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Exploring Female Oppression in 'Wide Sargasso Sea' and 'Damascus Bitter Sweet' Through Voices of Silence

Abstract
An essential aspect of literature is its function as a medium through which cultural beliefs can be studied in a society. This study aims to study patriarchy as experienced in different societies and, thus, looks at two novels, Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea and Ulfat Idilbi's Damascus Bitter Sweet, in a qualitative analysis. By utilizing feminist literary theory, this research delves into the struggles, power dynamics, and suppression faced by female characters, as well as gender stereotypes and the violation of women's self-assertion within various cultures. The study examines how gender inequalities are depicted in various texts by analyzing the oppression and violence faced by female protagonists Sabriya and Antoinette. Studies suggest that women are constrained within confined Victorian patriarchal societies, leaving them powerless and exposed to submissiveness and exploitation. This includes using psychological, economic, and sexual strategies to keep women in a subordinate position to men. However, it also highlights the resilience and strength of these women in the face of such adversity, inspiring us with their courage.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Damascus Bitter Sweet, feminist literary theory, gender roles, oppression, power dynamics, resistance, Wide Sargasso Sea*

'Wide Sargasso Sea' ve 'Damascus Bitter Sweet' Filmlerinde Kadın Baskısını Sessizliğin Sesleri Üzerinden Keşfetmek

Öz

Edebiyatın önemli bir yönü, bir toplumdaki kültürel inançların incelenebileceği bir araç olarak işlev görmesidir. Bu çalışma, farklı toplumlarda deneyimlenen ataerkilliği incelemeyi amaçlamakta ve bu nedenle Jean Rhys'in Wide Sargasso Sea ve Ulfat İdilbi'nin Damascus Bitter Sweet adlı iki romanını nitel bir analizle ele almaktadır. Feminist edebiyat kuramı kullanan bu araştırma, kadın karakterlerin karşılaştığı mücadeleler, güç dinamikleri ve baskıların yanı sıra toplumsal cinsiyet kalıpları ve çeşitli kültürlerde kadınların benliklerini ortaya koymalarının engellenmesini incelemektedir. Çalışma, kadın kahramanlar Sabriya ve Antoinette'in karşılaştığı baskı ve şiddeti analiz ederek toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliklerinin çeşitli metinlerde nasıl tasvir edildiğini incelemekte ve kadınların Viktorya dönemi ataerkil toplumlarında kısıtlandıklarını, güçsüz bırakıldıklarını ve itaatkarlık ve sömürüye maruz kaldıklarını göstermektedir. Bu, kadınları erkeklere bağımlı bir konumda tutmak için psikolojik, ekonomik ve cinsel stratejilerin kullanılmasını içerir. Bununla birlikte, bu çalışma kadınların bu tür zorluklar karşısındaki direncini ve gücünü de vurgulamakta ve cesaretleriyle bize ilham vermektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Damascus Bitter Sweet, feminist edebiyat kuramı, toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri, baskı, güç dinamikleri, direniş, Wide Sargasso Sea*

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1. Introduction

In the vast realm of literature, women have long been oppressed, their stories silenced and struggles ignored. Examining the difficulties women in literature endure, this paper brings attention to the silent battles they often face. The key focus of this research is to emphasize how people display resilience and determination in difficult situations by investigating the different forms of oppression they confront. To truly grasp the profound effect of gender roles and cultural norms on women's lives, it is essential to amplify these marginalized voices.

The paper analyzes *Damascus Bitter Sweet* by Syrian author Ulfat Idilbi. The characters and setting are powerful, brutal, nationalistic, and sexual in a city undergoing war in its author's home country. The novel revolves around the life of a young girl named Sabriya, who desires independence and love in a society constrained by strict traditions and expectations. While going through adolescence, she is torn between her wishes and the harsh truths of her surroundings. This story takes place in Syria and explores its historical and cultural background, touching on themes of love, loss, and the search for identity in colonialism and war. Using Sabriya's experiences, Idilbi paints a picture of a society in flux and the poignant obstacles faced by individuals striving for change in a world that resists it.

Sabriya, the central character, encounters severe social backlash and mistreatment due to her involvement in a relationship considered immoral by society and her contribution to the national war effort. She is truly inspiring with her determination and resilience, despite the challenges. This novel portrays the agony of women due to men. In raising the principal question, 'What happens to those who dare to deviate from societal norms of femininity and masculinity?' this heartfelt narrative effectively conveys the consequences for both men and women.

The author of Wide Sargasso Sea, Jean Rhys, successfully reimagines Bertha Mason's narrative, known as the "Madwoman in the Attic," in this second novel discussed in the

paper, published in 1966, serving as a prequel to Jane Eyre. The book delves into the difficult life of Antoinette Cosway, a Creole woman caught between two cultures in the lush but unforgiving landscapes of Jamaica and Dominica. The central theme of Antoinette's narrative is displacement and alienation, caused by her mother's rejection and society's colonial influence. The previous marriage to an unidentified Englishman, potentially Mr. Rochester, exacerbates her feelings of loneliness, leading to her mental collapse. The book uses Rhys's poetic language to examine themes of racial tension, cultural identity, and the detrimental effects of colonialism, presenting a nuanced and compassionate portrayal of a silenced woman from the Victorian era.

Antoinette's life takes a turn for the worse in wealth, social status, and family dynamics after her mother's remarriage and her marriage to an Englishman. By portraying the Creole characters in the novel, the reader discovers their profound struggles with identity and nationality stemming from their disconnect with both European masters and the native population.

The investigation looks into various prejudices and oppressions in Wide Sargasso Sea and Damascus Bitter Sweet, highlighting the purpose behind them. Among the main areas of interest in this study are financial exploitation, sexual objectification/abuse, language violence, psychological torment, and physical mistreatment endured by female characters in novels, as well as the extent of women's hardships in diverse cultural and historical contexts. This study aims to investigate the challenges and inequalities women encounter due to societal and cultural barriers impeding their advancement. The study aims to uncover similarities and differences by investigating the research questions in both novels:

1. What kinds of oppression and discrimination are experienced by the female characters?
2. What types of physical, psychological, verbal, sexual, and financial oppression do the female characters face?

The significance of this study lies in analyzing the impact of women on the evolution of Feminist literary tradition in Syria and the Caribbean. By analyzing two major Eastern

novels, this comparative study showcases the essential role of Syrian, Caribbean, and English literature in feminism. This research aims to connect Syrian and Caribbean literature by utilizing established feminist theory. The foundation is based on studying gendered social interactions and the various crimes women encounter in two cultures. The primary objective is to aid readers in comprehending the challenges and hardships women face in Syrian and West Indian societies and cultures.

2. Literature Review

Storytelling has acted as a strong instrument for disadvantaged communities to articulate their experiences and challenge existing narratives, participating in social and political resistance. Throughout history, leaders have used storytelling to motivate people, while women have used fiction to resist and question established conventions. Kathleen Barry points out that novels unveil concealed power relationships among women and blend social, political, and cultural elements, presenting varied perspectives from the authors (Turner, 2006).

Hierarchies play a crucial role in shaping power dynamics within society, with patriarchy being a notable system characterized by male dominance. Feminism challenges and rejects this societal structure by advocating for women's liberation and fair treatment. Early figures like Marguerite Porete were already challenging and critiquing the systems dominated by men (Schrupp, 2017). Anthropologists like Ellen Lewin and Gayle Rubin extensively documented how women were considered subordinate in various cultures and demonstrated the connection between this subordination and enduring customs that shape modern civilizations (Ryan, 2017).

Feminist theory examines power imbalances through the analysis of literature and cultural artifacts to expose and challenge oppressive beliefs toward women. Established gender stereotypes enforce fixed identities, promoting conformity and punishing those who do not conform, often resulting in violence towards individuals who challenge traditional roles (Ryan, 2017). To combat oppression, it's essential to recognize the

supporting concepts and understand that these disadvantages are not inherent or inevitable. Comprehending these interactions is essential for confronting violence and striving for freedom, as emphasized by Alison Jaggar, who analyses the oppression of women (Jaggar, 1983).

Liberal Feminists' Stance on the Subjugation of Women

Jaggar stated that women experience gender-based oppression. Instead of laws, it is common for societal culture to perpetuate this oppression. These customs reinforce the false belief that women are suited for certain types of labor, particularly those involving low technical skills and service roles, implying barriers to their ability to make decisions about their lives and financial stability (Jaggar, 1983). Daughtry also contends that women's current social treatment contradicts liberal political ideology's core principles of equality, liberty, and justice.

Feminist literary theory is a critical method used to analyze how literature addresses the systemic oppression of women. Key to the feminist perspective on gender relations is recognizing the gendered injustices in the world and how they are perpetuated in various forms. Liberal feminism promotes equality between women and men through legal and social reforms for women's liberation. This perspective is built on the notion that men can think independently and deserve to be recognized as individuals.

The Radical Feminists' Concept of Women's Oppression

Radical feminists are more ingrained in the societal system, resulting in the belief that everything female is oppressed by patriarchy. They highlight how gender roles are socially constructed and upheld to perpetuate male dominance. According to radical feminist theory, patriarchal control extends beyond legal and economic spheres, profoundly influencing cultural and familial institutions (Tong, 2009). This perspective focuses on analyzing the institutions and societies involved in eliminating patriarchal thinking, which is the foundation for the real liberation of women. The literature illustrating these factors shows that gender oppression is deeply ingrained and challenging to eliminate, yet it

sparks awareness and resistance in readers, empowering them to disrupt the cycle of oppression and uplift women.

According to radical feminists, shifting society's structures and values hinges on addressing human reproduction and the sexual division of labor rooted in procreation. They think that gender plays the most important role in influencing a person's societal status, life experiences, preferences, and beliefs. Radical feminism argues that society is split between a visible masculine culture that controls institutions like the military, government, religion, and economy, and a hidden feminine culture centered on domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning, and childcare (Jaggar, 1983).

Radical feminists condemn the prevailing patriarchal system for promoting masculine standards that depict men as strong, powerful, and logical while casting women as weak, emotional, and submissive. They argue that these biases stem from a male-dominated society and support fair evaluation of both genders, as they are capable of independent decision-making and logical thinking. Contrary to liberal and Marxist feminists, radical feminists do not advocate for women to adhere to male society. Their goal is to interrogate and reshape current norms to form a fresh culture that integrates advantageous aspects of female culture, including caregiving, wellness, and compassion (Rich, 1977).

Adrienne Rich examines women's dignity in a patriarchal society. The author suggests a new definition of honor that values truthfulness over lying to satisfy men's wishes (Rich, 1977). Simone de Beauvoir's idea of the "other" explains how men, by defining women, contribute to their oppression. The binary distinction between males and females intensifies inequalities to support male dominance. The dominance of patriarchal civilizations is justified by depicting women as inferior and associating them with roles that favor men (Beauvoir, 1953).

Michele Barrett analyzes how feminism challenges existing ideas supporting gender inequality to create a fairer society. She highlights the connection between romantic ideals and harmful practices like rape, domestic violence, and limiting women's freedom. According to radical feminists, the prevalence of sexual abuse against women

demonstrates men's subjugation and authority. Barrett emphasizes the difference between biological sex and socially constructed gender roles, stating that behaviors labeled as "feminine" or "masculine" are not inherently biological but are shaped by societal norms (Barrett, 1980).

3. Methodology

This study uses comparative literary analysis to examine female oppression and gender roles in the novels *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *Damascus Bitter Sweet* by Ulfat Idilbi. The shared theme in the two mentioned works is the challenge of defying and surpassing societal limitations on women across different cultures. The process involves a detailed analysis of the texts to uncover themes related to gender roles, traits of masculinity and femininity, power dynamics, types of oppression, and the ways female characters resist.

The analysis seeks to examine the impact of gender expectations and unmet standards on cultural experiences, focusing on power dynamics, relationships, and strategies utilized by female characters. The authors of these books capture the raw and turbulent experiences women face in a world dominated by male authority, highlighting the courage needed to resist oppression.

While examining the texts, gender-related inquiries aim to uncover the details conveyed explicitly or implicitly through the plots, character development, and themes in the novels. This approach enables a thorough comprehension of how these writers depict the oppression of women and cultural norms contributing to gender inequality, as well as the nuances in representing female and male characters.

4. Analysis of "Wide Sargossa Sea" and "Damascus Bitter Sweet" Through a Feminist Lens

Wide Sargasso Sea

The book Wide Sargasso Sea is a Jamaican novel that explores the life of Antoinette Cosway, a Creole woman, as she battles against racism and sexism. Antoinette's troubled childhood and arranged marriage to an unnamed Englishman are depicted in the novel. It

is a prequel to Jane Eyre, which gives a new idea of the "madwoman in the attic" from Jane Eyre. The novel deals with principal fiction themes concerning personality, degeneration, and relations between colour and sex (Rhys, 1966). By examining the story's relationships and scenarios, we can see how Antoinette, the novel's main character, aligns with prevalent cultural views of women and how her final breakdown represents the peak of patriarchal oppression. To bolster the central theme, Rhys vividly elaborates on Antoinette's hardships and discrimination, illustrating how race and gender combine to create distinct obstacles for the protagonist.

Sabriya: "Damascus Bitter Sweet"

In the novel Damascus Bitter Sweet, the character Sabriya embodies the constraints on women's rights within Syrian society. The novel tells the story of her love, grief, and heartbreak. Sabriya's life mirrors the battle between her aspirations and societal norms, set against her nation's quest for liberation. By utilizing dual narration, with Sabriya's journal and her niece Salma's perspective, the author offers a thorough exploration of women's cultural restrictions and oppression (Idilbi, 1997). The paper analyzes how Idilbi used Sabriya's presence to explore societal bias and how Sabriya's suicide enhances the story's depiction of social oppression and defiance against it. In this way, Idilbi's portrayal of Sabriya's life critiques how patriarchal societies oppress women and confine them to restricted roles and servitude.

Gender Roles Normalized Characteristics

Both works highlight the rigid gender norms that society forces on women. In the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette must conform to the role of a submissive and obedient wife. Meanwhile, her husband asserts control over her life and identity (Rhys, 1966). Antoinette's struggle with self-identity and independence reflects the larger societal pressures placed on women in a post-colonial context, where race and gender intersect in power dynamics. Therefore, in her eyes, her husband is the ultimate source of happiness and the sole reason for her existence. While on their honeymoon, she confesses to her husband that he is the reason she wants to live, revealing, "I never felt the desire to live until I found you." Sabriya, the main character of *Damascus Bitter Sweet*,

is confined to domestic duties and judged based on her looks and ability to fulfill traditional feminine roles (Idilbi, 1997). Sabriya's experiences demonstrate the firmly established gender norms in Syrian culture, where women's identities are molded by their connections with men and their ability to follow cultural standards.

Standards of Beauty

The article explores how beauty standards are used to oppress women in both pieces. Antoinette's diverse heritage and unique beauty in Wide Sargasso Sea lead to her exclusion, as depicted by Rhys in her novel. The husband takes advantage of his wife's exceptional and otherworldly beauty to control and influence her. In the book Damascus Bitter Sweet, women are judged on how well they fit certain physical standards representing power and status (Jaggar, 2015). Sabriya and other female characters are judged based on their looks, highlighting society's emphasis on beauty standards for women. Antoinette's description of her Aunt Cora in the novel included her looking thin and old with unkempt hair, prompting Antoinette to close her eyes to avoid looking at her. The focus on aesthetics serves as a way of asserting authority, limiting women's freedom, and reinforcing their subordinate position.

Power Dynamics

The central theme of the novels is the power dynamics between genders. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette's husband exerts psychological control over her, leading to her mental breakdown.

> I hated the mountains, hills, rivers, and rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all, I hated her, for she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty, and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it
>
> (Rhys, 1966, p. 156).

His power goes beyond the personal sphere and symbolizes the larger colonial and patriarchal systems aiming to suppress and erase Antoinette's identity. The dominance of patriarchal power in Syrian culture is illustrated in *Damascus Bitter Sweet* through the male family members shaping Sabriya's decisions (Idilbi, 1997). Sabriya's experiences demonstrate how power is used to maintain gender hierarchies and limit women's independence. Both pieces illustrate how patriarchal power systems are maintained through psychological, physical, and social means, restricting women to roles that limit their independence and liberty. Antoinette's stepbrother, Richard Mason, has the authority to make life-changing decisions for Antoinette following her stepfather's death. She does not have the liberty to determine what is best for her. Aunt Cora opposes the marriage during the conversation about her husband's infidelity, stating that Richard Mason's father would not have approved.

Objectifying Women

In Wide Sargasso Sea, there is a vivid depiction of the social hierarchy resulting from colonialism, with the previously enslaved and impoverished colored community situated at the lowest level. White Englishmen are at the peak, with Creoles in a middle position. Geraldine Moane's research emphasizes how gender, class, and minority status affect one's position in society and mobility (Moane, 1999, p. 24). Women, in particular, are in a lower social standing compared to men of the same social class or racial group. They are subject to patriarchal dominance in both family and society. In Wide Sargasso Sea, the theme of male dominance is depicted through Christophine, whom Antoinette receives as a gift from Martinique: "He thought I would be pleased with a Martinique girl" (Rhys, 1966, p. 19). The story also explores the theme of arranged marriages, where women like Antoinette are seen as financial commodities. Antoinette's husband viewed her solely as a potential source of money, evident in his indifferent attitude: "The lively and unique environment meant nothing to me." "She completely disregarded me" (Rhys, 1966, p. 69).

Antoinette and her husband lack emotional closeness in their marriage, shown through his distant behavior and hurtful comments like, "I didn't love her." (Rhys, 1966, p. 64). Ultimately, he exercises his dominance over her, regarding her as an object, even as her

mental well-being declines: "She is mentally unstable, but she belongs to me, exclusively..."Whether she grins, weeps, or displays both emotions regarding me. My mad girl". The phrase "My mad girl" is cited from Rhys' novel, published in 1966, on page 150. This interaction exemplifies the deeply rooted gender and racial disparities that characterize their relationship and the broader colonial backdrop.

The central theme of *Damascus Bitter Sweet focuses* on the objectification of women, mirroring societal attitudes towards female identity. In the novel, female characters are commonly judged based on their looks rather than their abilities or traits. Sabriya, the main character, is objectified by those around her in how she is treated and perceived. Sabriya reflects on how she is often commended for her physical beauty rather than her intelligence or dreams. Constant focus on her appearance reduces her to a decorative role, preventing recognition of her unique qualities (Clark, 1997, p. 23).

Moreover, the narrative demonstrates how objectification extends to viewing women as mere commodities. Male characters often view women as prizes to be won or status symbols, further dehumanizing them. One tragic example is when Sabriya overhears her father and a potential partner talking about her as if she were a commodity (Clark, 1997, p. 45). Commercialization undermines women's independence and reinforces patriarchal systems that dehumanize them as objects. The portrayal of female characters as objects greatly impacts individuals, leading to feelings of alienation and diminished self-worth.

Types of Oppression Forms

The research categorizes and analyzes various types of oppression faced by female characters, such as patriarchal beliefs, honor-related violence, financial domination, and imprisonment. The goal of the research is to expose how societal expectations are maintained and prolonged through the analysis of diverse forms of oppression.

Male-centric Beliefs and Values

Both works vividly depict examples of male dominance over women. In Damascus and various Arab societies, the phrase "sister of men" is a term of high esteem for a woman who exhibits traditionally masculine traits such as bravery and leadership. In the book

Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys depicts Antoinette's husband as a callous and oppressive man who disregards her independence and tries to control her (Rhys, 1966). His behavior is a manifestation of a broader patriarchal system, where women are seen as objects for men to dominate, especially their bodies and minds. Even though the novel discusses women's struggles for liberation from outdated customs, *Damascus Bitter Sweet* also shows how some women uphold patriarchal systems that oppress others. In one part of the story, Sabriya's father praises Umm Rashid, Sabriya's aunt, for being more masculine than feminine as she takes charge of her late husband's business (Idilbi, 1997, p. 55). Other complicated relationships consist of clashes between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, along with conflicts with sisters-in-law. The patriarchal beliefs held by these women lead them to endure taboos imposed by patriarchy and reinforce these rules on themselves, thus highlighting the widespread presence of patriarchal attitudes in society. The embrace of patriarchal views by women demonstrates the intricate workings of gender discrimination within families and the broader community.

Honor-based Violence

More precisely, *Damascus Bitter Sweet* primarily highlights forms of violence, like honor killings, where men rationalize their violent behavior towards women as a way to uphold the family's honor. These actions are being carried out to protect the family's image and establish that Sabriya's existence is seen as a potential cause of physical and psychological harm to her and the family (Awwad, 2001). This is particularly true, considering the strict regulations in place to control women's sexual behavior to uphold family honor. This form of violence is connected to cultural and social traditions that place the onus on women to maintain the honor and values of the family, resulting in constraints on women's independence and influence. The novel illustrates the function of honor killings in regulating women's conduct to uphold legitimate masculinity and assert dominance.

Isolation

Confinement is portrayed as a source of psychological suffering in both works. Rhys (1966) proposes that Antoinette's confinement in the attic represents the restrictions of

societal and marital obligations. Her physical limitations symbolize her powerlessness and lack of identity, mirroring the societal pressures that aim to restrict and oppress women. Sabriya's seclusion at her family residence demonstrates the limitations placed on women in her community. Sabriya writes, "I feel that I am becoming more and more desiccated every minute I am trapped behind the high walls of this old house with this sick old man" (Idilbi, 1997, p. 41). Confinement is portrayed in both novels as a means to restrict women's movements and govern their behavior in society, as shown by the authors' experiences. The concept of captivity is utilized in both works to explore themes of societal constraints and limited freedom for women.

Antoinette encounters social isolation and prejudice because of her Creole heritage, too. Characters such as Amélie, who display offensive and controlling conduct, symbolize the widespread animosity implied by the derogatory term "white cockroach" used to describe her (Rhys, 1966, p. 93). Women experience social isolation and public humiliation due to factors like their marital status. Annette faces social disapproval for marrying again following her husband's death, as society questions Mr Mason's decision: "It is an extraordinary marriage, and he will come to regret it...why would he choose to marry a widow who possesses no wealth?" (Rhys, 1966, p. 26). Antoinette and her mother grow apart as Annette favors her brother Pierre over her. This amplifies Antoinette's emotions of being abandoned and insecure. Annette's forceful rejection of Antoinette, in a state of anguish, is powerfully illustrated as she loudly exclaims "No no no" and throws [her daughter] away (Rhys, 1966, p. 41), leading to a profound impact on Antoinette's self-perception and sense of acceptance.

Strategies for Resistence

The study delves into the resistance tactics used by female characters to challenge their subordination. Antoinette's initial political rebellion, which is then followed by her mental breakdown, is seen as a challenge to her husband's authoritarianism (Rhys, 1966). Her dreams, defiance, rebellion, and mental breakdown vividly mirror her wish to defy the oppressors trying to enforce their rules on her. The analysis of Sabriya's ultimate act of suicide is regarded as a potent expression of resistance against the cultural standards

that restricted her (Higonnet, 1985; Idilbi, 1997). In the end of her life, Sabriya chooses to confront her oppression through confrontation. Her death was a final act of rebellion against the patriarchal systems that ruled her life, refusing to let them shape her fate. Both works center on women resisting domination through either direct action or more subtle, occasionally violent, forms of resistance.

Economic Subjugation

The novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* illustrates how financially autonomous women challenge the prevailing power structures that enforce women's economic dependence on men in a patriarchal and colonial society. Annette's narrative is a perfect illustration of this economic subordination. Following the demise of her initial spouse, she and her family descend into abject destitution, depending on their slaves for sustenance: "We consumed preserved fish - lacking the means to afford fresh seafood." "The dilapidated home was so permeable that one hastily grabbed a calabash to collect water when it rained" (Rhys, 1966, p. 22). Her status as a widow and the spouse of a former enslaver leads to her being socially isolated and made fun of. Black people come together to mock her, especially when her riding clothes start to show wear. Mr. Mason's arrival significantly influences their circumstances, highlighting the financial constraints faced by widowed women and the societal expectation for them to depend on men. Antoinette recognizes this reliance: "I believed she would have perished if she had not encountered him." "For the first time, I felt gratitude and admiration towards him" (Rhys, 1966, p. 33).

Antoinette faces similar financial dependence challenges in her marriage. Upon receiving advice from Christophine to leave her husband, Antoinette becomes aware of her entrapment as a result of her limited financial autonomy: "I am currently not wealthy, as I possess no personal funds whatsoever; everything I once owned belongs to him" (Rhys, 1966, p. 100). By having this financial control, men can dominate other aspects of women's lives, making marriage a tool for exploitation. Antoinette's marriage to her English spouse is a sad example where she gives up her wealth and possessions, being seen as just a financial asset to him. Aunt Cora strongly disagrees with this situation,

deeming it “disgraceful” and insists on legal protection for Antoinette, claiming, “Your father wouldn’t have approved.”

The novel *Damascus Bitter Sweet* delves into financial oppression, highlighting how economic constraints restrict women’s independence. In the story, women are portrayed as relying on their male relatives for financial support, which hinders their ability to make decisions on their own. Sabriya’s financial struggles represent the systematic mistreatment. Despite her skills and ambitions, her father has financial control over her, restricting her independence and placing her in a subordinate role (Clark, 1997, p. 78).

The story also explores how financial power is used to enforce patriarchal control. Sabriya’s economic independence is continuously impeded by cultural norms and structural barriers. Her family’s resistance and skepticism towards her attempts to save money and pursue her passions further solidify the idea that women should rely on men financially. Sabriya’s economic oppression not only limits her dreams but also perpetuates a cycle of control and dependence, making it difficult for women to break free from societal expectations (Clark, 1997, p. 102).

Patriarchal Society’s Judgment

In the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Annette and her daughter Antoinette are met with hostility from the impoverished community of ex-slaves despite their own poverty. Slaves feel anger towards their masters because they believe their interests clash and they were closer to the former English lords. Annette’s financial struggles after her first husband’s death require her to rely on domestic help like Christophine. The servants’ neglect of duties, particularly Godfrey, shows their hostility and led to the poisoning of Annette’s horse. The cultural contempt is further exemplified by the peasants' insulting phrases, such as "Look at the black Englishman!" Observing individuals who are of Caucasian descent yet exhibit negative behavior emphasizes the underlying racial and socioeconomic conflicts (Rhys, 1966, p. 38).

The female leads in *Damascus Bitter Sweet* encounter ongoing obstacles from the patriarchal culture’s judgment. Women are held to strict and sometimes impossible

standards, with any deviation leading to harsh criticism and exclusion. Sabriya is under considerable public scrutiny for her attempts to demonstrate her autonomy and forge her unique path (Clark, 1997, p. 112). She envisions a life where she can make her own choices, not bound by societal norms. The patriarchal culture she identifies with has shattered all her dreams. Any attempt she makes to break free from the established limits is met with strong disapproval and social isolation, leading her to abandon her hopes and wishes. Her denial of desires underscores the oppressive boundaries placed on women in her society, intensifying the poignancy of her struggle.

Women face cultural pressure that limits their opportunities and affects how they see themselves and their worth. Sabriya's struggle to discover her identity and purpose is made harder by societal expectations. The book effectively portrays the deep emotional and psychological weight of facing constant scrutiny and criticism. The strict cultural norms cover every aspect of their lives, leading to constant monitoring and criticism. The strict monitoring and supervision of women weaken their confidence and autonomy, upholding a system of oppression and control (Clark, 1997, p. 135).

The Concept of Body Autonomy and its Relation to Sexual Violence

Understanding the relationships between characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* involves examining sex and power dynamics, especially concerning chastity and sexual purity, which hold significance in Caribbean Christian communities. Antoinette's experience in the convent underscores the importance placed on modesty and chastity, as shown in her memory of Miss Helene de Plana's teachings: "...she transitions to discussing order and chastity, which are like a perfect crystal that, once shattered, cannot be repaired" (Rhys, 1966, p. 49). Daniel Cosway/Boyd subsequently manipulates these ideals to harm her by suggesting to her husband that Antoinette is sexually promiscuous, as evidenced by his comment, "You are not the first to kiss her pretty face" (Rhys, 1966, p. 114).

The incorporation of sexual violence in the plot brings a new level of intricacy to the power dynamics. Christophine sees bruises on Antoinette, revealing that she has suffered abuse

in her marriage after witnessing her mother's sexual abuse. Antoinette uses sexual manipulation to try to save her marriage by convincing Christophine to use Obeah. Her spouse, experiencing the effects of drugs and feeling confused, remembers, "I have a recollection of extinguishing the candles on the table next to the bed, and that is the extent of my memory" (Rhys, 1966, p. 125). The incident illustrates the intricate relationship between power, control, and sexual aggression, showing how people exploit these dynamics to assert dominance or gain advantages in their relationships.

Damascus Bitter Sweet delves into issues of body autonomy and sexual assault, highlighting the systematic violations of women's rights. Cultural and familial pressures make it difficult for the female characters in the story to assert autonomy over their physical selves. Sabriya's experiences vividly show the challenges of maintaining control over one's body in a society that often sees women as property. The author illustrates her struggle by showing multiple occasions where her autonomy is disregarded, such as coerced marriage proposals and unwanted advances she faces (Clark, 1997, p. 157).

The novel examines how sexual abuse profoundly affects women. Sabriya's account details disturbing experiences of abuse and mistreatment, highlighting the prevalent culture of dominance and control over women's bodies. These experiences are portrayed with unwavering honesty, showing the real and emotional damage caused by this brutality. The story emphasizes the urgent need for a cultural shift to recognize and respect women's rights and dignity. Sabriya faces challenges in reclaiming her independence.

Conclusion

A feminist analysis of *Damascus Bitter Sweet* by Ulfat Idilbi and *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys reveals the pervasive impact of patriarchal ideologies in Syrian and Caribbean-English societies. Regardless of cultural differences, the treatment of women in both countries shows significant similarities, with various forms of subjugation and gender-based limitations being exclusively enforced.

The study reveals that Sabriya, Antoinette, Nirmin, and Christophine encounter difficulties in changing the cultural norms that hinder their equal rights with men. Their efforts to achieve autonomy and exhibit what they view as traditional 'male' qualities such as assertiveness and ambition are met with significant social pushback and increased persecution. Sabriya and even Antoinette don't conform to the role of a logical being in societies that believe women are weak-minded. This perspective stems from liberal feminism, challenging the idea of rationality in liberalism and reevaluating women's worth relative to men.

This clearly contradicts the core belief of liberal feminism that recognizes the inherent value and worth of all individuals. This goes against a fundamental belief of liberal feminism, which is that all genders should be treated equally. Both characters face significant restrictions: Sabriya is still subject to the dress code, cannot attend school, and relies on her father and husband for financial support. One significant aspect of Antoinette's life includes her gender preference, marriage intentions, loss of inheritance, and time in prison. These actions by representatives restrict the freedom and personal liberty of female characters, contradicting another principle of liberal feminism. Sabriya and Antoinette are unable to resist pursuing their personal goals and independence while maintaining full control over their properties.

Radical feminist theories starkly demonstrate how patriarchal civilizations utilize gender differences for hegemonic control. Both novels demonstrate the effects of sexism on the female gender, as the masculine culture dominates legal-political-economic structures and the family institution. Women are often seen in relation to men and are mainly appreciated for their roles as supportive, subservient, and nurturing figures such as wives, mothers, or daughters.

The presence of social feminist ideas of sexual oppression and honor-based violence is evident. The control over women's behavior serves to uphold prevailing social hierarchies, where the preservation of honor is seen as essential for their independence. Both Sabriya and Antoinette encounter significant repercussions for challenging these societal standards, including public shame, infidelity, and confinement. Common aspects of

female culture, like beauty standards set by those in power, lead to women being objectified and increase competition and mistreatment among them. Gender roles create hierarchies, and societies use religion and cultural traditions to maintain these roles and prevent any disruptions to the power structure.

The main characters resist their mothers' destinies and turn to solitude, nature, or intellectual pursuits for comfort. However, these behaviors lead to increased oppression, which is not beneficial when dealing with mental health and self-perception. For instance, Christophine and Nirmin, depicted as powerful figures, highlight the need for women to unite and empower each other in the face of oppressive forces. Sabriya and Antoinette decide to prioritize their desires over societal expectations, leading them to choose death. Their suicides symbolize their last form of resistance, effectively undermining society's ability to influence them.

In summary, both *A Damascus Bitter Sweet* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* depict male dominance and the subjugation of women in colonial and post-colonial settings. Although these societies aim for freedom from their oppressors, they still impose internal oppression and injustice on their women, illustrating the extensive and intricate impact of male dominance.

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