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The Madwoman in the Attic: Quest for self identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Abstract

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys is a rewriting of the Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Jean Rhys has tried to give a voice to the madwoman in the attic, Bertha Mason, who is always seen as the other. However, due to her mixed ethnicity and cultural inferiority, she faces a self-identity crisis. Initially, she is Antoinette but later she is renamed Bertha by her husband to probably sound more English and thus a new identity is imposed on her. She is a victim of the binaries created by the Eurocentric values as she straddles between the superior White English community and the inferior Black community. This hybridity, otherness, in-betweenness, a lack of belonging, isolation, probably drives her mad as she is unable to come to terms with her own natural self-identity.

Keywords: Cultural Imperialism, Hybridity, Identity crisis, Orientalism, Other, Post colonialism

The *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a novel by Dominica-born British author Jean Rhys. Rhys's *The Wide Sargasso Sea* is an indispensable postmodern and postcolonial novel, which is written as a response to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. In her rewriting of the *Jane Eyre*, Rhys gives a voice to the deliberately suppressed, silenced and passive character of *Jane Eyre*, with a postcolonial endeavor to unearth the "other" side of the related character and the story. It is a deconstructionist attempt to explore and fill the silences and the gaps of the text. Rhys via her deconstructionist method, adroitly plays upon the theme, characters and

the general plot line of *Jane Eyre*. Bertha Mason, Edward Rochester's first wife, a woman of Creole origin who was described as "the madwoman in the attic", a silenced character in *Jane Eyre*, shown to the readers as a devilish woman with a dark and horrific image. She becomes Antoinette Cosway, a key figure of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which the other, repressed and silenced madwoman's story is retold to unearth the orientalist and the cultural imperialistic attitude of Bronte's story towards the West Indies and the Creole culture. Therefore, it would not be implausible to describe *Wide Sargasso Sea* as the story of the "other", whether it is the story of the othered Bertha or the othered Creole woman in general. In her rewriting of Bertha's story, Rhys lays focus on her life as Antoinette in the West Indies and puts forward the reasons behind her arguable madness, questioning the post colonialist intentions of Bronte. Through this retelling of *Jane Eyre*, the unknowns of the Creole life of Antoinette, of her mother Annette, of her marriage with Mr. Rochester and main issues which were left blank are narrated from a post colonial point of view with a desire to create a new understanding of the other. Through a postcolonial analysis of the novel, Rhys succeeds in drawing several binaries in Europe and its other, the people of Creole origin. She portrays several cultural and political orientalist attitudes towards the Creole people.

Bertha, like Rhys herself is from the English-Caribbean and thus both are members of colonized- therefore marginal cultures. By contrast, both the main characters she creates are English, members of the dominant colonizing culture. Bertha is a restrained and a voiceless character in *Jane Eyre*, who is understood in terms of what others say about her. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, she is able to speak her story in her own voice. In an interview, Rhys explained her impulse to rewrite *Jane Eyre*: "When I read *Jane Eyre* as a child, I thought, why should she [Bronte] think Creole women are lunatics and all that? What a shame to make Rochester's first wife, Bertha, the awful mad woman, and I immediately thought I'd write the story as it might really have been. She seemed such a poor ghost. I thought I'd try to write her a life." [1] And thus Rhys feels compelled to write her own version of the story. While the writer once stated that telling Bertha's tale would allow her to give a life to "a poor ghost" with no history, [2] analysis of Bertha's role reveals that the character is also a vehicle by which the writer subverts and exposes the mechanisms of colonial oppression extant in Bronte's text, as well as the mechanisms of patriarchy Rhys had undoubtedly witnessed in her own time.

The in-betweenness that Antoinette suffered from the much 'inferior' Black community and the much 'superior' White English society is another crucial issue of the

social status of the creoles. The social inferiority and social depression that Antoinette faces is a result of her mixed ethnic origin which is defined by Homi Bhabha as “hybridity” and the result of this hybrid culture surfaces as a kind of in-betweenness. As Antoinette says in the lines:

“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.” – Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Wide Sargasso Sea tries to capture the struggles over meaning that is embedded in the fictions of colonial identity and English imperial control through the challenging narrative frames, authorial voices and shifting points of view.

Antoinette's account is actually shaped by the uncertainties of a Creole vision that is ruptured by the incompatible claims of British colonial history and the cultural remains of a fading West Indian plantation society. Her unattainable task in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is to negotiate between the incompatible claims of British colonialism while also making her way through the Creole culture and post-emancipation English society that continue to elude her. Antoinette explains:

“A white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. 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.” – Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Rhys's Creole woman, who is neither quite “English” and not quite “native,” straddles amid the divide between the binaries of human and savage, core and periphery, self and the other. “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks” is Rhys's opening solicitation into the borderland of the post-emancipation West Indies.[3] And yet, while the collapse of the Caribbean plantation economy in the 1830's succeeded in transforming the class of affluent Creole planters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* economically and culturally disenfranchised “white niggers” and “cockroaches,” locating them outside the ranks of the new community of non-slaveholding English colonials, considering them alien to the English society despite their persistent attachment to England.

Gayatri Spivak in her essay, “*The Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*”, appreciates Rhys for her endeavor to tell the story of Bertha from a perspective of the Creole, however, she also accuses the author of marginalizing the native peoples of

West Indies [4][5]. Therefore, according to Spivak, in her postcolonial rewriting of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, Jean Rhys also subconsciously degrades the native inhabitants of the Caribbean by her character depictions in which the native inhabitants are portrayed as open to sexual abuse, unreliable, performing obeah in its extremes, and abusing the main characters. In all these depictions the native West Indians are manifested to the reader as nothing but dark, abusive, minor characters, which are used to identify contrasting traits in the English as pure and ideal.

It is sure that geography plays almost no role in regulating the oriental approach of the West towards the rest of the world, which is based on Eurocentric universalism as it is exhibited by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1978). If any society does not play along with the power structures of the West, then that particular society is doomed to be labeled, whether as the East or the rest, and always as the “other.” “Said identifies a European cultural tradition of orientalism, which is a particular and longstanding way of identifying the East as ‘other’ and inferior to the West. The orient, he says, features, in the Western mind as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” [6]. So what is “East”, “the rest”, “non-West”, becomes a projection of all the qualities and features which the West would disapprove and not like to attach to itself. In a way, to be able to identify and recognize its own identity as pure good and the ideal reason, the West makes use of the binary oppositions in which the pure whiteness always depicts the West. That is why, in most literatures of the West, such qualities like cruelty, savageness, barbarity, inferiority, laziness, corruption belong to the non-Western societies but authenticity, goodness, reason, hard work, all the ideal labels are manifested to belong the West. Another prominent Oriental belief of the West towards the non-western societies has been to acknowledge the rest as the “exotic, mystical and seductive” other companion combined with a practice of identifying those other people as homogenous masses instead of recognizing their individuality and cultural variations.

The characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* show the orientalist or imperialistic approach towards the Creole. Such depictions are conspicuous in the characterization of Mr. Rochester, a white Englishman whose family dismisses him from their heritage and he pursues a marital accord with Antoinette to deal with his financial troubles. Initially, it can be seen that Mr. Rochester, seems to be fascinated and charmed by the ways of Antoinette. However, this fantasy does not last long. He is agitated by the awareness aroused by his brother-in-law and Amelia that Antoinette is from ‘bad blood’. From then, the Orientalist attitude of Mr.

Rochester towards Antoinette steadily ascertains itself. The Eurocentric Universalist attitude as shown by Mr. Rochester cannot only be directed at Antoinette, but it could also be hinted towards his contempt for the native Caribbean people.

Hence, the characterization of Mr. Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea* dominantly echoes the concept of Edward Said i.e. the orientalist attempts of othering the West towards the East. When Mr. Rochester and Antoinette are together for their honeymoon, the orientalist belief of Mr. Rochester towards Creole comes to the surface. When he is served coffee by Christophine, the servant he clearly dislikes due to her practice of obeah, he denies the drink with fury. Upon the insistence of Antoinette, he says, "I like the drink, but I hate the language." This blunt statement by Mr. Rochester is enough to discover his attitude towards the Creole people; he surely likes the land, with its richness and natural diversity, the natural beauty, and the exoticism of the nature, as these qualities cannot be acquired in England.

Mr. Rochester is also alarmed and annoyed by the cultural appearance of the Creole. The native language, customs and traditions, native obeah conventions, which are unlike the Eurocentric universal values, all annoy and agitate Mr. Rochester. As Mr. Rochester fails to appreciate the Creole people and their values from their own perspectives but from a much broader unjustified vision of universality, he fails to welcome those cultural and regional differences and believes them to be inferior. Mr. Rochester even begins to believe that he is "married to the wrong kind", as Antoinette is seen as an impediment which straddles between pure white Englishness and the more inferior 'Nigger' kind.

Mr. Rochester shows another restricting imperialist attitude when he renames Antoinette- Bertha, which sounds much more English than Antoinette, a typical Creole female name. Throughout the story, Mr. Rochester also objects to Antoinette's own authentic ways of clothing and hair dressing, opposing the western ways. These acts of renaming her to Bertha or bothering her natural ways of fashion are all signs of an orientalist attitude to impose a forced identity and a culture on a post-colonial subject, which would give rise to several self-identity crisis. As Frantz Fanon puts forward in *The Wretched of the Earth*, throughout history, the colonizing power of Europe, devalued the histories of the colonized nations, alleging those histories as 'pre-civilized voids' and from then on the history and culture of the related nation was marked by the arrival of the European colonizers through their imposed educational systems [7]. The act of imposing a history on to a nation is nothing more than imposing a new limited identity on the colonized people by the powerful

Colonizer. Similarly, Mr. Rochester as a white 'superior' Englishman attempts to impose a more English name on Antoinette; he also dictates an identity, a created history and a culture on her, which again moves her further to madness, the only place where she could find some mental peace, away from the hegemonic oppressors.

Jean Rhys has also focused on the cultural aspects when she discusses how the way Antoinette and her mother say "adieu", a French word is different from the locals. There is a stark difference in terms of the cultural practices in the West Indies and the British Isles. Rhys has laid great importance to the significance of music in the Jamaican culture but, however, such emotions are controlled when it comes to the English. The other distinctions are visible in terms of flora and fauna, which is shown to be wild. The wild symbolizes the life of the Caribbean, which is not tutored or pruned in any way and which is going on in a haphazard and chaotic manner. The bright color imagery of the West Indies also evokes a sensual aspect in the minds of the reader. All these are incompatible in relation to the British Isles.

The novel covers a time frame which is of quite relevance. Rhys's story is set during the years which follow the Emancipation Act (1833) in Jamaica, the crucial period when the racial problems were quite complex and controversial. During that time, the three different ethnic communities in the society had given rise to the social tension and pressure; the Black, the Creole, and the White community. After the emancipation act, the ex-slaves gained freedom and proved highly outraged and infuriated towards their previous owners, who were either White Creoles or White English. The ex-slaves proved rebellious and even tried to take revenge on their former owners. The hatred of the Black community is considerably evident in instances like when they burn the plantation house of the Cosway Family, or as Amelia sleeps with Mr. Rochester, and even when Christophine advises Antoinette on her 'madness'. But, Spivak's assertion is quite agreeable that although Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, narrates the story of the silenced "other" Creole woman, even with her post colonialist perception, she unintentionally attempts in "othering" the Black community in the West Indies. Through her depiction of the Black characters, she commits the same mistake of treating them as homogenous masses with no individual or cultural differences. Almost all of the people of the Black community are portrayed as revengeful, demonic and infernal characters of corruption with almost no good or pure ambition. Accordingly, even when Jean Rhys writes back to create another version from the perspective of the suppressed Creole people, she "others" them.

Antoinette undergoes double oppression because of the several relationships that she develops in the novel such as her gloomy marriage to Mr. Rochester, her pathetic pursuit of relief from Christophine, and her obnoxious relation to Amelia. Even the social and communal space in which Annette and her daughter Antoinette are doomed to live in search of rich White English husbands is enough to acknowledge their restricted in-between status in the society. The patriarchal subjugation that Antoinette experiences as a woman aggravate her repression, causing her to endure double “othering” of the society both as a woman and as a postcolonial subject. The triple oppression under which Antoinette tries to acknowledge her self-identity leads her to a desirable madness which provides her some mental peace and relief.

The basic reason why Antoinette is unable to come to terms with her identity is because of her hybrid ethnicity which is usually manifested as ambiguous. And her being a woman also blurs her acceptance of a definite individuality. Throughout the novel Antoinette, is referred to as the daughter of Annette, or as the wife of Mr. Rochester, or as Bertha, a name and individuality which is not her own and is totally imposed on her by Mr. Rochester. Antoinette cannot strike a balance with her individual self, because of the imposed identities on herself by other power holders. All the identity crisis is related to Antoinette’s in-betweenness and placelessness.

All the triple oppression that she endures in life consigns Antoinette to a kind of madness, the reality of which is arguable. The probable reasons that could take Antoinette a step further towards conceivable madness are all the features of hybridity, in-betweenness, isolation, a lack of belongingness, identity crisis, insecurity, distrust, all kinds of economic, racial, patriarchal, sexual, colonial and class oppressions. The madness that she is pushed into or that she ‘prefers’ to be with, is a kind of an ideological reaction that Antoinette manifests against the all-oppressive powers in her life. In relation to this, it is interesting to consider Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous essay *‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’*, in which she questions the status of subaltern women who are oppressed and tries to find a new way for these double oppressed women to raise their voices against the patriarchal and postcolonial power holders. Spivak believes that as long as the West denies judging the subaltern or the postcolonial subjects on their own authentic values, and instead, favors a system of judgment, which is Eurocentric universal, the subaltern cannot speak. [8] Certainly, the subaltern has never been able to speak and if the world power structures and economic systems remain the same and do not alter, the subaltern shall not be able to raise his voice for power and freedom. It seems like the only way for the subaltern to escape from all the economic, racial,

patriarchal, colonial oppressions is madness and dreams and fantasies. As, even Antoinette finds a way to revolt against all those controlling factors of her life in her recurring dreams in which she sets fire to the house of Mr. Rochester to which she was confined and which seemed like a prison house to her. The subaltern, like Antoinette, has the dream and desire of protesting and raising their voice against all the power structures that captivates, devalues, and decreases their own self-identity and morale. We can just hope that maybe, one day the subaltern will wake up from their anxious and troubled dreams and demand and fulfill their desires of freedom and a self-identity, just as Antoinette does at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

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