

IDENTITY CRISES AND THE QUEST FOR SELF IN JEAN RHY'S “WIDE SARGASSO SEA”

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Introduction

“*Wide Sargasso Sea*” is a Postcolonial novel written by Jean Rhys. This novel, written in 1966, retells the story of one of the major characters of Charlotte Brontë’s classic novel, “*Jane Eyre*” (1847). “*Wide Sargasso Sea*” is a novel which is written from the perspective of Bertha Mason, described as a lunatic in “*Jane Eyre*”, who has been named Antoinette Cosway in “*Wide Sargasso Sea*”. Through the reading of “*Jane Eyre*”, readers develop a sort of sympathy for Mr. Rochester, the protagonist of the novel, for being the husband of an insane wife, i.e., Bertha Mason, as named in the aforementioned novel. The girl, who had been locked in an attic in “*Jane Eyre*”, is described as monster, an animal and a horrific creature. “whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing—” (Brontë 303-304). While being described in the novel, she hardly gets attention of the reader. Jean Rhys, on the contrary, is quite dissatisfied with this ignorance of the author towards this oppressed character, and intends to give voice to Bertha Mason, named as Antoinette in “*Wide Sargasso Sea*”. In “*Jane Eyre*”, her existence is of less importance, and Rhys is dissatisfied with Brontë for the fact that she enables Jane Eyre to gain a respectable place in the society, only at the cost of Bertha’s identity. Jean Rhys brings in the real story of Bertha Mason in “*Wide Sargasso Sea*”, describing the cruelty of Mr. Rochester, focusing on the real agony of Antoinette Cosway, later known as Antoinette Mason, and her identity crisis and the quest for self. The novel has been discussed by critics to a greater extent, especially in the fields of Postcolonial, Feminism and Modern literary criticism. Contrary to the focus of many critics regarding the notion of rewriting the issues of gender and race as also expressed in “*Jane Eyre*”, “*Wide Sargasso Sea*” stands as an independent entity and objects to the notion of analyzing Antoinette’s identity crisis. Thus, if we examine the connection between race and gender in “*Wide Sargasso Sea*” in the light of Ania Loomba’s ideas of colonialism postcolonialism and link it to psychoanalytic feminism with Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, we will be able to arrive at the conclusion as to why Antoinette loses her identity and how madness actually operates in a colonial and patriarchal society. The author uses race and gender as metaphors for one another and to abject the other among us, which drive towards insanity. But unlike the last part of the novel, where Antoinette is locked in the attic, she always tries to hold her identity in the society, and her quest for the self does not end even at the closure of the novel. At the closure of the novel, she is able to find her unique identity by moving out of race, class and culture metaphorically. Once, while talking to her mentally challenged brother

Pierre, she wistfully asks him, “‘And how will you like that’ I thought, as I kissed him. ‘How will you like being made exactly like other people?’” (Rhys 22). Echoing through the novel with a haunting sense of irony, this question plagues Antoinette while she struggles to develop her own identity in the face of cultural and racial rejection.

My paper will focus on the fact that how Antoinette Cosway, the heroine of the novel is torn apart between two cultures, race, patriarchal domination, and how she strives to gain her identity and seeks her self-esteem in the society. I will also be focusing as to how does she end up breaking all the barriers of race, gender, class and culture and obtains an exclusive identity and succeeds in the quest of self. It is, however, not only the heroine who suffers from identity crisis, but there are a number of other characters who come across the same fate in the novel. Such as Annette, Antoinette’s mother, Rochester, a nameless person throughout the novel, etc. There are certain characters, I believe, from whose perspectives a different, or say, a new novel can be written. Christophine is one of such characters. All these issues will be the focal points of my paper.

Rhys’s highly acclaimed and phenomenal work, “*Wide Sargasso Sea*”, which appeared in 1966, gained wide attention from the critics and scholars. “*Wide Sargasso Sea*” was an instant success, winning the W. H. Smith Award for writers and the Heinemann Award of the Royal Society of Literature. The impact of her novel was such that it is still considered as one of the paradigmatic texts of postcolonial area of the 20th century. Rhys’s effort for writing Bronte’s classic novel from a different perspective and, giving voice to a voiceless creature and writing one of the classics in her own words and by virtue of her own imagination have been appreciated by critics and scholars. Postcolonialist feminists, in particular, have appreciated Rhys for attempting to write the classic “*Jane Eyre*” in her own words. One of the facts which is more noticeable, is her endeavor to reenact the postcolonial West Indies world by exhibiting the revival of Bertha Mason as the protagonist of the novel in her experimental narrative.

Sometimes it appears as if the novel, “WSS” is nothing but a reflection of Rhys’s own self. Rhys, analogous to the heroine of “WSS” had been torn apart between two cultures, and she too, alike Antoinette strived a lot to overcome the bondage of class, gender, race and culture. It is worth mentioning that Jean Rhys came from West Indies. From her very childhood, she was affected by the notion of the colonizer/colonized, white/black, self/other, so on and so forth. She was the offspring of a Welsh father and “white-Creole” mother from Dominica. She was born in Dominica in 1890, and spent her entire childhood there. When she grew up, she noticed that the whites were only one per cent of the total population. Hence, Rhys had the experience of being a part of minority group in West Indies, and this is reflected in characterizing Antoinette who becomes the victim of loneliness and isolation. When Rhys was 17, she was sent to a convent school in England for acquiring further studies. But being the product of diverse culture, she could not assimilate with the English culture and could not surmount the feelings of alienation due to her cognizance of her own complex ‘identity’, just like the heroine of the novel. Although an English girl at birth, she never considered herself an English girl. Some facts regarding Rhys’s ambivalent identity can be observed by reflecting upon some questions asked to her, and her responses to those questions.

"Do you consider yourself a West Indian?"

She shrugged. "It was such a long time ago when I left."

"So you don't think of yourself as a West Indian writer?"

Again she shrugged, but said nothing.

"What about English? Do you consider yourself an English writer?"

"No! I'm not, I'm not! I'm not even English."

"What about a French writer?" I asked.

Again she shrugged and said nothing.

"You have no desire to go back to Dominica?"

"Sometimes," she said.

(David Planet. "Jean Rhys: A Remembrance"[275-76]. *Qut in Gregg: 1.*)

Hence, Rhys could neither become a normal English woman, nor could she fully assimilate herself with other culture. Apart from this emotional conflict within her heart, she had to undergo through utter poverty as one of the marginalized female writers. All these factors contributed immensely to the writing of "*Wide Sargasso Sea*". According to an interview, quoted in the "*Guardian*" (August 8, 1968), Jean Rhys was extremely dissatisfied and angry with Charlotte Bronte for narrating Bertha Mason in a negative manner and she decided to "vindicate the mad woman" (Nebeker 126). Hence, it could be said that she could achieve success in accomplishing the task of writing this novel due to her experience as a white creole woman in the British West Indies. It took her 21 years to finish "*Wide Sargasso Sea*", which will always be counted as Rhys's best creation.

The novel "*Wide Sargasso Sea*" depicts the story of Bertha Mason of Bronte's classic "*Jane Eyre*" (1847), who had been locked in the attic in England. Edward Rochester, the protagonist of the novel has been predicated as the victim as her husband. Rhys has attempted to narrate this story of this "other" woman from Bertha's perspective, whose real name is Antoinette Cosway (according to "*Wide Sargasso Sea*") and she tries to depict as to how her identity is crushed and oppressed, leading to complete destruction or end of the heroine, i.e., Bertha. Rhys shifts the story of this novel after the Emancipation Act of 1833, when the slaves were freed from the clutches of British slavery. Because of the fact that Antoinette is a white creole living in the English colony of Jamaica, she quickly learns that both the cultures, Caribbean as well as English society considered her as an outsider, and she is regarded as a disgraceful creature by both the cultures of which she is composed. Through social ostracism, verbal labeling and negative attitude of the male-dominated society towards creole women seeks to confuse the concept of identity and their quest for self, based on cultural and racial discrimination, and Rhys creates the character of Antoinette to represent the problems of creole woman in the society, which considers them disgraceful and below their rank.

According to some critics, Rhys's representation of Antoinette has been viewed as the classic case of a woman's descent into madness to escape masculine domination, the novel, "WSS" can also be interpreted as a reconceptualization of the concept of identity and the quest for the self. Antoinette is so perturbed by her confused identity in the society that in part two of the novel, in a conversation with her husband, showing utter disillusion she laments, saying: "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" (Rhys 61). In this uncertainty of cultural identity, she displays common estrangement that is often felt by West Indians.

As discussed earlier, the identity crisis of Antoinette ties together the issues of race and gender as oppressive categories. Postcolonial theoreticians have examined Antoinette's crisis of otherness as a result of colonial rule, while by feminists critics, this has been viewed, for instance, as per the text of Kristeva and Irigaray, as an outcome of the patriarchal dimension of the society and the connection between madness and the mother-daughter

relationships of the book. Antoinette is suppressed to the extent, that her identity crisis not only becomes the outcome of the relationship between colonizer/colonized, male/female,

and mother/daughter, but also the repression coming from the self, together in a patriarchal and colonial society, which eventually leads to Antoinette's confused identity and to some extent, the loss of self.

In this novel, Rhys explores a reality that many a times, certain race and gender form the community of ultimate subalterns. Antoinette, the protagonist of the novel, is a white creole woman, who lives in the nineteenth century in the British owned Jamaica, after the emancipation of slaves according to the Emancipation Act, 1833. She and her mother represent the minority on the Island, and they are despised by the black Jamaicans due to their family background for the fact that they form a part of slave owners. Antoinette and her family become the victim of this crisis and they are the subjects to torment, ridicule, hatred and disgrace among the Black Jamaicans. "I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us, they called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping dogs lie" (Rhys 13).

Simultaneously, it is implied that the "differences between the English and the Creoles were considered "racial as well as cultural" (Raikin 39). Edward (according to "Jane Eyre, who is nameless in this novel) defines Antoinette as an alien. He feels:" Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (Rhys 39). Thus Antoinette and her mother represented white niggers in Jamaica, who neither belonged to Caribbean culture nor English culture, but torn between the two. This conflict of cultural and racial differences compels both Antoinette and her mother, Annette, to suffer from identity crisis.

In the midst of two cultures and nations, Antoinette is unable to find the place and position of her own. She is torn apart between the two, which ushers to her ambiguous identity. Her role, in this condition, becomes even worse than the formerly colonized people. Because she belongs neither to English, nor to the Jamaicans, she herself keeps questioning her real identity. She is the "other" for both the cultures, and this crisis becomes her real tragedy. She utters: "None of you understand about us', I thought" (Rhys 18). Hence, the heroine of the novel, "Wide Sargasso Sea" is considered as the "other" by both the cultures, leading to her ambiguous identity, and compels her to continue her quest for the self.

Now, appears another problem. In addition to belonging to two cultures, and forming the part of none, she is a creole "woman". Ania Loomba, in her book, "*Colonialism/ Postcolonialism*" describes how race and gender provide metaphors and images for each other in the colonial arena. She argues: "In short, lower races represented the 'female' type of the human species, and females the 'lower race' of gender" (Loomba 161). She further explains how both women and non-Europeans were considered as passive, child-like, who require leadership and guidance or "as sexually aberrant, emotional, wild and outside society". (Loomba 159). Here Loomba's ideas can be utilized to analyze Antoinette's position. Edward considers her as 'child-like', 'passive' and 'obstinate'. She is perceived by Edward in these two traditional ways. She was a child-like creature needing Edward to love and guide her. "If she was a child she was not a stupid child but an obstinate one. She often questioned me about England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made much difference" (Rhys 56), or she poses a threat to him with her dangerous outbursts, sexuality, and knowledge of her Martiniquais servant's Caribbean black magic: "Then she cursed me comprehensively ([...] this red-eyed wild-haired stranger who was my wife shouting obscenities at me" [89]).

Apart from this, Loomba also draws our attention towards the notion as to how the analogy between the subordination of women and

colonial subjects easily leaves out the question of colored women because "the colonial subject is conceptualized as male and the female as white" (Loomba 163). Hence, coloured

women, who suffer from racial and gender oppression, and who become the victim of social discrimination are forgotten. And similar is the case with Antoinette. Despite of being white in color, she does not belong to English or European culture and thus suffer from the oppression of the society belonging to a subordinate race and culture. She is considered by Europeans as “other” as well, and in this state of utter confusion, Antoinette is forced to form her own identity, and hence appear as a symbolic order.

As discussed earlier in my paper, it is not only the heroine (Antoinette) of the novel, “Wide Sargasso Sea” who suffers from identity crisis. Many other major characters are also entrapped in this realm of confused identity, and while this contention continues, they should also be given fair attention. The first character, in this regard, who needs to be mentioned is Mr. Rochester, the protagonist of “*Jane Eyre*”. The notable point is that Mr. Edward Rochester, who was the hero of the former novel, remains nameless throughout the novel, “*Wide Sargasso Sea*”. He is always mentioned either as “my husband”, or “that man”. It is worth notable that name is a significant element of a novel, and this is, believe many critics and authors is supposedly Rhee’s revenge on the character by emasculating him (making him less manly). The marriage places him in the female’s role – powerless, no knowledge of the world around him and no sense of English or Metropolitan identity. However, despite this, his namelessness empowers him and his anonymity enhances the implied authority of his account. We see him as a nameless creator, and as a white man, his privilege and authority to confer identity on others, which he does by renaming his wife ‘Bertha’ in an attempt to distance her from her Inatic mother, Annette. Here the similarity between names are noticeable, and equally noticeable is the fashioning herself into something more familiar to him, as suggested by Antoinette, when irritated by her husband’s constant use of the name “Bertha”, she says in section two of the novel, “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me another name.” (Rhys 67). But whatever may be the case, ultimately Edward Rochester remains a nameless creature throughout the novel “*Wide Sargasso Sea*”, and somewhere or the other he suffers from the identity crisis.

Another character, who is worth mentioning in this regard, is Annette, Antoinette’s mother. Like Antoinette, she is also the victim of the conflict of races, cultures and gender. Annette is a white nigger living in the Jamaican land after the emancipation of the slaves, and she also has to suffer the same rejection by both the cultures and races. Annette is a French Creole woman coming from the French colony Martinique. She comes to Coulibri as a second wife to Mr. Cosway, Antoinette’s biological father. Her tragedy starts after her husband’s death. In the first scene of the novel, Annette found out that her horse is “marooned” by her former slaves. She feels latent antagonism held by black slaves but cannot do anything about it. In addition, she suffers from economic hardships and geographical isolation until Mr. Mason comes to rescue her and Coulibri. However, it soon turns out that Mr. Mason is an insolent and foolish Englishman who does not try to listen to his wife’s warning against looming black riots. After all, the Coulibri estate got destroyed by black slaves and Annette became insane. Despite it was Mason himself who brought Coulibri to the ruins, he does not regret nor repent but instead send “insane” Annette away to isolation. Here, Rhys criticizes British patriarchal imperialism by disclosing utter foolishness and hypocrisy of the tyrannical British male character Mason. He was not a savior of Annette and Coulibri but just another selfish English businessman who came there to buy the farm at cheap price. She marries two husbands, the later one being Mr. Mason, who eventually treats her as an object, ignoring the identity of her own. Annette hates Antoinette to the extreme and her entire focus remains shifted to her mentally ill son, Pierre. After their (Antoinette’s and her family’s) house is burned in Calibri by the black Jamaicans, she becomes

insane, and afterwards becomes the victim of the male-dominated society under the domination of her husband, Mr. Mason, But the only dissimilarity between Annette and Antoinette is that whereas Annette accepts the bondage of the society and allows herself to be suppressed by the male-dominated society, Antoinette tries to reject the exploitation of the male-dominated society, and also the bondage of different races and cultures and tries to emerge with a different and unique identity, and her quest for the self does not end even at the closure of the novel.

Another major character, who suffers from immense identity crisis is Christophine, the black servant, who helps Antoinette and her family in their survival, after they are rejected by both the societies. But alas! The existence of Christophine can be seen in relation to either Annette or Antoinette! One of the greatest critics Spivak laments the fact that literature itself is dependent on the hegemonic justice fixed within the history of imperialism and how difficult it is to break away from such fixation. As long as imperialist vestiges linger in the name of Law, Truth and Sciences, there is always a great danger that “natives” could become self-consolidating Others. Spivak could find out the sign of internalized colonialism in the description of Christophine in “*Wide Sargasso Sea*”. While Spivak tries to condone such shortcomings by acknowledging the difficulty of overcoming internalized colonialism — especially in the middle of the modernization and industrialization of the early 20th century where Rhys lived, it is still true that Rhys did not bring out full representation of the black native Christophine in her Caribbean narrative. Hence, as I contended earlier, a different novel can be written from Christophine’s perspective as well, showing the identity of her own.

But we should not forget the fact that the novel, “*Wide Sargasso Sea*” has been written from the perspective of Antoinette Cosway, formerly known as “Bertha Mason” in “*Jane Eyre*”, and hence, she should be given more importance in this paper.

Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, one of the leading critics of the time, evaluates significance of “*Wide Sargasso Sea*” in her article “*Three Women’s Texts and A Critique of Imperialism*” (1985). Spivak first cautions readers to remember that imperialism was a social mission of the nineteenth- century England and its literature served as a major instrument to spread out such imperialist ideology. In other words, the nineteenth- century English literature took a great part in representing the imperialist project of England. Therefore, she warns, we should distance ourselves off from such imperialist narratives as depicted in the 19th century literature and examine how they (imperialists) “worlded” non-European cultures as the so-called “Third-World.” Spivak especially argues that it could become a serious problem when a subversive theoretical tool such as feminism accepts imperialist prejudices without a doubt.

First phase Anglo-American feminist theoreticians, who contend that the model of an independent woman who survives in a male-dominated society by attaining professional success or high social status. It seemed that only if they could mark progress of an individual woman who fights for her own freedom and independence in society, their goal is achieved. A most-renowned case of such instance is “*Jane Eyre*”, but as discussed in the earlier part of my paper, Spivak condemns that Charlotte Bronte victimized a Creole woman Bertha to incorporate “poor and plain” orphan Jane Eyre into the legal English family of Rochester. Spivak reveals imperialist ideology of the 19th century British Empire veiled in Bronte’s work. Spivak appreciates Rhys, for she told us the other side of the story by tracing how Antoinette became Bertha. Readers come to know that Bertha was not her original name. It was Antoinette but soon changed to Bertha by Rochester who symbolizes colonial violence, leading to the confusion of Antoinette’s identity.

Thus, through the novel, “*Wide Sargasso Sea*” Jean Rhys presents the agony of the Creole community and how they are torn between two cultures. Through the representation of Antoinette, Rhys succeeds in exhibiting the real confusing qualities which are imposed on the Creoles. But the character of Antoinette is praiseworthy for the fact that In spite of male imperialists’ efforts to erase all aspects of an identity within Antoinette, she emerges before the readers with a new sense of self within her that embraces all the opposing qualities comprising her character.

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