

Postcolonial Discourse in Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea

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The erasure of colonial empires in the course of the twentieth century and the emerging cultural determinism of former colonies has resulted in a quantity of new literatures in recent years. These literatures seek to define the many voices of the previously marginalized Other and establish acclaim to cultural identity. They also challenge the very identity of the mainstream culture and question the established concepts of cultural superiority. The earliest postcolonial texts could not realize in their themes their potential for subversion because of the direct control of the imperial masters who dictated the acceptable form of the texts. Resistance literature developed due to the abrogation of that constraining power and the appropriation of language and writing for specific purposes (Ashcroft et al. 43-8).

Wide Sargasso Sea emerged as part of postcolonial literature where, both a national and a regional consciousness try to assert difference from the imperial centre. Such literature subverts the imperial privilege of the "centre" in order to give voice to that "periphery" which has been silent for so long. According to Chinua Achebe, the form of the novel, like the whole postcolonial literature, works to disrupt the literary and philosophical basis of Western civilization. This tendency to underline and reject stereotypical aspects of imperialist literature and conscience is a practice of postcolonialism which aims at disrupting, disassembling or deconstructing the kind of logic and ideologies of the West (Ashcroft et al. 27).

Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea is a product of postcolonialism and the use of language she does represents her extraordinary ability to subvert the ideologies of the West. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft and Tiffin distinguish between the Standard British English inherited from the Empire and the English which the language has evolved in postcolonial countries. Jean Rhys uses in her novel both Standard British English and the Jamaican varieties of English as the language of the periphery, i.e. Creole and the English of black community. Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, by means of language, emphasizes and constructs the setting; the Creole, Black, and European identity; and the race relationships of the novel. Rochester, representative of the European discourse and power, rejects the varieties of English, and he refuses Creole as a language which he dislikes and cannot understand. The novel is full of Creole expressions: "I too old now" (6), "she pretty like pretty self" (5), "read and write I don't know" (104), etc.

It is worthwhile to notice that the omission of the inessentials creates an impression of vitality to speakers of the language that was the source of the Creole. Jean Rhys practices the postcolonial tendency to write back to the oppressive imperialist novels. The deliberate act to rewrite canonical narratives of Western discourse is a common colonial practice wherein the telling of a story from a different point of view is considered an extension of the deconstructive project to explore the gaps and the silences in a text. In this case, the novel Jean Rhys is writing back to is Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte. In the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys confronts the possibility of another side to Jane Eyre and she gives voice to Edward Rochester's mad wife, Bertha. *Wide Sargasso Sea* thus becomes a creative response to Charlotte Bronte's text. Rhys's story is set in Jamaica during the years immediately following the Emancipation Act (1833) when race relations were very tense and conflicted.

There is a conscious shift of dates: in Jane Eyre, Bertha is confined in the attic in the first decade of the 19th century; in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette is a child in the 1840s. Jean Rhys, touched by the figure of Bertha, decides to make her tell her life story, abandoning her marginal place as an unimportant character and becoming the main character of the novel. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the point of view central in Jane Eyre is turned upside down, Antoinette is no longer described totally through the eyes of her husband who is white and English, and she gains her centrality. Antoinette declares that "there is always the other side" (82): thus affirming that everyone has his/her personal point of view, and only the recognition of this might allow people to reach the truth. In that, Antoinette reminds us Parmenides's philosophy of being which is one, eternal, continuous, non-divisible, and immobile. Besides there is the world of appearance which, on the contrary, is indefinite, changeable, and made up of oppositions, which makes it so difficult to know the *esse* as it truly is. She presents a creed very similar to Protagoras' and Pirandello's beliefs where reality is how it appears, thus a philosophy where man is the measure of everything and all opinions are true.

Jean Rhys was deeply influenced by her Creole heritage: she was born in Roseau, Dominica, West Indies; her father was a Welsh doctor and her mother a Dominican Creole. At the age of sixteen she left the West Indies for Britain and shortly thereafter moved to Paris, where she wrote five books between 1927 and 1939. She experienced being Creole both in the Caribbean and in England, and she was personally aware of the conflicting culture she depicts in the figure of Antoinette who, being Creole, is accepted neither within the black community nor by the white representatives of the colonial power.

Several critics have pointed out that the novel depicts a society in a state of financial and social decay, and Antoinette's family epitomises this decay: "our garden was large and beautiful [. . .] but it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell" (6). This deterioration mirrors the financial and social decay resulting from the end of slavery, and Jean Rhys shows her understanding of the complexity of the situation. Antoinette belongs to the creolized white community which was a minority group and regarded negatively

by both British whites and local blacks. Antoinette's position in relation to the blacks is not well defined and is contradictory. She is a part of the black society for she shares experiences, superstitions, and beliefs with Tia, her black friend. "soon Tia was my friend and I met her nearly every morning at the turn of the road to the river. Sometimes we left the bathing pool at midday [. . .] we boiled green bananas in an old iron pot and ate them with our finger out of a calabash, and after we had eaten she slept at once" (9).

It can be argued that Antoinette is part of black society and always aware of the differences and of the distance between them. This is clear when, after a disagreement, Antoinette accuses her friend of being a "cheating nigger" (10) and Tia calls her a "white cockroach" (9). There are other episodes in the novel which reveal the complexity between the white Creole and the black community like the night when Antoinette leaves Coulibri. When she sees Tia, her first impulse is to run to her friend and stay with her: "when I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass" (24). Both the girls are moved by the touching atmosphere of the moment because they feel that something has been lost. They see each other as in a mirror image. The mirror represents the illusion of two things being the same.

The two girls are somehow similar but still different and separated as reality is separated from its image in the mirror. Therefore, in her books Jean Rhys intended to demonstrate how the other, the different could abandon his/her marginal role and become essential and central. Jean Rhys speaks from a self-consciously marginal position raising issues of gender and colonial difference in fiction of resistance which are always compromised by the conditions of female dependency. In response to Jane Eyre, Rhys gives a presentation of Antoinette different from Brontë's Bertha Mason and sets out to write a colonial story that is absent from Brontë's text. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, not only does she express the viewpoints of characters who had no voice in *Jane Eyre*, but she also takes a different structural approach to the first-person narrative technique employed by Charlotte Brontë. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written as a multiple narrative, where in the first part Bertha starts telling her story. In Part Two, Rochester, even though never named, takes over the narration, and at the opening of Part Three Grace Poole has been given a voice in order to give the reader greater understanding. Then Bertha again has the role of narrator and ends her side of the story.

Antoinette's anxiety is related to her identity - or lack of identity and it has many more implications on her being than with the reality of her life. Rochester is anxious too, but this feeling for him is connected with the repercussions of his choice of his personal life. It is after his marriage, that his European culture, prejudices, and presumptions about Creoles emerge and

make him reflect on his decision. When he and his wife arrive on the honeymoon island, he starts to look at his wife and he notices her beautiful appearance, and also her creolity. Her eyes now appears "too large and can be disconcerting [. . .] long, sad, dark, alien eyes" (40). The eyes which are suddenly "alien" make him wonder if he "did notice it before and refuse to admit what he saw". She is Creole: of "pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (40). Rochester begins to be obsessed by anxiety that Antoinette is not entirely white and he regrets his choice. The only excuse he gives himself is that he "hadn't much time to notice anything. I was married a month after I arrived in Jamaica and for nearly three weeks of that time I was in bed with fever" (40). What he appreciated of Antoinette is her external beauty "I wonder why I never realised how beautiful she was" (49) and the desire for her, the lust of possession does not imply a true feeling of love for her. In his long stream-of-consciousness monologue, he quickly admits he does not love her "I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did" (58). This is Jean Rhys' device to introduce Rochester's European point of view, the point of view of someone who considers inferior what is not European, but who at the question "is the world more beautiful?" (55) - which puts Jamaica in comparison to the rest of the world - simply answers that it is different.

What appears interesting in the novel is that Antoinette's husband is not depicted as a vicious tyrant, but as a victim himself belonging to a patriarchal society, a victim of prejudices, incapable of understanding and acknowledging the ties linking his wife with the black culture and community, thus unable to appreciate and understand the complex personality of Antoinette. It is this cultural distance and misunderstanding which lead to discrimination, to uprooting Antoinette from her land in order to be taken to England where the story reaches its tragic climax. In the Antoinette/Rochester relation Jean Rhys implies that sense of possession implying a superior/inferior relation which she strongly rejects and condemns. Rochester reveals all his self-centeredness and possessiveness even with the language. The moment he turns Antoinette into Bertha and then to Marionette is emblematic.

Rochester seems to belong to that patriarchal world where women are luxury items to be bought, enjoyed and discarded. Jean Rhys portrays the characters of Rochester and Antoinette to describe and define wider race relations typical of the West Indies where Europeans born or living there, educated to conceive of England as home were culturally marked and excluded as inferior colonials. At the same time, they were racially and institutionally privileged in relation to the African people brought there as slaves to work in the plantations occupying a position of liminality .

Jean Rhys constructs her novel in response to Charlotte Bronte's in order to enlighten the readers about a contradictory and conflicting cultural situation deeply affecting the social, political, and religious life of the Caribbean, a situation not considered in its totality and not present in Bronte's text. Antoinette and Rochester are representatives of two cultural worlds incapable of reciprocal

understanding. But they are not alone in Jean Rhys's picture: they relate with each other and with many other characters belonging to several other sections of the social West Indies' environment. Christophine is an emblematic character in the novel. She is practically Antoinette's caretaker and - in the first part of the text - appears different from the other women at Antoinette's eyes: "she was not like the other women. She was much blacker. [. . .] she had a quiet voice and a quiet laugh (7). She is an obeah woman and Antoinette is afraid as she imagines the occult objects hidden in the room. Later, Antoinette relates differently to Christophine; she greatly wants to trust her, and the previous fear turns into hope, hope that Christophine could help her for her purposes. The need for help makes Antoinette consider and treat Christophine not as a wedding gift but as a person in all her powerful presence. Christophine suggests to Antoinette what to do and how to solve the problems with her husband. As soon as Christophine says she does not know England, Antoinette thinks "but how can she know the best thing for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate, old Negro woman" (70). In that there is the sign that Antoinette's perception of Christophine as a Negro woman and wedding gift has not changed even in her maturity. Spivak and Parry have different views of Christophine. For Spivak, Christophine is tangential to this narrative. "She cannot be contained in a novel which rewrites a canonical English text written in the European novelist tradition and in the interest of the white Creoles rather than of the natives" (Spivak 253). In contrast, Parry asserts that Spivak's strategy of reading necessarily blots out Christophine's inscription as the native, female, individual self who defies the demands of the discriminatory discourses impinging on her person. What is certain is that Christophine considers herself free to contrast Rochester's behavior, to accuse him of reducing Antoinette to a doll. She is so self-confident to answer him directly, coldly and going beyond his pretension of imperial power. It does not matter he thinks to be culturally superior because she is aware of her knowledge and personal culture. Through the character of Christophine Jean Rhys introduces the presence of the obeah as part of the Caribbean, a creolized practice of African religions. It occurs in the novel with both a positive and a negative meaning. It is negative especially according to the white colonizers, in connection with the evil magic. On the contrary, it is positive if seen as a source of rebellion against slavery. Christophine is an obeah woman of whom Antoinette was at first afraid and from whom she later needs help. Antoinette asks her to prepare a potion to make Rochester love her again. But the potion will have entirely the opposite effect it was supposed to have, and Rochester will totally refuse Antoinette as a beloved wife and as a person. Thus, if at a certain point in the novel Rochester seems in some way to appreciate colors, shapes, and smells of Jamaica, at the end of the story he comes to hate the place.

His stream of consciousness, which made him take up the narration, ends with his entire alienation and distance from a world in which he does not belong and which he is incapable of comprehending. Obeah represents a huge living tradition, largely oral, in the West Indies: a great deal of African folk culture, myths, songs, folk tales, and superstitions. Jean Rhys depicts all that in the novel, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* wonderfully reveals how the West Indies is made up of a

number of islands in different stages of economic and social development and in cultural competitiveness. It is clear so far, that several themes arise from the course of the novel: from voodoo to customs, to dialects, to race relations and displacement, and even to the detailed description of the island. Jean Rhys provides a detailed geographical description of the place with rich terminology and particular attention to translating into words sounds, colors, and scents. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchid flowered - then not an inch of tentacle showed. It was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it. (6) The entire passage is evocative of a lost paradise and the detailed description shows Rhys's intention to transfer reality into written text so that the reader can perceive it totally and in its complete essence. Further on in the novel, Antoinette displaced in England and lost in her dreams and fantasy, turns to think again and again of her home.

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