



Female Psychic Disintegration in the Post-colonial context of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*(1966)

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ABSTRACT

Antoinette, the unfortunate heroin of Jean Rhys's the most prominent and generally acclaimed novel is considered as twice "Other'ed" because of both her gender and ethnicity (as a Creole). The problematic nature of her identity as having both European and Caribbean ancestors intensifies her loneliness and inability to find peace within neither of these cultures, feeling alienated and homeless, in other wordsto use Homi K. Bhabha's word "hybridity". Meanwhile Antoinette is mistreated and oppressed by her husband, representative of English imperialism and patriarchy. He controls and subjugates his wife as slave owners did with their slaves. Considering the importance of name in connection to identity, renaming Antoinette by her husband is a form of manipulation and oppression which further distances her from her roots. Financial issues are also very important in oppressing Antoinette. Depriving the rich heiress of all her property according to English law means more dependence and oppression. In the quest for her identity, Antoinette is barred both by the postcolonial and patriarchal factors. That's why she assumes schizophrenic identity and lives her mother's life by succumbing to madness.

الانهيار النفسي الأنثوي في السياق ما بعد الاستعماري

لرواية جان ريس "بحر سارجاسو الواسع"

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المستخلص

أنطوانيت، البطلة التعيسة في رواية جان ريس الأبرز والأكثر شهرة وتقديراً، تعتبر "مغتربة مضاعفة" بسبب جنسها وأصولها العرقية (كواحدة من الكريول). طبيعة هويتها الإشكالية كشخصية ذات أصول أوروبية وكاريبية تعمق شعورها بالوحدة وعدم القدرة على العثور على السلام في أي من هاتين الثقافتين، مما يجعلها تشعر بالاعتراب وانعدام الانتماء، أو باستخدام مصطلح هومي ك. بهابها، "الهجنة". في الوقت نفسه، تتعرض أنطوانيت للقهر والاضطهاد من قبل زوجها، الذي يمثل الإمبريالية الإنجليزية والبطيركية الذكورية، حيث يسيطر عليها ويخضعها كما كان يفعل أصحاب العبيد مع عبيدهم . وبالنظر إلى أهمية الاسم وارتباطه بالهوية، فإن إعادة تسمية أنطوانيت من قبل زوجها يُعد شكلاً من أشكال التلاعب والاضطهاد الذي يزيد من ابتعادها عن جذورها. كما تلعب القضايا المالية دوراً مهماً في اضطهادها، حيث أن حرمانها — الوراثة الثرية — من كل ممتلكاتها بموجب القانون الإنجليزي يعني مزيداً من التبعية والقهر . في سعيها للبحث عن هويتها، تواجه أنطوانيت عوائق من كلا العاملين ما بعد الاستعماري والبطيركي، وهذا ما يدفعها إلى تبني هوية انفصالية (شيزوفرنية) وتعيش حياة أمها من خلال الاستسلام للجنون.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الهجنة، الاخرية ، البطيركية، ما بعد الاستعمار

Introduction

Jean Rhys's experiences as a white Creole writer deeply influence her life and writings. She reflects her personal feelings of bewilderment in most of her writings including *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As Moran observes, "Rhys's characters live in constant fear of the return of the repressed; for this reason, most of her characters experience their lives as a jumble of the past and the present, in which the present is an almost nonexistent space between the horrors of the past and fear of the future" (Moran, 2007: p.14). Rhys publicly and enthusiastically was praised all over the world in 1960s with the publication of her most highly approved novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Lilian Pizzichini (2009) in her biography, *The Blue Hour: A Life of Jean Rhys*, explores the life experiences of a psychologically

wounded novelist who forever challenges the way the people look at women in fiction. *The Blue Hour* performs a similar exhaustive analysis of Rhys's neglected and obscure life, which was tormented by evils from within and without. The exploration of Rhys's severe mental and physical suffering and loss makes a map of her hopeless journey from the wild nature of Dominica to a British boarding school. In her adult life, Rhys suffered the scars and consequences of three failed marriages, the deaths of her two children, and her long battle with alcoholism. "A mesmerizing evocation of a fragile and brilliant mind, *The Blue Hour* explores the crucial element that ultimately spared Rhys from the fate of her most famous protagonist: a genius that rescued her, again and again, from the abyss" (Pizzichini, 2009: 12).

In this novel which critics consider it as a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Rhys explores the theme of suppression and dependence, ruling and being ruled, through the relationship between an over confident and arrogant European man and a suppressed, marginalized, powerless woman who suffers from the lack of self-confidence and sense of identity. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written in three sections: the first covers Antoinette's sad and lonely childhood in Caribbean and also her predetermined and doomed marriage to Edward Rochester. It is told from the view point of the protagonist, Antoinette, herself; the second deals with Rochester as the narrator describes his arrival in the West Indies, his marriage and the disastrous relationship with Antoinette are revealed through his perspective; and the third part is again narrated by the protagonist from her imprisonment on the attic room of Thornfield Hall.

The story of the incompatible cultures is analyzed in the unfortunate female character of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, that means Antoinette Bertha Cosway, a West Indian. As a child, she is called "white nigger" by English women, or white cockroach by neighboring girls. Recognizing her problematic identity, Antoinette explains that, "That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (Rhys, 1966 : p.85). She marries a constrained and authoritarian Englishman Edward and inevitably goes with him to his home country. She ends up locked in the room

below the roof of her husband's country house. "The mad wife in *Jane Eyre* always interested me," Rhys expressed her anger with Brontë in an interview. "I was convinced that Charlotte Brontë must have had something against the West Indies, and I was angry about it." Much of the action of this novel takes place in the West Indies. In the state of frustration, misery, and madness, Antoinette sets fire to the house and she herself burns in it.

What comes out from this very brief introduction on *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that Antoinette is the powerless victim of both Imperial and Patriarchal society represented in her husband, the nameless character of the novel whom only reader calls Edward Rochester because he or she associates him with the man in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. To put it in other words, Antoinette is considered as twice Othered both because of her ethnicity and gender.

Discussion

To be ethnically Othered is explained in Edward Said's theory of colonialism. He claims that, "colonial domination is justified by the west through the rationalization that colonial subject is inferior and must be dependent on as an authoritative voice" (Said, 1993: p.9). The weaker and inferior colonial subject is considered as Other. In fact, Otherness is western philosophical concept that postcolonial theory sought to criticize and repudiate. In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, the concept of other is explained as, "Otherness is the process through which a dominant group creates and stigmatizes out-groups based on perceived differences, leading to potential discrimination. It involves categorizing individuals into hierarchical groups of 'us' and 'them', where the out-group lacks identity and is subject to discriminatory measures imposed by the dominant group" (Staszak, 2009: p.258). The concept of Other is resulted from the false social criterion that divides human beings in to two groups, appreciating the life standard, values, manners, beliefs of the powerful dominant group and degrading and despising the norms of the less fortunate one.

Antoinette's case in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is more problematic since she is at the same time considered both a colonizer and colonized, master and slave, neither black nor white. She is a Creole that means she is "of mixed ethnical background" (Oxford Dictionary). The Cosways used to be a rich family, but since the emancipation of the slaves the family had lost its social position and money and now are ridiculed and belittled by their former slaves and left alone by the other Europeans on the island. The problem of not being accepted by neither the Jamaican society nor the English one is mentioned in the first sentence of the novel: "They say when trouble comes close ranks and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks. The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother" (Rhys, 1968: p.1).

The opening of the novel explains the family's complicated and unresolved situation that is culturally and ethnically trapped between Europeans and Jamaicans. They are not in the rank of Europeans since they are not racially pure and at the same time they are the target of the native's animosity and hatred as former colonizers. As the result, Antoinette can identify neither with the islanders nor with her European ancestors. "Jean Rhys's heroine is one among millions of nobodies in the world who find themselves in the turmoil of two opposing cultures while striving to feel at home in one. The Imperial Society taught her that the ambiguous cultural elements and ambivalent feelings hardly can coexist; leading her to believe that this troubled identity is a result of hybridity in both her origins and surroundings". (Hanif and Peimanrad, 2016: p. 18). Her sense of alienation and difficulties in shaping an identity correspond with Homi K Bhabha's theory of hybridity.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha explains the concept of hybridity as the product of post colonialism; "hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities...hybridity is the revaluation of the assumptions of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects"(Bhabha,1994: p.112). To explain simply hybridity means being in-between position and the subject who is in between situation is called a hybrid or homeless. Hybridity is the product of colonial power as Bhabha puts in "hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects" (Bhabha, 1994: p.112). To be part of both social and ethnic groups but not belonging to any, the hybrid cannot be accepted to any of

them and cannot establish the foundations of her identity on neither of them. As Roman Seldem points out, post colonial criticism in general draws attention to questions of identity of individual human subjects (Seldem, 1993: p. 152).

Hybridity is an extensive technical term used in many biological and cultural fields. Amar Acheraiou claims that, "it was Charles Darwin who first employed it in 1837 in his experiments with cross-fertilization in plants" (Acheraiou , 2011: p. 88). However , the term is recently used in cultural fields "to describe the colonizer/ colonized relationship, particularly the effects of post colonialism on the identity of the colonized". Hybridity as defined in The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology is "an anthropological interpretation of the relationship between Westernization and local cultures - that indigenous cultures are not simply destroyed but combined and merged with Western cultures through a process of adaptation" (Hill and Abercrombie, 2006: p.187). It is worthy to note that there has to be an intermix among different cultures, which subsequently gives a fortune to people of mixed cultures to adopt certain qualities of the superior and better one. However, because of their arrogance and sense of superiority, the colonizers believe that they are better than the colonized people, and as a result, they always strengthen the sense of inferiority in colonized by depriving them of their values. The discriminatory remarks and behavior of the central culture decreases the self-esteem in colonized, ending up in imitation or assimilation.

Antoinette could also be considered a hybrid, a homeless. As Hanif and Peimanfard point out, "Deeply swayed by her Creole legacy, Antoinette resembles the typical portrait of a hybrid individual cut in between the flux of two different cultures" (Hanif and Peimanfard, 2016: p.16). She is rejected and disapproved by both the islanders and Europeans. In other words, she is regarded *Other* both by English and Jamaican society. They do not let her and her family in and think of them as strangers and inferiors. Burns explains, "Antoinette's life becomes a continuous struggle to find a place where she may be happy and peaceful" (Burns, 2004: P.19). That's why the main character of *Wide Sargasso Sea* has to struggle throughout the novel in this ambivalent situation and wishes to be in either of the dominant social groups. Erica Johnson calling our attention to creoles' ambivalent situation maintains that, "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". (Johnson, 2003: p. 22). The creole is a synthesized human being. Indeed, the white creole is the result of an interracial marriage. The creole who is born into parents of different races is physically, linguistically, socially and religiously a manifold human being.

Antoinette wishes to be like Tia, an independent, brave, carefree, hard-skinned girl who knows how to defend herself and is Antoinette's supposedly only friend in her childhood in the island. "Antoinette's wearing Tia's dress is symbolic of Antoinette's desire to be like Tia" (Carriere, 2007: p. 49). And meanwhile she idealizes the English woman in the picture; "So I looked away from her at my favorite picture 'the Miller's Daughter', a lovely English girl with brown curls and blue eyes and a dress slipping of her shoulders"(Rhys, 1968: p. 30). Later after her marriage, she wears the same white dress modeled after this picture in quest to adopt English identity that her husband admires so much. "The oppressive and crushing influence of Edward Rochester makes Antoinette to embrace and imitate European model in order to be accepted by her husband (Carrier, 2007: p.56). Such debasing attitudes towards the ex-colonized people propels them to adopt "mimicry" which is referred to as "the attempt of the colonized to be accepted by imitating the dress, behavior, speech, and lifestyle of the colonizers" (Tyson, 2006: P.427). Mimicry is viewed as a new pattern of conduct in which the colonized people imitate the person in authority in the hope of gaining equal power. During the process of imitation, colonized people remove their own identity which can subsequently create a state of confusion between the real identity and the newly adopted one. This sense of bewilderment and rootlessness leads them to feel not in peace within either of these cultures.

The unfortunate heroin of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is also a powerless victim of patriarchal society and she becomes one of the prime examples of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call "the madwoman in the attic" (Bennett and Royle, 1999: p.149). Antoinette is suppressed by patriarchal power of the west culture. After marriage all her property as an heiress is delivered to her husband and like a slave succumbs to Rochester in following him to England and being confined in the attic.

Rhys also analyzes the theme of women's subjugation to male authority in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In the novel, "female characters are introduced as feeble beings who are dependent on men around them for legal, sexual and financial securities. When Antoinette's father passes away, her mother relies on her second marriage to bring back her status in the society. She wants to escape from Coulibri and regain status amongst her friends". (Maharaj, 2021: 266). Before getting married, Antoinette has a dream which foreshadows her unhappy marriage and also reflects her attitude toward marriage.

"It is still night and I am walking towards the forest. I am wearing a long dress and thin slippers, so I walk with difficulty, following the man who is with me holding up the skirt of my dress. It is white and beautiful and I don't wish to get it spoiled. I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself; ...this must happen...He turns and looks at me, his face black with hatred" (Rhys, 1968: p. 50).

Deanna Madden suggests on Antoinette's second dream in which Antoinette is chased in a forest by heavy footsteps and feels unable to scream or save herself as "a product of her sense of hopelessness and powerlessness as a young woman in patriarchal society" (Madden, 1995: p.165). "Gallagher (2019) asserts, women's value to their appearance and obedience, constructing "a prison of vanity" that equated womanhood with servitude. The implications for marriage were profound: women were not prepared for partnership but for subservience, their lives pre-scripted as accessories to male development"(Nima, 2025:p.1001). She also maintains that, "The dream also reveals Antoinette's fear of what marriage will be: she will be entrapped, violated, despoiled and exploited like a colonized possession" (Madden, 1995: p.165).

Antoinette lives her unhappy and insecure childhood in the island, rejected by her mother in favor of her disabled brother Pierre. She enters an unhealthy marriage determined by her step father Mr. Mason. This marriage further pushes her into marginalized space. Now she is not only labeled *Other* because of her ethnicity but also because of her gender. The newly married couple comes to Coulibri to spend their

honeymoon. The second part of the novel which is narrated by Edward reflects the bewilderment of this mediocre and petty character. Rochester soon realizes that he has no power over the island and the inhabitants even his wife. Antoinette's knowledge and love of Caribbean undermines Rochester's authority and immediately he confesses that, "I feel very much a stranger here, I said I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side" (Rhys. 1968: p. 120). The menace and hatred he feels in the island is as the result of "lack of his authority over so he tries to change and crush Antoinette's identity to bring her back to England, imprison her in the attic and impose his complete authority over her" (Carriere. 2007: p. 47).

Many critics have pointed out to Edward's renaming Antoinette as further removing from her identity and the readers feel uncomfortable and worried by this renaming since it reminds them of the mad woman locked in the attic in Bronte's novel. Gayatri Spivak suggests that, "in the figure of Antoinette, who in *Wide Sargasso Sea* violently renames Bertha Rhys suggests that so intimate a thing as personal and human identity might be determined by politics of imperialism" (Spivak, 1985: p.250). Antoinette herself vaguely understands the danger of her renaming; "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me in to someone else, calling me by another name. I know that's Obeah too'. Tears streamed from her eyes." (Rhys, 1986: p. 121). Considering the importance of name in connection to identity, renaming Antoinette by her husband is a form of manipulation and oppression which further distances her from her roots.

Financial issues are very important in oppressing Antoinette. Edward in an imaginary letter to his father makes clear that he has married her for money and talks about it as a bargain;

Dear father. The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provisions made for her (that must be seen to). I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother, the son you love. No begging letters, no mean requestsI have sold my soul or you have sold it and after all is it such a bad bargain(Rhys, 1968: p.59).

"Bertha grieved patriarchy and discrimination as a female and a west Indian as well" (Saddan, and Al-Hasani, 2023: P. 152). She is a rich heiress but after marriage all her property belongs to her husband, according to English law. It's something that makes Christophine, Antoinette's confidant and nurse, very angry and surprised. She declares that to be financially independent is very important for women's self-esteem. The nurse advises her to leave Edward but Antoinette in a mood of complete hopelessness and misery answers, "He will not come after me, I have no money of my own at all. Everything had belongs to him...that's English law." (Rhys, 1968: p.91). Christophine despising English law exclaims that, "all women, all colors, nothing but fools,...I thank my God. I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man" (Rhys, 1968 : p.105). Understanding the crucial function of money to escape from male-domination, christophine unfruitfully attempts to convince Antoinette to leave Rochester, but with no money of her own, which is not feasible according to English law which gave what the woman possessed to the man she married. "Since economic liberty means independence, depriving Antoinette of her property only means more control over women and the sustainability of patriarchal hegemony" (Bekler, 2023, p. 92).

Maggie Humm hints in this regard that, "All women characters in Rhys's fiction are mercilessly exposed to the financial and gendered constraints of an imperial world" (Humm, 1995: p.187). This imperial world is created and controlled by white men. This forced financial dependency on the world that excluded, marginalized and suppressed her also crushed her sense of identity. From this point of the novel, what the readers see from Antoinette is complete obedience and automatism. She lets Edward to take her away from Jamaica to England. To call her Bertha, restrict her from the rest of the world and give her schizophrenic identity.

Antoinette is distressed and confused by being a woman in a male dominated society. Since Antoinette has so little sense of identity, doesn't clearly understand the oppression of patriarchy over her. Both mother and daughter get married to Englishmen in hopes of making peace with their fears but the men deceive and abandon them. It is the dependency and childlike reliance on men that lead to Annette and Antoinette's madness followed by traumatic death. Sherry Lewkowicz recognizing the dark and pessimistic world view of

the author, points out: “*Wide Sargasso Sea* maintains a steady absence of faith in women’s ability to transcend the oppression of her gender. Rhys’s novel depicts the near impossibility of success for a woman in a patriarchal world. This is a strikingly different kind of feminism” (Lewkowicz, 2004: 25).

Part three of the novel which is mostly narrated by Antoinette except a letter written by Grace Poole, a woman who looks after her explains the unfortunate heroine’s life in Northfield hall where she is locked in the attic. Antoinette gradually understands why she is brought there, an important question which had confused her at first. “why I have been brought here, for what reason? There must be a reason. What is that I must do?”(Rhys, 1968: p.146). The fact that Rochester has even prevented her having a looking glass shows to what extent he has suppressed her and had blocked any slight attempt from Antoinette to achieve any sense of identity. She maintains, “There is no looking glass here and I don’t know what I am like now...Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?” (Rhys, 1968: p.147).

Then the color red of the spreading dress on the floor reflects the image of fire in her mind and reminds her of something she must do. In an unconscious state of mind while she has her third dream, she takes revenge. “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do.” In the fiery death that she chooses for herself, she sets fire to Rochester’s house and takes revenge of both patriarchal system and colonial power. This revengeful action reminds the reader of native’s setting fire to their Coulibri house to show their hatred and opposition to slavery and colonial power.

Conclusion

Jean Rhys by focusing on *Jane Eyre's* the most mysterious character, "the mad woman in the attic", calls the readers' attention to the destructive effects of both colonialism and patriarchal systems which makes the female character falter in the process of identity

formation. By giving voice to *Jane Eyre's* silenced and marginalized character, the writer challenges the oppression of colonial and patriarchal ideology.

The first half of *Wide Sargasso Sea* concentrates on Antoinette's life in Jamaica who helplessly tries to identify with the island people. The second half, mostly narrated by Edward Rochester focuses on her inability to identify with England, which is demonstrated through her relationship to Rochester. This issue is explained by Homi K. Bhabha, a postcolonial critic, as hybridity or homelessness. She cannot find home in either of the cultures and her attempts to feel affinity with natives or English people is doomed to failure. One of the most important factors determining one's identity is home, a place of belonging and feel safe. Antoinette is deprived of feeling of what home or safety can be like. So she doesn't have any sense of identity. She knows so little of herself.

She is considered Other, because of her ethnicity. As a Creole, she is mocked and belittled by islanders calling her white cockroach, and at the same time, her English husband considers her stranger. The English values that he appreciates so much are far removed from her. He never understands her and frankly declares that I don't love you.

Antoinette is doubly Othered as a woman. She gets financially dependent on her husband after marriage. Since English law delivers all women's property to their husbands after marriage. Edward Rochester as a representative of patriarchal system of thought suppresses her, crushes her identity by calling her another name and taking her away from Jamaica to England, confining her in the attic from the rest of the world. That's why the victim of imperial power and patriarchal system of thought fails to construct the basis of her identity and consequently assumes a schizophrenic identity.

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