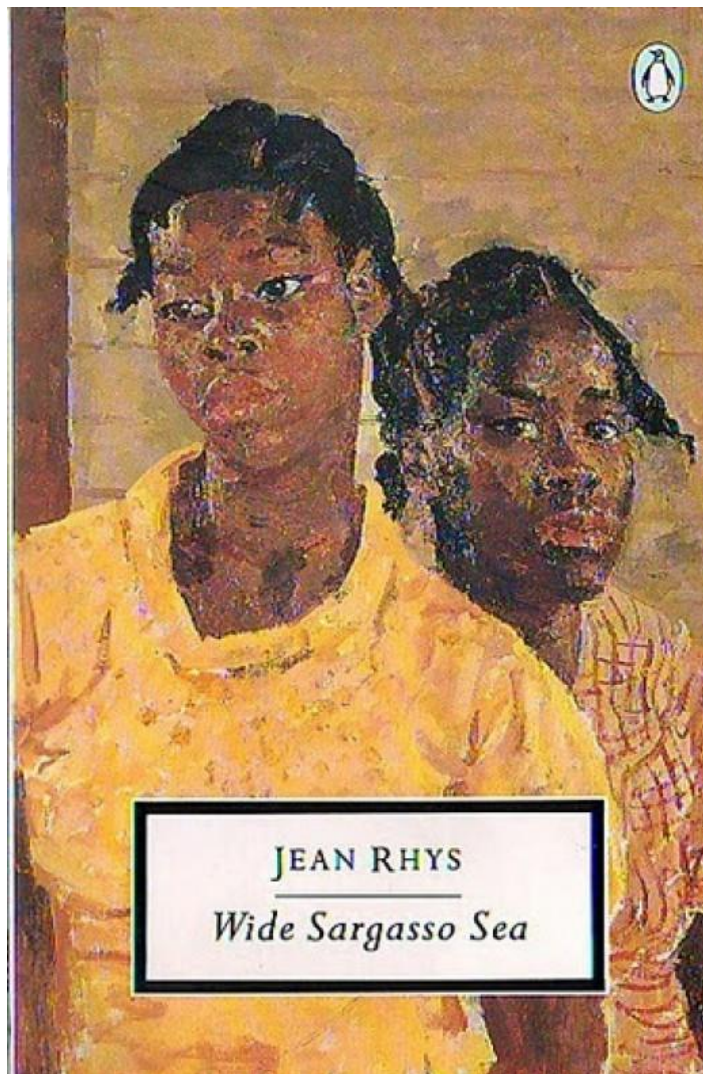


Jean Rhy's Controversial Post Colonial Text *Wide Sargasso Sea*
Implicitly Agrees with and Elucidates the Colonial Project

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discover how the author Jean Rhy's controversial post colonial text *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been elucidated how it agreed with the colonial project through her

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protagonist Antoinette. The embedded colonial spirit has been stretched to its full strength also in this so called post colonial text. Jean Rhy's attempt was to raise the voice against the colonizers (Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and give the proper right and reverence to the colonized other (Charlotte Bronte's character Bertha Mason) through her own strong and rebellious character Antoinette in the text *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The works of the Nineteenth century British novelists were predominantly the depiction of superiority throughout their texts. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* was one of them. In this novel the character Jane Eyre was presented as a disciplined, modest, and pure English woman. While on the other hand, Bronte portrayed Bertha Mason as a mad Creole woman who was savage, mad and an indisciplined character. After this British novel which was based on Englishness, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* described as a post colonial text where she actually tried to proclaim that Bertha Mason will no longer be a mad Creole woman but a strong white negress or a white creole. If the readers would make an attempt to sink inside of Jean Rhys' ideologies regarding the Englishness, they will be astonished to know her acceptance of Englishness through her character of Antoinette.

To analyse the importance of English attributes through the colonizer (*Jane Eyre*) and the colonized body (*Wide Sargasso Sea*), the controversial elements will clearly be traced out in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. While Bronte's text has been constructed the definition of Englishness by juxtaposing English characters against the colonial other, and Rhys' text took an attempt to fight against Bronte's cultural hierarchy while simultaneously did collude with the colonial project. This is how the text of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the character of Antoinette became fashioned and attached with the superiority of Englishness trying to adopt the English touch in every step of her life throughout the novel.

Keywords: Post colonialism, Colonial project, Englishness, Colonizer, Colonized other, white English girl, Creolized West Indian woman

Introduction

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In the novel *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte did depict the Creole woman Bertha Mason as inferior and helpless in front of Jane Eyre. While in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys created a counterpoint through her strong and rebellious character of Antoinette. Therefore, she did try hard to give an answer back to the colonial text *Jane Eyre*. Inside of the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the main protagonist (Antoinette) was certainly the bearer of post colonialism's flag. But unfortunately, the superiority and desirability of Englishness has been found to be an effective impact even on this post colonial text and proved that Englishness certainly prevailed over all and remained as superior among the standards of ideals in all eras.

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* sailed over the river of narratives with her inner anguish towards British imperialism. Her characters were taken on the ideologies to imbibe English attributes, but continuously did fall short. Though *Wide Sargasso Sea* was considered the Creole answer to Bronte's English text, which she did generate the subtle understanding of post colonialism through the double minded character Antoinette. In one sense she was utterly a rebellious soul and did fight against the English, while on the other hands, she was trying to fix herself as perfect as an English girl. From her appearance to her food habits, in everything she gave concentration and wanted to be an ideal English woman.

Rhys's main goal was to resist the superiority of English attitudes found in *Jane Eyre* by engaging in what Homi Bhabha described as colonial mimicry. Her novel basically acted like the prequel for *Jane Eyre*, and also endorsed the marks of mimicking it in style and genre. She even made Antoinette almost as similar to Jane in regard to her religious matters, education, isolation in society and loss of childhood friends. As Rhys attempted to put an effort to show the smashing attitudes of the creolized woman, though implicitly she has made the strong tie with the British colonial project. Hence her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* became ensnared by the provocative Englishness, simultaneously colluding with the very ideas she was trying so hard to resist.

By depicting Antoinette as constantly trying to distinguish herself from the blacks on the island, making herself appear more white, more European, more English, Rhys presented her character and internalized the cultural hierarchy that values Englishness above all else.

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Antoinette's interactions with various racial and ethnic groups of island were both unsettled and also re-enacted many of the common structures of English superiority, bringing into question whether the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* can even be considered as post colonial text at all or not, when the entire premise of the novel was not simply a reaction to the English imperial narrative.

Using Bhabha, I have intended to look at *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a controversial post colonial text and also I have the intention to discern about what extent the novel illustrated the controversial post colonialism and how this novel has gone to shake its hands with the colonial project. Antoinette's madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea* also became complicated by this reading of Englishness, as it proposed the idea that Antoinette's madness was the result of a colonial identity crisis and her frustration was not being able to fit within the narrow constructs of English superiority versus her sexual and social subordination by the male. Hence it has proved that Antoinette's endeavour to become an English woman eventually perished the spirit of post colonialism.

Jean Rhys' Implicit Acceptance of Englishness as a Post Colonial Writer

Jean Rhys' post-colonial answer to *Jane Eyre* was complicated because of her ideological contradictions regarding the superiority of English attributes. The contradictions within Rhys' work was nothing but confusion which has made by her and thus she also instilled the controversial ideologies in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys wrote from her very own experience and said that she discovered the peculiarly smug attitude of the British colonizers and started to think that she was in some way inferior and if she said that she was an English, they at once contradicted her or implied a contradiction. Their concepts were mocking and depressing towards her. They actually treated her as an inferior being. Rhys' mother said that colonials aren't ladies and gentlemen, and so on. Rhys remarked in exasperate manner "All right then I'm not English as a matter of fact, I'm not a bit. I'd much rather be French or Spanish. They'd get even more amazed at that. I was a traitor. You're British they'd say neither one thing nor the other. Heads you win, tails I lose and I never liked their voices any better than they liked mine". Rhys did not possess the ability to claim a solid national identity which has clearly been reflected

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both in her depiction of Antoinette as a hybrid character and the implicit contradictions which was found within her discussion of Englishness.

Jean Rhys' Ambiguous Presentation of Post Colonialism in Relation to Homi Bhaba's Theory

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys did fight against the bombardment of Englishness using what Homi Bhabha used the terms “colonial mimicry”. Mimicry is when someone tries to copy someone else in some way and the result can become almost ridiculous: “a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 122). Here in the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys tried to copy the English people through her protagonist Antoinette which means to collude with the colonial project by using black characters as props to the Creole identity, just as Bronte used the Creole as a prop to the English identity. In this way implicitly Rhys gave influence her protagonist Antoinette as the follower of British colonial project through all of her activities in her life throughout the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys exhibited the social hierarchy, which the British imperialism imposed upon the West Indies by displaying Antoinette's constant attempts to achieve Englishness. So here in the post colonial text we are able to see the West Indian protagonist's urge to take the Englishness with great seriousness. It seems they have been able to spell bound the colonial subjects who were under their subjugation. From the beginning of the novel Rhys depicted Antoinette as a person who was really forfeited in the issue of a sense of belonging, due to a destructive racism that separated her socially from the Caribbean black population and epistemologically from the European white population. Although Antoinette enjoyed behaving like an English girl, also habituated of eating traditional English beef and mutton. Therefore she acknowledged that it was only a facade, since she truly craved Christophine's spicy West Indian cooking. It is to be noted that Antoinette was trying to be like an English girl but she actually could not because of her impure Englishness. She was not a pure English woman. Antoinette's aberration from English tastes that signified her physical and cultural differences from the domestic English body, as the Creole food she has chosen to ingest which symbolized her Creole otherness. Mr. Mason from his part did not understand Antoinette and her mother's alterity, and attempted to claim them for English elite while both are self-admittedly “so without a doubt not English” (Rhys, 16).

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To be like an English woman for Antoinette and her mother was utterly impossible compared to the inherited English people. And they did realize that, to celebrate the dominant codes of Englishness will not be possible, since the pure Englishness got attached to the English race and genealogy, which endorsed wholly by society, while in their blood there was the presence of trail through inherited Englishness. Thus the justification of Antoinette's inability to claim Englishness was absolutely credible. Besides this issue, Antoinette's improbable claim of Englishness laid in her family's lack of wealth. For the black inhabitants of Jamaica, whiteness was associated with the wealthy planter class. So, because Antoinette could not properly perform her whiteness, she could not claim Englishness. Hence it is to be noted that Rhys really wanted to prove her protagonist as a pure English woman.

To Present the Disagreement against the Superior Englishness, Jean Rhys' fell into Dire difficulty of Portraying the Black people as more Powerful than the White People

In the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys tried to show the power of the black negros as more than the white British or white negros. One of the characters is Tia, who was the Jamaican girl, to whom Antoinette tried to befriend. Tia pointed out the incongruity in Antoinette's social status when she says,

“Real white people, they got gold money. Old times white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger”. (Rhys, 8)

When Tia referred to “old time white people” she was referring to former slave owners whose familiarity with and involvement in the slave trade, creolized them morally and biologically estranged them from their English brethren. That means the former slave owners were no longer friendly. Antoinette's physical appearance also played a big role in her inability to claim her Englishness. The main obstacle was considered to be her skin color which was ambiguous. While some literary critics assumed Antoinette was a white Creole because of Rochester's comments about her ability to pass as English at times. Bronte's text described her as having darkened skin and appearing almost purple to Jane. Bertha/Antoinette's racial ambiguity created an issue of banishment from an English identity. As Bronte gave the

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description of having darkened skin associated her with blackness, the antithesis of English whiteness. For Britain, blackness was associated with the colonial slaves and their violent uprising in the West Indies against the white English imperial power. The colonial slave's violence against the colonizer, which made Antoinette emphatically un-English. Somehow Rhys wanted to prove her protagonist Antoinette as a pure English woman which was totally against the rule of post colonialism. However, as Rhys showed that Antoinette cannot be truly English, she actually did create some major problems and eventually failed to give the proper answer to Bronte's novel. Bronte presented Bertha's otherness as the reflection of Jane's Englishness.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys changed the name of Bertha and made her name as Antoinette who was supposed to fight against the colonial anarchy. But the question of colonial mimicry came forward when the post colonial text could not present the original theory of post-colonialism, rather it got the plan to merge with the enticing gait of colonialism. The questions of colonial mimicry became prominent and thus moved forward, because of the diametric opposition of the two female characters who were supposed to be called as colonial other. In *Jane Eyre* Bertha was totally stranded and neglected in front of Jane Eyre, while on the other hands, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette was portrayed as a rebellious, strong character who was performing her activities against the colonial power and their people. But the main twist happened when Rhys portrayed Antoinette as a fanatic applicant to adopt the Englishness. Homi Bhabha stated that, the act of colonial mimicry consists of a desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must produce its slippage, its excess and its difference. Thus colonial mimicry reveals the ambivalence of racial markers and the arbitrariness of cultural hierarchy. In the scene in *Wide Sargasso Sea* where the black slave set fire to Coulibri, Rhys has re-enacted the famous scene of Bertha who was setting fire to Thornfield in *Jane Eyre*. By mimicking this scene of colonial violence, in this way Rhys presented Antoinette a victim of the colonial other. Such a comparison which has made the scenario of post colonial spirit become unstable and upsetting. Jean Rhys should not have created Antoinette the victim of colonial project, and instead of that

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Antoinette's existence should be decorated with the name of unceasing victory over the inherited Englishness of white people.

Rhys Elucidates the False Reasoning Regarding the English hierarchy by undermining Rochester.

The rapturous moments proved as superior as like the attributes of English people. In their lives, they used to follow the superlative activities that made them superior than the inferior black race. In the British novel *Jane Eyre*, we have seen some absolute English characters. It seems, from God they have been gifted by the personalities of pride and their English inheritance. The bearer of Englishness, Mr. Rochester has was seen as a character of mimicry when he did praise Antoinette and remarked that she could be a pretty English girl. Rochester noticed how Antoinette might have been any pretty English girl- "looked like an imitation of an English summer house". (Rhys, 40). Again the concept of Rochester's English disgust became prominent when he commented that Antoinette and Amelie were resembled to each other and could be considered as the menacing concept for British Imperialism.

These kinds of observations by Rochester fuel the upcoming dangers of colonial mimicry. His thoughts of putting the sense of resemblance between the Creole other and the English race completely undermine the authenticity of Englishness. This kind of subversive ideology regarding the English attributes was a threat to the British and their imperialism. Rhys has been exposed the false reasoning regarding the English hierarchy by undermining Rochester. She tried to present Rochester as a man who did share his qualities with Daniel Cosway, Antoinette's biracial alleged half-brother. Rhys has gone so far as to show that, Rochester betrayed his Englishness by undermining the power of Englishness after sleeping with the black servant Amelie and actively partaking in miscegenation.

Rhys's notion of Underscoring the Unique Qualities of Antoinette as a Creolized woman

Unfortunately Rhys took Antoinette as the colonial other and made her as the English subordinate. she also consciously or unconsciously did collude with the Colonial project by showing that, Antoinette's ideologies regarding the black's existence was treated as an issue of the inferior race. Antoinette displayed the fear of miscegenation when she saw a black servant

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kissed her mother. She then moved forward for the further explanation about her disgust at the black servant and showed her anger upon Christophine, calling and rebuking her. She remarked her as, “damned black evil from hell”. (Rhys, 86)

After seeing Christophine with the black man, Antoinette demonstrated that “racial dyad of white and black is always there in the back of her mind, always structuring and warping conceptions and relations, even her relationship with Christophine. In the scene where Antoinette is chased by the biracial boy on her way to school, she describes her horror at the child’s hybrid features, he had white skin, a dull ugly white face covered with freckles, his mouth was a negro mouth, worst, most horrible of all, his hair was crinkled, a negro’s hair, but bright red and his eyebrows and eye lashes were red”. (Rhys, 26)

Another fear of black appearance became visible when Antoinette encountered the biracial boy and it was proved that in her character there were some major impacts from colonial attitudes. Thus it also proved the theory of colonial mimicry as she took the boy to be almost a white boy, but actually he was not the same like the real white boys. Here in this way Antoinette showed her disgust at the physical evidence of miscegenation. On the other hands the concept of Rochester’s English disgust became prominent when he had commented that Antoinette and Amelie resembled each other and could be related. Antoinette’s attempts to break out of her displaced role of the “other” and establish herself within one cultural group, and therefore resisted without any pause. When Antoinette attempted to assimilate with the black population in Jamaica, tried to make friendship with Tia and attempted to speak the patois, her complete assimilation was prevented by both Tia and Rochester; when Coulibri was burned down and Antoinette ran to join her friend Tia, Tia threw a rock at Antoinette’s face signaling Antoinette’s rejection by the black community.

Antoinette’s Urge to Involve Herself Among the English Community that Makes Her Life Stranded and therefore rejects her from the Black Community

For showing Antoinette’s strong position among the group of English people, Rhys made up the mind of Rochester like a superior English man even in the post colonial text *Wide Sargasso Sea*. When Rochester considered Antoinette as not belonging to the blacks as she was

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now the wife of an Englishman declared his disapproval with her speaking patois with Christophine along with her hugging and kissing the black servants openly. Thus, Antoinette's own English prejudices, along with Tia's rejection and Rochester's chastisement compelled her to negate her existence with the black community, while her birth and availability with the former slaves did preclude her connection with the English community.

In *Jane Eyre* Rochester asserted that it was Bertha's sexual matters which was contaminated. So it is to be noted that in *Jane Eyre* Rochester was fully in disgust with Bertha, a colonial other. He remarked, "excesses that had prematurely developed the germs of insanity", (Bronte, 345) while in *Wide Sargasso sea*, Rochester considered Antoinette as one among the English community. Here lies the dilemma of Antoinette's character, she neither belongs to the black community nor she can adjust with the English community. Rhys thus portrayed the madness of Antoinette only to prove herself rebellious against the English society. But Rhys failed to depict Antoinette in the light of post colonialism. This issue of Antoinette proved that her madness was the result of trying to fit within the narrow confines of Englishness.

As Seodial Denna pointed out, "Antoinette is a victim of colonization, one of the purest forms of cultural destruction and mass human denigration. Even the British colonizers suffered from a loss of cultural identity as they were creolized and rejected by their British relations. Antoinette has alluded to this when she and Mr. Mason discuss how Cora's husband's family refused to help the Cosways because of their involvement with slavery. Antoinette's attempts to present herself as English was frustrated by the nature of her position as a Creole, on the boundary of Englishness and otherness being different yet inherently similar to Rochester on the basis of fundamental reasons". Eric Johnson discusses this dichotomy about inclusion and exclusion of the inferior groups within the canon of Englishness. She remarked,

"Rhys is careful to show how the history of colonialism operates in such a way that Creole characters never achieve the same sense of national or even geographical identity that the English characters possess. Antoinette exists in an imperial system which simultaneously forces her to submit to the British nation

state's domestic, legal and cultural practices, yet refuses to view her as anything more than a distant imperial subject never domestically English".

She was rejected by the Jamaican black community, and while her label as the 'other' then it has been problematized, she is still denied her Englishness, Antoinette has addressed her own lack of identity when she got reflected on a song about 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 woman call us white niggers. So between you and 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, 63)

Jean Rhys's description of the Superiority of Englishness through the Character of Rochester

As a colonial writer Bronte has achieved the success to uphold the superior traits of English people through her novel *Jane Eyre* which was authentic and justified according to the theory of colonialism. But on the other hands, Rhys demonstrated the English's superiority again even while she belonged to the post colonial writer's group. She actually done the unauthentic thing. She described the self-importance and superiority by having Rochester constantly compare the West Indies and its inhabitants to England. Rhys exhibited that, it was Rochester for whom England was clearly the norm or standard against which everything else should be measured. From the beginning of Rochester's staying in Jamaica, he was doing comparison between the West Indies and English practices, at what time dinner was served, how the house was looking, and how his wife Antoinette interacted with the servants. Perhaps he was showing his dominance over the Granbois same as his dominance which remained in Thornfield, his ancestral house in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rochester's innate Englishness was proved through his susceptibility to colonial disease. In *Jane Eyre* Bronte depicted Jane's fears of colonial contamination when she did attempt to present some negative ideas concerning travel to India. This issue could be related simultaneously to the character of Rochester in *Wide Sargasso sea*, when he caught a fever immediately upon his arrival in Jamaica.

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“His healthy English body can not withstand the colonial contagion represented by the West Indies and he feels wretched from the affliction for two weeks (Rhys, 44).

Again for the digestion of food Rhys expressed the English man’s fear of Creole foods.

“Just as Antoinette’s otherness and bodily contamination can be seen by her desire and ability to ingest Creole food, Rochester’s Englishness can be seen through his inability to ingest substances that are coded as belonging to the colonial other. In the scene where Antoinette puts one of Christophine’s patios made of West Indian ingredients, in Rochester’s wine he becomes physically sick to the point of thinking himself poisoned”. (Rhys, 88)

Here its so clear that, Rochester’s pure English body has been affected by the colonial contagion and his moral and cultural superiority was confirmed in his deep inward feelings about such contamination. Bronte was justified in showing the Englishness of Rochester in her novel *Jane Eyre*, but for Rhys to uphold the concept of the superior Englishness of a English man like Rochester, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* was not pertinent. Rochester refused to accept anything that deviates from his English norms and ideals, justifying his emotional suppression:

“It was necessary, I was told, and that view I have always accepted. If these mountains challenge me, or Baptiste’s face, or Antoinette’s eyes, they are mistaken, melodramatic, unreal”. (Rhys, 63)

Throughout the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester made the proper relationship of himself to his English self by establishing his moral and physical differences that are accepted as the examples of English national identity. He was terrified by the physical signs of a different race when he did encounter Denial Cosway: “A tall fine Englishman like you, you don’t want to touch a little tallow rat like meeh?” (Rhys, 79)

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Rochester attempted to overcome this threat to English identity with his own marriage when he has decide to remove Antoinette from Granbois and her cousin Sandi. Another reason was to take this decision when Daniel Cosway insinuated an affair between Antoinette and her bi-racial cousin. Antoinette confessed her relationship and remarked that, “we had often kissed before but not like that. That was the life and death kiss and you only know a long time afterwards what it is, the life and death kiss”. (Rhys, 123)

After bringing Antoinette to England, Rochester felt that, he got the ultimate success as he did restrict Antoinette from sexual activity to the domain of the patriarchal family. Therefore, Rochester thought he did prevent the possible birth and infiltration of Antoinette and Sandi’s bi-racial bastard into the patriarchal home and established the codes of Englishness. Here it can be said that, Antoinette was imprisoned with the hands of colonialism, since she has listened to what Rochester ordered her to do.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that, Jean Rhys' depiction of post colonial zeal through her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* was absolutely controversial. She was supposed to present the strong and independent position of the creolized community and has actually planned to ignore the English traits. But somehow in her novel she expressed her inferiority through her character Antoinette’s urge to adopt the Englishness. Eventually Rhys and her novel both were simultaneously colluded with the colonial project.

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