Quest for Self-Identity in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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One of the recurring strains in Commonwealth literature, is the search for a reconstruction of identity in the post-colonial context and a questioning of imperialist referents, as norms. From her unique position as a white West Indian woman writer, Jean Rhys examines the paradoxes and ambivalences of the creolised woman, in a post-colonial society.[1] She belongs to the white settler class, that 'occupies a cultural space between the European and the black Caribbean societies'[2]and whose confusion over identity and self-worth, is seldom examined in English texts of imperialism.

The initial idea for Rhys's last novel, titled, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* arose from the dehumanised depiction of the creole woman, Bertha, in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre.*[3] She is the mad wife of Edward Rochester, kept locked up in the attic at Thornfield Hall. *Wide Sargasso Sea* expresses Rhys's post-colonial reading and rewriting of *Jane Eyre,* by questioning and contradicting its underlying assumptions.[4] By imaginatively recreating Bertha's mute story, Rhys has attempted to move the madwoman, in Gilbert and Gubar's words, 'from the liminal zone of the third storey ... to the first storey in which her own story could become central.'[5] By shifting Bronte's marginalised character into the central focus and by making her a subject in her own right, Rhys's novel also makes us understand her point of view, as expressed through her seemingly abnormal behaviour, amidst the supposed normality of a patriarchal/imperialist order.

The otherness of the colonized country invites an interesting parallel comparison with the otherness of a woman. The way that these othernesses converge in the consciousness of Bertha, who is Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea,* offers the initial key to her search for a

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sense of self, in colonial society and in heterosexual relations. The relationship between imperialist and sexual politics is progressively built up and explored in the three parts of the novel.

In parts one and two, the setting of the novel is Jamaica and Dominica during the 1830s, in the years after the Emancipation Act, which abolished slavery. In portraying Antoinette's childhood in part I, Rhys has delved into the felt experiences of her own life as a creole and as a woman.[6] The nebulousness of her protagonist's identity as a creole is introduced from the very first sentence of the novel: 'They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks.'[7] The white West Indian natives are not acknowledged as part of the community of the nouveau rich British imperialists, who are the new masters. Neither do they enjoy the respect of the black natives and the privileges of bygone days, before the emancipation. Their position within the West Indian social hierarchy is best stated in Tia's words: 'Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger' (WSS, p. 21). They are contemptuously addressed as 'white cockroach' (WSS, p. 20).

Antoinette expresses her feelings of a lack of identity, resulting from the ambiguity of her situation, as caught up between the new whites and the black natives: 'So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all' (WSS, p. 85). By going back to Antoinette's childhood in the West Indies, Rhys has tried to get to the root of the sense of otherness, which is inherent in the consciousness of her protagonist.[8]

In part I, Antoinette narrates the sequestered existence led by herself, her widowed mother, Annette, and brother, Pierre. Although some faithful black servants also live with them, the overall hostility of the other black natives, runs as an undercurrent in their existence. In her search for identity, Antoinette longs for an integration with the native Jamaican culture, as epitomised by Christophine and Tia. Tia is her only friend and Antoinette feels a fascination for her, due to her affinity with the natural surroundings. They share a natural kinship, bathing in the pool together and then, eating and sleeping together, in the lap of nature. However, through certain episodes, we are also shown how the resurgence of cultural stereotypes may also disturb the tie between the black and white natives.

In her search for self-representation as a woman, Antoinette turns to her mother. However, quite typically, Annette is shown as being under the influence of patriarchal modes of thought and prefers her son Pierre to Antoinette, who consequently feels a sense of lack.[9] For instance,

Antoinette narrates from the incident when she goes to comfort her mother, after Pierre's death. To quote: '"But I am here..." I said, and she said ... "No no no"... and flung me from her' (WSS, p. 40). The sense of rejection and inadequacy which Antoinette experiences through her mother, lead her to turn to Aunt Cora and also to seek a surrogate mother through Christophine, who does support her during her moments of crisis. The Antoinette-Christophine relationship, suggests the possibility of a fruitful bond between the black and white natives, based on trust and personal friendship.

In contrast to Antoinette's attempts at an assimilation with the black natives, her mother Annette understands them, but wishes to keep them at a distance. Rather, she desires a fusion with the British imperialists, represented by the newly rich whites as well as a reintegration into patriarchy, through marriage. Her marriage to Mr. Mason, accomplishes both. After it, in the native's eyes, both she and Antoinette become associated with the imperialists. In the climactic episode of part one in which they burn down Coulibri Estate, the fire is emblematic of an expression of the suppressed rage of the native, against the imperialist. It also prefigures the leaping flames at Thornfield Hall, in part III, at the end of the novel. Similarly, Annette's marriage prefigures Antoinette's marriage to Rochester. Both end in failure, due to the British imperialist's shallow, outer level interaction with the native West Indians, represented by Annette and Antoinette, who remain for them as the 'other'.

Part II of the novel portrays Antoinette's marital experiences and her thwarted quest for self-identity, through love. It is narrated by Edward Rochester. Although it gives an inside peep into his attitudes and vulnerabilities, in the overall effect, it points to the disparities between his point of view and that of Antoinette and makes us understand more clearly, just why love is lost. The Wide Sargasso Sea of the title, appears symbolic of the unsurpassed wide gulf, separating the two cultures, as well as the parallel male and female perspectives, which are explored through the Antoinette-Rochester relationship, in part II.

By displacing Bronte's Rochester into a culture and a reality which initially bewilders him, then casts its spell over him and is finally rejected by him, Rhys focusses on the tragic overtones of his 'advance and retreat' (WSS, p. 85) from the West Indian world associated with Antoinette and by implication, female reality. The sensuousness and vibrancy of the West Indian landscape are so different from the ordered, grey surroundings of his homeland that they alarm his sense of rightness. Nature, the natives and his bride become identified in his mind, as one,

strange, untrustworthy reality. In this context, Mona Fayad has rightly pointed out: 'Suddenly removed from a totally male-centred society into one in which women play a dominant role, his whole identity comes into question.'[10] The island appears to stand for primitive nature and the 'feminine values' of emotions, sensuality and love.

For a brief period after the marriage, Rochester is shown as being intoxicated by Antoinette's mysterious sensual appeal and her overwhelming response to him. Yet, even during the fleeting moments of their shared happiness, he does not try to love and understand her, in the way she wants. Antoinette always remains for him as the 'other', as a creole and as a woman, as this statement makes clear:

> 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 who did not think or feel as I did. (WSS, p. 78)

He feels more comfortable when he can project an English girl identity onto her. At one time, he looks at Antoinette and feels: 'Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either' (WSS, p. 56). His narrative is interspersed with pointers to his racial prejudices, which show his unwillingness to accept differences between people and realise the promise contained in a fruitful union, through love and respect for the individuality of the 'other'.

In the novel, the tragedy of their unrealised love is shown as arising from a combination of outer and inner forces. Daniel's malicious letter, which proclaims that he is her half-brother, suggests that she has loose morals and mentions about her mother's madness, becomes a pretext for the surfacing of Rochester's culturally/patriarchally defined projections onto Antoinette. For man, woman as 'other' has been the locus for what is mysterious and magical, desired as well as feared. English classic poetry mirrors this notion.[11] Rhys's depiction of Rochester is representative of a conventional English male and his subconscious responses to Antoinette as a woman, reveal the internalisation of the received myths of woman's sexuality being allied to seduction and excess. After Daniel's letter, Antoinette is transformed in Rochester's mind from a captivating seductress to whore. He starts categorising her openly expressed desire for himself as voluptuous, unchaste and insane. To quote from his narrative: 'She thirsts for *anyone* -not for me.... She'll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would-or could' (WSS, pp.135-6). His projections provide him the rationalisation for extricating himself from the spell of her sensual charm and thereby gaining control

over himself and the situation.

When Antoinette realises that her dream of love is lost forever, she tries to win Rochester back, in various ways. When all is of no use and especially after his revengeful liaison with the servant girl, she turns into what he calls a zombie, a ghost of herself, conveniently labelled by him as mad. In part III, she is transplanted into Rochester's world, where his values are predominant and she is barely kept alive as his possession and seen as an aberrant creature, gone insane.

Christophine becomes the spokeswoman for Antoinette's reality and the values she represents. It is through her that Rhys offers a counter corrective to Rochester's outsider's perception of Antoinette's seeming descent into insanity. She points out to Rochester that whereas he had come to the island to marry a creole heiress for her money, he also received with it, the promise of her love. She explains to him the centrality of her relationship with Rochester, in Antoinette's life and her inability to cope with the rejection of her love. In fact, Christophine bares how the supposed sanity of Rochester's world, is really based upon a denial of an alternative reality.

In part III, Rhys imaginatively moves within the outwardly mad and monster like image of Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and makes her think and speak for herself. Having already provided us with her childhood and marital experiences, the truth of her reality becomes increasingly evident, as she continues her search for self-identity, amidst the dark, grey world, in which she is incarcerated, in part III. As Antoinette reminisces about her past life in the West Indies, she is conscious that Rochester had tried to enclose her within a self, with which she could not identify. In this context, the name, Bertha, which Antoinette does not like but which he insistently uses in addressing her, as well as the colour of Antoinette's dresses, become significant.

As Antoinette muses, she also makes it clear that she feels strongly about her red dress. To her, it stands for a natural expression of her female sexuality and passion as a vital component of her sense of self. However, Rochester has been shown as being attracted to her in a white dress. In his mind, the white colour stands for modesty, chastity and restraint, the qualities that he has been conditioned to look for, in a woman. In part II, Antoinette's sense of joyous abandon in the intense expression of her union with her husband, has been portrayed amidst the wild, natural surroundings of her native Caribbean, which becomes a befitting objective correlative for her reality and the sensuality latent within her. In her search for identity as a woman, it is the red dress which expresses her spontaneous self, which is unacceptable and labelled

as insane, in Rochester's world.

The red dress and fire become important symbols in part III, as Rhys offers her version of Bertha's death by fire, in *Jane Eyre*.[12] For Antoinette/Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea,* her red dress stands for a way of being, beyond the cold and rational world of England. Antoinette narrates: '... my red dress ... has a meaning.... I saw it hanging, the colour of fire and sunset. The colour of flamboyant flowers' (WSS, p. 151). Alone with Grace Poole, in Thornfield Hall, she puts the dress against herself but knows that in Rochester's world, the meaning assigned to it would be quite different. '"Does it make me look intemperate and unchaste?"... That man [Rochester] told me so' (WSS, p.152), she tells Grace Poole, who laughs and offers her a grey wrapper, which is more in harmony with the place where she is imprisoned.

As Antoinette looks at her red dress within Thornfield Hall, in her mind, the dress also becomes explicitly connected with the burning fire in the room and reminds her of the fire through which the native West Indians had expressed themselves and burnt Coulibri Estate. The dress is the only reminder of a reality she had known. Antoinette narrates:

> I ... looked from the fire to the dress and from the dress to the fire ... and it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and *it reminded me of something I must do.* (WSS, pp.152-3, emphasis added)

After this subtle indication of what is to come, Antoinette has her third dream. By the end of the novel, by a clever device, Rhys has renarrated the account of Bertha's death amidst the spluttering flames of Thornfield Hall, by giving it as a part of Antoinette/Bertha's dream.

Antoinette dreams that she let herself out of the room with a candle in her hand. She narrates how she was careful as she walked because she did not wish to meet 'that ghost of a woman whom they say haunts this place' (WSS, p. 154). The ghost of a woman is of course, herself, divested of her spirit and true identity. As Antoinette accidentally confronts her own image in the mirror, she thinks it is an *other* that she knows but not her *self.* To quote:

> It was then that I saw her—*the ghost.* The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but *I knew her.* I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of a tablecloth and I saw flames shoot up.... *I called help me Christophine help me* and looking behind me *I saw that I had been helped.* There was a wall of fire protecting me....(WSS, p.154, emphasis added)

Antoinette calls out to Christophine and the strength of her matriarchal

world. She rejects her identity with the ghost of herself that she can see in the mirror, by literally and metaphorically asserting her *self,* in fire red. Rhys's rewriting of this famous scene, convincingly proves that it constitutes Antoinette/Bertha's 'act of resistance, not only to her status as a woman in a patriarchal culture but also as a colonized object'.[13]

As Antoinette goes up to the balcony and hears shouts around her, she looks up at the sky: 'It was red and all my life was in it' (WSS, p. 155). She experiences a mental array of images representing her whole life and when she looks down, she imagines she's seeing the pool at Coulibri:

> Tia was there. She beckoned to me.... And I heard the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha! ... I called 'Tia!' and jumped and *woke.* (WSS, p. 155, emphasis added)

Bertha's suicidal jump in *Jane Eyre,* is reinterpreted and placed within *Wide Sargasso Sea,* as a part of Antoinette's dream and as her imagined attempt to reach out to a known reality, as she hears Rochester calling her Bertha and imposing on her a selfhood, that is alien to her.

After waking from the dream, Antoinette unlocks the door, holding a candle. She now knows that she must reaffirm her identity with the values of the marginalised West Indian community, to which she belongs. In this context, we may say that through this novel, Rhys has attempted to 'reinstate the marginalised in the face of the dominant'.[14] The marginalised is the natural world of passions, emotions and love. The dominant is the patriarchal world of the British imperialist, the world of facts and cold reason, divested of feelings. It is the world of artificial restraint and for Antoinette, it has neither warmth nor light in it. Significantly, Antoinette lets herself out of this world with a lit flame in her hand which also symbolises her awakened consciousness of her sense of self, which had been cramped beneath the norms and impositions of the patriarchal world.

As Rhys explores the relationship between colonialist and sexual politics in this novel, she also offers a critique of Bronte's implicit complicity with the facile conventions of a society, which relegated Bertha to the attic, labelled her as mad and failed to understand her. The potentially radical aspect in *Wide Sargasso Sea,* lies in Rhys's fictionalization of the native creole woman's emerging awareness and acceptance of her self. Rhys has also articulated through this novel, an implicit argument against a patriarchal/imperialist order which exploits woman/the native economically, sexually and psychologically, but accords a low

priority value to a relationship based on love, understanding and respect, for the otherness of the 'other'.

NOTES

1. Jean Rhys was born in 1894 at Roseau, Dominica, in the West Indies and spent her childhood there. Her mother was a creole whose family had been living there since the end of the eighteenth century.
2. Judith Raskin, 'Jean Rhys: Creole Writing and Strategies of Reading', *ARIEL*, vol. 22,Oct.1991, p. 51.
3. Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (1847) Penguin, London, 1985.
4. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, Routledge, London, 1998, p. 192.
5. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. l, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988, p. 67.
6. Rhys's childhood experiences in Dominica were an important shaping force in her life. She has explored their hold on her sense of self, through her fiction. In an interview with Hannah Carter, Rhys has said: 'If you want to write the truth, you must write about yourself. I am the only real truth I know.' Hannah Carter, 'Fated To Be Sad', *Guardian*, 8 Aug. 1968, p. 5.
7. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) Penguin, London, 1968, p. 15. For subsequent references to this novel, page numbers have been indicated parenthetically in the text, preceded by the abbreviation WSS.
8. In her autobiography, Rhys has written about her own lifelong feelings of alienation from both Dominica and Anglo/European societies. Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* (1979) Penguin, London, 1981, pp. 48-9, 124.
9. In depicting the sense of rejection that Antoinette feels in her relationship with her mother, Rhys has again drawn upon the felt experiences with her own mother (Rhys, *Smile Please*, p. 43).
10. Mona Fayad, 'Unquiet Ghosts: The Struggle for Representation in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, Autumn 1988, pp. 443-4.
11. The idea conveyed through poems like Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, John Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* is that the power of woman's sexuality is threatening since it calls upon man's disempowerment through desire and therefore, it must be checked and vigilantly controlled. Adam's sin is that of weakness before woman and in *Paradise Lost*, Gabriel is sent by God to explicate that human suffering: 'From man's effeminate slackness it begins' (XI. 634).
12. This has also been commented on by Carole Angier, *Jean Rhys: Life and Work*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1990, pp. 564-5; Sue Spaull, 'Gynocriticism', *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading*, Sara Mills, et al., eds., Harvester Wheat Sheaf, New York, 1989, pp. 108-9; Fayad, 'Unquiet Ghosts...', 449- 50.
13. Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 30.
14. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, Routledge, London, 1989, p. 175.

FOR OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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