



"WIDE SARGASSO SEA": RACE, WOMANHOOD AND SLAVERY

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ABSTRACT

Wide Sargasso Sea is a postcolonial rendition of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. The text is the portrayal of a Creole madwoman caught in an oppressive and patriarchal society, struggling to find her own identity, in a society that belongs to neither White Europeans nor Black Jamaicans. It exposes matters related to colonialism that Bronte overlooked and ignored. She gives voice to the colonized people through the protagonist who is totally silenced, dehumanized in the earlier colonial text of Bronte.

This paper aims to explore this postcolonial text with reference to the following:

- Its Creole protagonist
- The issue of race
- Womanhood and gender
- Slavery/freedom.

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Postcolonial literature attacks the colonial empire from the point of view of the marginalized, rendering voices to the stereotyped and quieted and establishing a claim to cultural identity. It seeks to assert the richness and validity of indigenous cultures in an effort to restore pride in practices and traditions that were systematically degraded under colonialism. It restores a disregarded ontology that applauds everything that is indigenous and cursing everything that is colonial.

Jean Rhys' (1890-1979) *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1968) is celebrated as an excellent postcolonial deconstruction of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and is appreciated for its subtle and sympathetic portrayal of a Creole madwoman caught in an oppressive and patriarchal society, struggling to find her own identity, in a society that belongs to neither White Europeans nor Black Jamaicans. "It reinvests its own hybridized world with a provincially authoritative perspective, but one which is deliberately constructed as provincial since the

novel is at pains to demonstrate the subjective nature of point of view and hence the cultural construction of meaning." (Tiffin, 24)

By recreating Bronte's colonial text from a postcolonial point of view, Rhys exposes matters related to colonialism that Bronte overlooked and ignored. She gives voice to the colonized people through the protagonist, Antoinette, who is totally silenced, dehumanized in the earlier colonial text. According to Wilson Harris, "*Wide Sargasso Sea* gives voice to a marginalized character and transforms her original tragic demise into a kind of victorious heroism by telling the story in a different racial context by translating the Victorian woman's feminist struggle to a West Indian context" (10).

This paper aims to explore this postcolonial text with reference to its Creole protagonist, Antoinette's race, womanhood and slavery/freedom.

"I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping dogs lie. One day a little girl

followed me singing, "Go away white cockroach, go away, go away." (Rhys, I.1.3.2)

"What is all this," [Mr. Mason] shouted. "What do you want?" A horrible noise swelled up, like animals howling, but worse." (Rhys, I.1.8.2)

"Her coffee is delicious but her language is horrible and she might hold her dress up. It must get very dirty, yards of it trailing on the floor.

When they don't hold their dress up it's for respect," said Antoinette. "Or for feast days or going to Mass." (Rhys, II.3.3.5-14)

In the Victorian era, race determined your social class, occupation and domestic life. "By the time *Wide Sargasso Sea* begins, Jamaica is already embroiled in racial tensions caused by the recently passed Emancipation Act of 1833, which ruined most white slave owners and opened a huge economic gap between the white aristocracy and black natives." (BD1226, The "Wide Sargasso Sea" blog)

The novel brings forth the 'other side' to *Jane Eyre*; it gives a voice, identity and culture to the silenced and dehumanized Bertha Mason. It also constructs a much diverse and less labelled Caribbean world. Rhys shows the complex racial groupings- black, white, 'colored'-along with the way in which the specific colonial history of individual islands produced a very rich mixture of cultures.

Antoinette, a Creole woman, is denied acceptance by both Jamaicans as well as the white majority. She is an absolute foreigner. There is an apparent difference between the "white" that once was Jamaica's colonists and the "white" that she is. She is often denounced as "White nigger". It is considered to be better to be a "black nigger" than "white nigger" when Tia, Antoinette's so called friend, reveals that there are "real" white people in Jamaica who have gold money and are poor. However, Antoinette and her mother, Annette, share the racist view of other Whites in Jamaica, for they know that they are completely dependent on Christophine and other black helpers. The result of

such inner conflict based on race is marginalization from both communities and a fractured sense of personal identity.

Race also enters the picture through the two Englishmen, Mr. Rochester and Mr. Mason, who are prejudiced against the black inhabitants of the island. Mr. Mason tells Antoinette to not acknowledge her black relatives. Mr. Rochester believes that Christophine and most ex-slaves are superstitious people after his money. Decadence and hypocrisy of the "superior" white community can be grasped when Rochester himself marries Antoinette only to receive her inheritance and 30,000 pounds.

Writing as a white Creole woman, Rhys represents black women as necessarily 'free', liberated, and occasionally tyrannical. Legally, black Caribbean people were freed from colonial rule with the introduction of the Emancipation Act of 1833. Rhys's novel is in that anxious time when racial relations in the Caribbean were most tense. The apprehensions of the local white and mixed race population are played out in new modes of representing black islanders.

It is substantial to note that Antoinette's dislocation is expressed in terms of negatives. She is not black, but she is not white either. Similarly, her longing is expressed also in negatives: "not to leave Coulibri, not to go." (Rhys 24). It is really only through her interaction with her friend Tia that Antoinette comes to realize how drastically out of place she is among the black people of Jamaica, and how mundane her wish to become one of them truly is.

Rhys tackles the overall racial tensions between everybody living in Jamaica during the novel's time period with no one to fully blame. She doesn't directly employ racism, but uses conditions such as betrayal, adultery, alienation and so on, to which readers can relate.

Wide Sargasso Sea deliberately problematizes its notions of gender. "All women characters in Rhys's fictions are mercilessly exposed to the financial and gendered constraints of an imperial world" (Humm, 187). This imperial world in its cultural context is one in which a dominant group of white men create, control and oppress dormant

groups of women, slaves and so on, and being a woman means negotiating the suffering caused by this ascendancy. Annette negotiates this torment minutely, or rather, doesn't at all, and Antoinette's unsettled relationship with her rejecting mother exposes her to a deep sense of instability and mistrust. As Teresa O'Connor notes, "maternal indifference and failure coincided with the failure of colonialism in developing a clearly defined and centered people . . . the mother country too failed to give sustenance and definition to its child colonies" (qtd. in Schapiro 85).

"Rhys reflects the changing status of woman and portrays Antoinette's struggle for identity within herself and within the confines of a patriarchal society, leaving her constrained and ultimately jumping to her death." (Hawthorn, A feminist reading of Jane Eyre and *Wide Sargasso Sea*.)

Antoinette is a victim of abuse during her childhood. Her family is pushed out of the society because "the people... hated them" (Rhys 27) and even her mother "pushes [Antoinette] away... as if [she] was useless" (Rhys 19). Consequently, she suffers physical and emotional conflicts which establishes her rites of passage. As a result, sympathy is evoked and she becomes an anti-heroine. The loss of a family member and a friend devastates her psychological endurance and helps reveal her inner beliefs in relation to religions and social values. She recognizes her issues and develops standards of righteousness. Antoinette thinks "there is no God" (Rhys 130). This attitude towards God reflects her ability to break free from the stereotypical images of women by determining and expressing her own independent principles and command in a patriarchal society.

Lastly, her womanhood experiences are shown through the final establishment of a new identity in the society. Firstly, she becomes part of a family by marrying Edward Rochester who "hated her" (Rhys 141). She finds redemption by liberating herself from the status of an outsider through the institution of family. Although she is labeled as a madwoman who "lives in her own darkness" (Rhys 146), and subsequently becomes confined in the attic of Thornhill Hall, Antoinette finds self-

exemption and independence through death, or even possibly rebirth. Rekindling her relationship with society reveals a certain kind of passion in her heart, seeking love and hope, which is shown through the imagery of nature. Antoinette's desire for lust is symbolized by the "huge drops [of rain] like hail on the leaves of the tree" (Rhys 55). Even in failure, Antoinette manifests a resilient female spirit that refuses to be subjugated by males.

The text renders an experience of womanhood of female outcasts striving to break free from the traditional views of women in a patriarchal society. Insight is gained while suffering abuse, losing family and friend, and ultimately achieving liberation to freedom.

Slavery is a major theme in the *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It is shown in the novel in two major forms- enslavement/entrapment based on race and on gender.

At the start of the novel, we see that the Emancipation Act of 1833 leaves discontent and violence in its wake. Mr. Luttrell, a white former slaveowner and neighbor to the Cosway's, commits suicide with the rouse of Emancipation, unable to adjust to the new social and economic landscape. At Coulibri, the local population of black former slaves is gravely angry. As Antoinette remembers at the start of the novel, "They hated us." Even the children threaten and enact violence on white people. A girl follows a young Antoinette singing, "White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you." Antoinette's friend Tia, who is black, ends up hitting Antoinette in the head with a rock as the mob burns her family's house down.

Another aspect is the connection Rhys makes between slavery and the oppression of white Creole women. Antoinette's relationship with Rochester represents the bond that a colonizer shares with the colonized. She is economically enslaved as, by virtue of her marriage, all her fortune becomes Mr. Rochester's, for him to dispose at his will. Women's dependence on fathers and husbands embodies a symbolic slavery that is made literal in Antoinette's ultimate physical captivity.

Rhys portrays black women as relatively unrestricted. Black women were not usually forced into marriage against their will, and were allowed a

degree of sexual freedom that white British women could only dream of. Tia, is presented as an extremely liberated free spirit in the novel. Early in the novel, the reader understands that Tia has skills to be envied; 'fires always lit for her, sharp stone did not hurt her bare feet, I never saw her cry.' (Rhys 9) Spatially, Tia is shown to be free: she has the freedom to go where she pleases, and do whatever she wants. In contrast, Antoinette feels repressed by her own inability to leave Jamaica, or, eventually, to leave Rochester. This idealization of Tia is quite possibly, in part, a reflection of Antoinette/Rhys's own longing to be just like her.

Similarly, the black serving girl Amelie is portrayed as both morally and economically liberated. Her lack of moral constriction permits her sexual encounter with Rochester to take place. Afterwards, all Rochester can recall is her free and light-hearted manner: 'She was so gay, so natural...' (Rhys 89). Along with this, Amelie is also economically shackles free. She is aware of what she wants to do with life and how to achieve the same, and knows that she requires a large sum of money for the same. As a result, she is able to fulfill her dream and travels to Rio, where all the rich men lived. In stark contrast to this, we see Antoinette's extreme poverty, and her financial inability to go anywhere without her husband's consent.

Rochester's dominant voice becomes a process of self-identification that enables him to maintain his superiority over the uncivilized island and over its racially different natives. He initially promises peace and happiness to Antoinette but changes his course as soon as power and money enter his domain. While Rochester maintains a white male imperialistic stance, Antoinette attempts to preserve the integrity of her own self. The result is that both stand in a binary cultural antagonism.

"The problems between Antoinette and Rochester come to an end when Antoinette gives her decision and descends from her prison by burning down Thornfield Hall, Rochester's home, which is the symbol of white male domination and exploitation in England, with its clear connections to the structures of colonialism. As Thornfield Hall is the concrete manifestation of Rochester's inheritance from his father, and the culmination of

the Rochester fortunes made from colonial wealth, Antoinette's final act of defiance overturns the past history in which she was the helpless watcher of Coulibri's destruction." (Koparanoglu, *The Victim of Colonization: Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea*)

In the novel, freedom can mean desertion or isolation, the fear of which leads many to enter self-righteously and sometimes even willingly into their own imprisonment. "Even if it is violent and ultimately tragic, freedom is shown to be inevitable, the necessary path to redemption in the novel on both a societal and personal level. Oppression and imprisonment are unsustainable. Antoinette ends the novel and her life by setting fire to the house in which she is imprisoned by Rochester. Her narration ends with a sense of purpose and self-knowledge that she lacked in the rest of the novel. In reference to her own emancipating destruction, she says, "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. This fire connects her to the angry mob that, in an act of protest against their own oppression, sets fire to her family's house early on in the novel. Both seek freedom in the flames." (*Wide Sargasso Sea: Themes*).

Wide Sargasso Sea expresses a more extreme and shocking perspective revealing the cruel misogynistic views of a male-dominated society where women are judged as weak and docile. An acclaimed feminist text, the novel aims to bring forth the bitter reality faced by ostracized women in the society. "The end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is left open; readers do not witness the death of Antoinette Cosway. What readers witness is her decision to seize the confrontation of her own destiny at last"

"now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage" (qtd. Koparanoglu, *The Victim of Colonization: Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea*)

In conclusion, Jean Rhys shows that a White Caribbean woman can in no way fight the oppression she faces in society except through demise and obliteration. However, Rhys grants her heroine a voice and an identity of her own, even

though it is conflicted, in the face of colonialism and its effects on the external world.

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