona and the young and handsome Cassio, Othello's insecurities from being old and black in a white-centric society are once again brought to the forefront. The resulting hyper-consciousness of his otherness and manliness being threatened make for a deadly tragic flaw within Othello.

Thus, rather than sexual jealousy, the play's white-centric society's perception of black as the 'alien', the 'other' and the society's standards for manliness render Othello a tragic protagonist in a white patriarchal society. In such a framework, his tragic flaw is contained in something that never should be seen as a tragic flaw in the first place: him being a black man. This gives Othello's character and tragic flaw a less carnal and more complex edge, revealing multiple layers that must be peeled off carefully and studied together for a better understanding of the tragedy of the Moor of Venice.

A Study of the Female Tragic Protagonist in Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea

Jean Rhys' 1966 masterpiece *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a post-colonial prequel to the famous *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. It follows the life of Bertha Mason, the infamous 'madwoman in the attic' from *Jane Eyre* who was the obstacle in Jane and Mr. Rochester's love-life. This prequel follows her life from when she was known as Antionette Cosway, an English-

Creole heiress. In Part one of the novels, Antionette lives in a riches-to-rags family due to the abolition of slavery. They face racism at the hands of the newly-freed slaves living around them. Her mother is to be married to the rich Englishman Mr. Mason. This angers the newly-freed locals, who burn down the house, killing Antionette's mentally challenged brother. Her mother goes mad with grief, is sent to an abusive family where she dies, and Antionette is left to live with Mr. Mason. Part Two follows her married life to the white Mr. Rochester, who is emotionally abusive and an infidel. She attempts to get him to love her, even asking her childhood nurse Christophine for a love potion that goes horribly wrong and further distances the wedded couple. Part Three of the novel follows Antionette as Bertha Mason. Here, she's locked up in the infamous attic of Thornfield Hall. This section follows her relationship with her servant Grace Poole, her failed marriage, the neglect she faces at Mr. Rochester's hands, and even nods at introduction of Jane Eyre herself into this dysfunctional marriage. Driven crazy by everything, Antionette is desperate to escape, attacking her step-brother Richard when he refuses to help. Finally, the novel ends with Antionette burning the house down in an attempt to attain freedom based on a vision she has, with her dying in those flames.

We know that Antionette's main role in the original work Jane Eyre is to be an obstacle in Jane and Mr. Rochester's life, but *Wide Sargasso Sea* really brings more than what meets the eye and shows her as a tragic figure. At the start of the novel, she's a young girl of mixed race, doomed to constant discrimination. She's hated by the Creole locals because she is half European i.e. the race of the once-slave-owners, and she's hated by her purely European husband because she is half Creole i.e. the race of the once-slaves. This conflict is also seen in how the once-slaves i.e. blacks attempted to overpower and rule the former masters, who were White-Creoles, yet the British Empire enslaved both groups (Shevade 74). Thus, Antionette deals with a severe sense of alienation and isolation in a post-colonial world, constantly being dubbed as a "white cockroach" an image that invokes a sense of abnormality and other-ness. For instance, if one were asked to label the contradictory identities within themselves as a single acceptable identity, wouldn't it be a harrowing and self-questioning enterprise? It would be a suspended sense of existence with no real way to root and define oneself. Such is the tragedy of Antionette Cosway. Her mixed race, her husband forcing onto her the new name Bertha Mason, her being moved from a Creole locality to a White locality etc. doesn't change the lack of identity and isolation she experiences wherever she goes. In fact, all these changes only amplify the sense of loneliness within her. This is best captured in the lines of the novel "Real white people, they got gold money. They didn't look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger" (Rhys 22). As seen in this speech by Tia, Antionette may be half-European, but that half-ness makes her a "white nigger" and thus lesser than a "real" white person. And Antionette being half-Creole makes her a "white nigger", that seems to be even worse off than a black person in the ladder of racial hierarchy. With this, Antionette isn't just a woman of mixed race: her mixed race makes her a consequence of colonialism, of white oppressors and the horrors they forced onto the suppressed races. She contains both as a paradox, and is punished for it. Black people spit on these "white niggers", and White people turn their noses up at these same "white niggers". Antionette remains suspended, then, between the two races, a foot in both camps, yet accepted by neither. Where would such a person go? Where would they find an identity for themselves, if they're rejected by both the identities within them? Finding no answers to these pressing questions, Antionette spirals into loneliness and alienation, this drives her mad.

This madness is brewed to a boil over the years of constantly being cast away as an undesirable other. Firstly, Antionette is neglected by her mother for her intellectually disabled younger brother. Secondly, in the Creole locality, she is often jeered at as a "white cockroach" and grows up virtually friendless. With her being an heiress to Mr. Mason, she is forcefully

othered by the vile rumours her bitter half-brother Daniel Cosway. Thirdly, she's locked up by her husband Edward Rochester, hidden away and treated like a wild animal, and neglected to the point of being treated as almost invisible. Lastly, the hints of a family-inherited madness take form within her and she transforms into the madwoman Bertha Mason of the attic in Thornfield Hall. With a careful delving into the past, *Wide Sargasso Sea* truly shows Antionette as a tragic character and victim of neglect by her mother, society, races, and husband. As an internal factor, her inherited mental instability is her fatal flaw, making her unfit for Mr. Rochester and thus a burden in his love story with Jane Eyre. However, after having analysed the complexity of a mixed race person in a post-colonial white-dominated world, Antionette's sense of severe alienation and inability to locate oneself in a world of labels can be listed as an external factor resulting from society's perception of her mixed race.

Other than her mixed race being perceived as the lowest in the fight between blacks and whites, Antionette's tragic flaw is also influenced by her being a woman in a patriarchal society. Where women treated with more respect, Mr. Rochester's constant and blatant infidelity would have been taken into consideration when analysing Antionette's spiralling sanity. However, Antionette is placed into a patriarchal set-up where Mr. Rochester's infidelity goes unchecked and becomes one of the many forms of deliberate torture driving in the crippling alienation. In this same set-up, Antionette is expected to stay dutiful to her lawfully-wedded husband, even if their marriage is an empty one. This can be seen in how, in Part Two, when Christophine tries to convince Mr. Rochester to run away and let her care for the tender and love-starved Antionette, Mr. Rochester selfishly refuses to comply. When Christophine suggests that Antionette would marry someone else and forget about him, he thinks, "A pang of rage and jealousy shot through me then. Oh no, she won't forget. I laughed you ridiculous old woman Now, say good-bye to Antionette, then go. You are to blame for all that has happened here, so don't come back." (Rhys 144). He feels a sense of possession over his wife, adamant that he be the only authoritative male figure in her life. He even masks that patriarchal mindset by blaming the infamous rumours propagated by Daniel that Christophine is a manipulative ill omen in Antionette's life. With this, any chance at an agency of choice for Antionette in this marriage is a faraway one. This dooms her to slowly losing her sanity and getting further alienated in a set-up she ought to expect intimacy and a sense of identity from.

Thus, Antionette's tragic flaw doesn't reside in her mental instability making her an obstacle in the Eyre-Rochester romance. Rather, it is the perception of her mixed race and the expectations of her as a woman that make Antionette Cosway a tragic protagonist in a post-colonial white-dominated patriarchal society. In such a framework, her tragic flaw is essentially contained in something that never should be seen as a tragic flaw in the first place: her being a woman and of mixed race. *Wide Sargasso Sea* gives Antionette's character more layers than the one-dimensional role defining her in *Jane Eyre*, and reveals a more sombre picture of the harsh realities of the post-colonial patriarchal world. This serves to give Antionette's character a much more complex dimension that must be studied from various angles for a better understanding of the tragedy that is ultimately Bertha Mason.

CONCLUSIONS

The definition of a tragic hero and the concept of tragic flaw both were initially established by Aristotle in 4th Century BC, the conventions of which have in their essence been sustained across time. However, in the current era of feminism, a re-visiting of these concepts reveals the inherent patriarchy in them and the resultant exclusion of women from the sphere of a tragic protagonist. This male-centricity is, of course expected considering the status of women in Greek society and theatre at that time. However, in the contemporary era, these era-specific definitions must not be upheld any further. They must be re-defined instead, as attempted in this paper. It is important to adapt conventions for the need of the current era, and thus

see literary tragic protagonists - both male and female - from a new, more equal, and more balanced lens. Like Antionette Cosway symbolises, the world isn't black and white, one or the other: it is a mix of everything, and we must keep in mind the influence of various elements on an individual when assessing them. Rather than finding fault within the tragic protagonist, the environment they are placed in must also be made to share the blame for the tragic fall of a member of their society. After all, while an individual affects society, that very individual is a product of that very same society. Keeping this in mind and striving for such an all-rounded two-way analysis would help remove female tragic protagonists from their invisible place in a patriarchal set-up. This balanced outlook would also help break free from the confines of patriarchy permeating into our own lives, changing the dichotomies with which we look at the world.

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