

Writing Back to the Empire: *Righting* Creole Identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wide_Sargasso_Sea

Abstract

Twentieth century witnessed writers challenging certain canonical English texts. The slow yet steady collapse of the imperial powers' direct control over their colonies, during the century, and at the same time, the desire on the part of the earlier colonized people to ascertain their cultural recognition, in a way other than the one established by the colonizers, have caused a great as well as new representative literature. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, being emblematic of this literature, portrays the voice of the formerly oppressed *Other* and thus sets up an assertion to the cultural distinctiveness of the earlier colonized Creole people. In this manner, this novel questions the elitism and exclusiveness of the say of the literature produced by writers from the powerful imperial nations, scrutinizing their well-established and fully thought out perceptions about the weaker and, at the same time, colonized nations. While using the critical tool of Postcolonial Criticism as a basis for the analytical endeavour, the paper analyzes Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a part of this mammoth postcolonial literature, which, according to

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Ashcroft et al (2002), ‘corresponds to stages both of national and regional consciousness of the project of asserting differences from the imperial center’ (p. 4).

Keywords: Twentieth century, canonical English texts, imperial, other, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Postcolonial literature, imperial center

Introduction

The twentieth century literature questions the imperial hegemony of the colonizers in a bid to give voice to the earlier colonized folks, who have either been silenced or misrepresented in literature for such a long time. This literature shows that the time is ripe for the world to hear, as Rhys (1966) terms it, ‘the other side’ (p. 2) of the account, which in fact, is the voice of disparaged and subdued colonized cultures, the ones considered by the colonizers as inferior and simply incapable to represent themselves. The propensity, on part of writers from among these earlier colonized nations, to underscore and disallow the specific traits of the literature of the empire as well as its principles is the hallmark of postcolonial literature that ‘wants to disrupt, disassemble or deconstruct the kind of logic, ideologies of the West’ (Ashcroft et al, 2002, p. 2). Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the product of this revisionist approach. Her use of the language shows her unusual power to challenge the colonial canonical text, Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), thus challenging the hegemonic tendency of the imperial powers. The overall Postcolonial project of rewriting provides a sort of communication, an interaction between texts, writers, discourses, cultures, and ideologies. This is exactly what Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) does to Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997) to Charles Dicken’s *Great Expectations* (1860), and J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).

Righting Creole Identity: Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Jean Rhys, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, uses Standard British English because she wants to give due coverage to the typical discourse of the powerful Europe through the character of Rochester, and, at the same time, she also gives due space to the Jamaican English in order to give the colonized people a say in this whole interaction. This importance to language on the part

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of the novelist is symbolic of the oppressed people, in this case the Creole and the black community in the Caribbean, to have an opportunity to maintain their language against all odds, because, as Fanon (1967) suggests, ‘A man, who has a language, consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.’ (p. 18). Thus Jean Rhys, through the use of language in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, highlights the individual identity of the Creole, the Black, and the European. Rochester, being the representative of the European colonial power, discards the Creole-cum-black varieties of English, saying: ‘Her coffee is delicious but her language is horrible.’ (p. 52). He further says at another occasion: ‘I can't say I like her language.’ (p.53). Rhys, maintaining the right of the Caribbean people, to maintain their identity by keeping hold of their own form of English language, deliberately includes Creole expressions, thus challenging the so-called mainstream or Standard English. Here expressions like ‘I too old now,’ (p. 6), ‘She pretty like pretty self,’ (p. 5), and ‘Read and write I don’t know’ (p. 104), quite evidently show Rhys’s struggle to write back to the empire and maintain the Creole identity against all odds.



Jean Rhys

Courtesy: www.amazon.co.uk

Writing Back to the Powerful Empire

Jean Rhys, through writing *Wide Sargasso Sea*, follows the postcolonial trend of writing back to the powerful empire. This option of rewriting the well-known novels, which emanated from the hegemonic mindset of the West, is an effective way of putting things in order. In postcolonial discourse, this is the deconstructive approach to retell a narrative from a different perspective and thus look for the earlier erasure and deliberate gaps in the original narrative.

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Here, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys deals with Jane Eyre in a bid to give voice to the *Other* side that was muted by Charlotte Bronte. Rhys, feeling this injustice meted out to the Creole girl, sets out to bring forth the real story, that also a full-fledged one, of the girl in the attic. The novelist's re-reading of *Jane Eyre* unveils the text as 'marred by stereotyping and crude imaginings' (Thorpe, 1990, p. 179).

Setting of the Novel

Jamaica is the setting of Rhys's novel, which portrays the period right after the Emancipation Act of 1833 when racial ties happened to be stressed. So, the difference of time period is quite evident regarding both novels as Bertha, the Creole girl in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, happens to be portrayed as a mad girl in the early years of the 19th century; however, Antoinette, the Creole girl as portrayed by Jean Rhys, is depicted in her childhood in the 1840s. The novel *Jane Eyre* illustrates 'imperialism understood as England's social mission, a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English' (Spivak, 2005, p. 362). Now, Jean Rhys, moved by the silent and voiceless character of Bertha, lets her relate the incidents of her life on her own, thus making her abandon her marginalized role as an unimportant character as presented in Bronte's novel. Antoinette is not depicted exclusively by Rochester, her husband, who at the same time is English and white, as was case in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*; rather, here, she is the central character. Here, she is as important individual as anybody else can be in a narrative, making it loud and clear that: 'there is always the other side' (p. 82), affirming that every individual, no matter black or white, and rich or poor, has the right to have a standpoint, of his or her own, regarding every matter, and that this is through the acknowledgment and appreciation of these varying perspectives that individuals and societies can have a peaceful coexistence.

The Issue of *Hybridity*

Jean Rhys, depicting the issue of *hybridity* in her novel, was in fact deeply influenced by her Creole legacy. As a Creole herself, she portrays the typical condition of a hybrid individual, in this case Antoinette, who, despite being born and brought up in the Caribbean is not accepted by the majority of the people, living around here, only because her skin color does not match theirs. Ironically, she, at the same time is not owned by the powerful whites, with whom her skin color resembles but, because she was born and brought up among the colonized blacks of the

Caribbean. Thus she describes her condition as: ‘Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell.’ (p. 19). This corrosion shows the monetary as well as societal decomposition, ensuing at the outset of the abolition of slavery.

Antoinette hails from the community of the white Creoles who live in minority and are not owned either by the British whites or the local blacks. Antoinette, in a sense, partly belongs to the black society because the experiences of her life, her beliefs, superstitions and experiences are just like those of Tia, her black friend. Though she, to some length belongs to the black society, but at the same time, she as well as the blacks living around her know the huge gulf and the mutual differences which halted their unity. This is quite evident at a time, during an argument, when Antoinette addresses Tia, her mate from the black community, as a ‘cheating nigger’ (p. 10), and Tia also once describes her as a ‘white cockroach’ (p. 9). One more incident that shows the tension between these two representatives of the same community takes place when Antoinette leaves Coulibri. While departing, Antoinette suddenly sees Tia, and thus runs towards her, describing: ‘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’ (p. 24). Their act of looking at each other shows as if they were the mirror images of each other. The sameness of the two selves is symbolized by the mirror image here. Just like a mirror gives an image true to the actual being but different in parts, in the same manner, Antoinette and Tia are disengaged from each through ‘the ideological barriers embedded in the colonialist discourses of white supremacy’ (Diedrick, 2005).

Identity Crisis and Bhabha’s *Mimicry*

Antoinette’s dilemma regarding her uncertainty of affiliations necessitates the need that she should be integrated in the community of her own at least, as she asserts ‘the Lord makes no distinction between black and white, black and white the same for Him’ (p. 6). In this manner, the novel is an account of the identities of the previously marginalized communities, Creole individuality, race relations, displacement, and the group’s different relationships with home. The novelist highlights the fact that the individual identity of the people is constructed by the

society itself. She criticizes the ‘divisions inherent in European social structures’ (Gregg, 1990, p. 6) and addresses this issue by means of depicting all those typical characters and stereotypes which, even after the end of slavery and colonialism, decide people’s identities and values on the basis of their skin color. Antoinette, as non-English Creole, would definitely let everyone, including her step father, Mr. Mason, know that the ways of the English people are not the only ones required to have a peaceful life. She would love to let everyone know that her family refused and replaced all Creole tendencies, aspects, inclinations, and habits and replaced them with English as soon as Antoinette's mother married Mr. Mason: ‘We ate English food now, beef and mutton, pies and pudding’ (p. 17). ‘The special postcolonial crisis of identity’ as mentioned by Ashcroft et al (2002, p. 21), in this case with Antoinette, is the first step in displacement. In fact, Antoinette, after the second marriage of her mother is pleased ‘to be like an English girl,’ (Rhys, 1993, p. 17), but later on it is mainly due to the treatment she receives from both the Blacks and the British that she speculates and worries about her real identity, as she asks: ‘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’ (p. 64). Like every individual living in this world, Antoinette wants to know and determine her identity. She wants to know about her origin, and especially the people with whom she can relate and compare herself. What the novelist wants to convey is that it is simply destructive for an individual or even a community to be forced to completely disregard their identity in order to accept a new identity which is created for them by someone else and which has never been their own.

On the surface, Antoinette is portrayed as indulging in the mimicry of other people’s acts and habits; however, this is a typical endeavor on part of the oppressed beings to strive for their specific distinctiveness. Homi K. Bhabha’s (1984) usage of the term ‘mimicry’ to portray such sort of imitation connotes the oppressed and colonized people’s approach to wait for the right moment and bring forth their identity. Lacan (1977) says that mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called in itself that is behind. Since the effect of mimicry is to camouflage, it is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background of becoming mottled- exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare (Lacan, 1977). According to Bhabha (1984), mimicry is a multifaceted tactic to rebel

against the colonizers' habits, language and religion, causing apprehension, anxiety as well as a sort of inferiority complex. Here, Antoinette's behavior quite evidently shows such anxiety.

This anxiety is visible when she, before marrying Rochester, she asks: 'I am afraid of what may happen' (Rhys, 1993, p. 48). Even during their honeymoon, she tells Rochester about certain things which happened to her and affected her life to a great extent. She, after being asked by her husband not to repeat the past sad incidents, replies: 'Only some things happen and are there for always even though you forget why and when' (p. 51). So, she, even after marrying Rochester, cannot get out of that anxiety which is related to her past experiences and which is completely different from the life she is presently living. It is mainly due to her troubled childhood, the unpleasant as well as unfriendly surroundings that she is still worried thinking that her present happiness might also elude her, saying: 'if I could die, now when I am happy' (p. 57).

Antoinette is worried and anxious about her identity or even the absence of identity, thus badly affecting her mental and spiritual health. Her husband, at the same time, is also worried, but ironically, his worry is not related to his wife; rather his concerns are, regretfully, hovering around the ramifications of entering Bertha into his life as a wife. His typical European bigotry, culture and beliefs about Creoles come to the forefront and make him think again about his marriage right after he is married to the Creole girl. Rochester starts looking for flaws in Antoinette's appearance even after he accepts her as a wife. During their honeymoon trip, he feels the typical Creole features in her being as he says that her eyes are: 'too large and can be disturbing – her long, sad, dark, alien eyes' (p. 40). Antoinette's eyes, all of a sudden make him anxious and he thinks whether he 'did notice it before and refuse to admit what he saw' (p. 40). This is the time when he, instead of considering Antoinette as a human being who is full of life and just like the girls in his own homeland, classifies her in terms of categories like powerful and powerless, the colonized and the colonizer etc. He says that Antoinette belongs to a Creole family of 'pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either' (p. 40).

Cultural Polyvalency versus European-cum-Colonial Dominance

Rochester is now engulfed by the typical English and colonial concern that Antoinette, despite being a beautiful as well as sensible girl, does not qualify to be the wife of an Englishman only because she does not belong to or hail from a purely English family. Rochester,

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instead of rethinking and convincing himself to think beyond the man-made classifications of race and power domains, gives himself excuses for making this so-called wrong choice as he says: 'I 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' (p. 40). His only appreciation is for Antoinette's physical beauty: 'I wonder why I never realized how beautiful she was' (p. 49). His lust and desire of possession for Antoinette is in no way symbolic of his true love for the Creole girl. The poor Creole soul, feeling safety of some kind with Rochester, after her house is burnt by the Blacks of her own community, does not know that her husband, intoxicated with the thoughts of belonging to a powerful and colonizer country, deems it simply unbecoming to love a girl hailing from a colonized part of the world. Without caring for the already battered Creole girl, Rochester announces that he is not in love with her Creole wife: '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' (p. 58).

Jean Rhys, in this manner, brings forth Rochester's typically European as well as colonial perspective about the colonized people. This is the viewpoint of the class that uses the yardstick of being European or otherwise in order to judge and decide about the utility of human beings and which, when asked about Jamaica in comparison to the rest of the world, does not say anything but that it is different.

In the relation between Antoinette and Rochester, the novelist portrays Rochester as revealing all his egoism and self-centeredness even during his dealing of the language. Jean Rhys depicts the characters of Antoinette and Rochester in order to depict and highlight the wider race problems present in the Caribbean. The novelist tells us that the Europeans, who are settled here, are categorically asked to envisage England as their ultimate abode but where they are tagged and condemned as representatives of the colonized places. Moreover, the Europeans living here are considered more honorable and they are facilitated more if compared to the people from Africa who were treated as slaves and forced to work in plantations. Jean Rhys's novel explains to the readers the incongruous and clashing cultural set up that affects the religious, social and political life of the people living in West Indies. She portrays the complex situation which, until then was never taken into consideration and which fell a prey to erasure in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.

Through the character of Christophine, the novelist introduces Obeah, an integral part of the Caribbean, a creolized performance of the African religions. From the view of white colonizers, obeah is a negative activity as this is connected with magic, used for evil purposes. However, another interpretation of obeah is that it can be read as revolt against the established slave business. So, Rochester, at the start, lauds the smells, colors and shapes in the Caribbean but he later on starts hating the place altogether: 'I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For, she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be a thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it' (p. 111).

Rochester, after narrating his part of the story and playing his role to the fullest, resigns in rupture and detachment from a world which is not his world and which he is unable to understand. Obeah involves a great living tradition in the West Indies. This is a huge deal of the culture in Africa, involving fables, legends, and superstitions. The novelist depicts all these features in this narrative, and thus the novel successfully shows how the West Indies comprises several parts which are running hard for social and economic prosperity. A porter who is not native inhabitant of the Caribbean tells Antoinette's white husband: 'This is a very wild place, not civilized. Why you come here? I tell you Sir, these people are not civilized' (p. 41).

Following the postcolonial tradition of re-writing colonial texts, Jean Rhys gives an exhaustive portrayal of the place through concrete words and meticulous consideration by transforming into words the scents, sounds and colors. Rhys incorporates humans' five senses in the descriptions because, as Ashcroft et al (2002) says 'the use of different senses in the depiction of landscape is a particularly postcolonial implement, and the overpowering inclination towards the visual is a characteristic of the Western culture, and thus using different senses in the expression of their creativity, the postcolonial authors are able to differentiate themselves from their suppressors' (p. 128). In order to show the peculiarity and uniqueness of this revisionist text, Rhys, through Antoinette, gives quite vivid portrayal of the Caribbean: 'A bamboo spout jutted from the cliff, the water coming from it was silver blue. She dismounted quickly, picked a large shamrock-shaped leaf to make a cup, and drank. It was cold, pure and sweet, a beautiful colour against the thick green leaf' (p. 40).

Universality of Cultural Difference

In the last part of the novel, Antoinette, immersed in her fantasy and dreams, when she is displaced in England, happens to think of her home again and again, missing scents, nature and objects. In the last part of the novel, Antoinette, being locked up in the attic of Thornfield Hall, has been left with nothing else but a red dress. On this dress, she still has the ability to smell the scents of the Caribbean: ‘The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grow stronger. The smell of vertivert and frangipani, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain’ (p. 120).

Thus, despite the fact that Rochester, by renaming Antoinette as Bertha and captivating her in England, has been able to take away this Creole girl from her landscape in the Caribbean, but still he fails to disengage her from the scent of the Caribbean, which is her only way of still adhering to the bits and pieces of her old identity in the attic. Jean Rhys’s stresses that the colonizer may be able to tag the colonized nations in accordance with their own standards but the fact remains that the soul and real identity of these oppressed nations is simply beyond the oppressors’ ability to captivate. Taking strong exceptions to Bronte’s portrayal of the Creole identity, Rhys presents the Creole girl the way she should have been portrayed, as a real living being, in the form of Antoinette. The novel succeeds ‘to memorize the victims of history – the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten’ (Ricoeur, 1999, p. 10). The novelist rejects the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and seeks to show their limitations of outlook, especially their general inability to empathize across boundaries of cultural and ethnic differences.

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