

THE OTHER`S (RE)WRITING OF THE NARRATIVE(S) IN JEAN RHYS` *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

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Abstract: *In 1966 Jean Rhys produced the novella "Wide Sargasso Sea", which retells Charlotte Brontë's famous novel "Jane Eyre", while transposing it in colonial Jamaica, and showing the negative effects of European colonization on Caribbean culture. The narrative relies upon dream-like visions, fragmented impressions, and multiple first-person voices to create an unsettling sense of disorientation in the reader; but this reflects the experiences of the work's main characters. Antoinette Cosway, patterned on the character of mad creole Bertha in Jane Eyre, tries to escape her predicament as a Creole by marrying, but she finds herself in the same position as Rochester's wife.*

The notion of the minority as "other" is important to postcolonial studies and to our understanding of the tensions at play in "Wide Sargasso Sea". Both the black majority and white minority on the island marginalize Antoinette and her Creole family, making them outsiders on two fronts.

Keywords: *minority, Caribbean culture, colonization, desorientation, outsiders, otherness*

The field known as "Postcolonial Studies" gained recognition as an academic discipline in the 1960s, the same decade in which Jean Rhys penned *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Today the novella is regarded as one of the most famous examples to emerge from a revisionist school of literary interpretation known as "Postcolonialism." But what exactly does it mean to say that the text is a "postcolonial" revision of *Jane Eyre*?

In brief, Rhys' work offers a retelling of part of Brontë's novel with specific attention paid to the largely negative effects of European colonization on the culture of the Caribbean. Postcolonial writing attempts to revise or correct often-accepted European-made historical details by providing accounts from the perspective of the colonized peoples - generally repressed minority groups. In this case, Rhys gives voice to the Brontë's Creole madwoman, a character she sympathetically reconfigures as Antoinette. By imagining Antoinette's history before being locked in the attic, the fate to which Brontë consigned her, Rhys simultaneously calls into question the racially pejorative characterization of her literary predecessor and indicts the once-rampant practice of colonialism. In this vein, Antoinette's nameless English husband (Brontë's Rochester) represents the devastatingly powerful colonizer.

Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)¹ is a short but dense literary work that becomes considerably more approachable when given some context. In the words of critic Anne B. Simpson, it is a text that offers "ambiguous and mutually incompatible interpretive possibilities." As such Rhys's work has been classified as a paragon of post-structuralism, a literary movement that insists upon the absence of absolute truth in the world. To be sure, *Wide Sargasso Sea* resists definition to an extent that many readers find frustrating. The

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¹ *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a 1966 postcolonial parallel novel by Dominica-born author Jean Rhys.

narrative relies upon dream-like visions, fragmented impressions, incomplete sentences, and multiple first-person voices to create an unsettling overall sense of disorientation in the reader; this confusion in turn reflects the experiences of the work's main characters. Perhaps because of its multitude of "interpretive possibilities," the novella has attracted a variety of critics, from feminists to deconstructionists to postcolonial theorists.

Undoubtedly the most important piece of contextual information about *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that the novella was inspired by Charlotte Brontë's famous nineteenth-century novel *Jane Eyre* (1847)². In *Jane Eyre*, the eponymous heroine accepts a position as a governess at a remote country estate by the name of Thornfield Hall. She falls in love with her employer, the much-older (Mr. Rochester), and eventually agrees to marry him. On the day of their nuptials, however, it comes out that Rochester is already married and is hiding his insane wife Bertha in the attic of his mansion. (This explains the evil laughter that Jane frequently hears emanating from the third story, as well as several strange incidents that befall the inhabitants of the house.) Jane, traumatized by the revelation of Rochester's shady past and horrified by his suggestion that she live as his mistress, flees from Thornfield, which the madwoman later burns to the ground. Bertha dies in the blaze and Rochester is temporarily blinded but regains his vision soon after his reunion with and marriage to Jane. The two, presumably, go on to live happily ever after.

Wide Sargasso Sea positions itself as a prequel to the events described in Brontë's tale and offers a much more nuanced and sympathetic portrait of the Creole madwoman Bertha, whom Rhys bestows with the more becoming moniker of "Antoinette." The title of the novella refers to the elongated portion of the Atlantic Ocean that separates England and the West Indies. The work traces Antoinette's life from her early childhood years in Jamaica to her disastrous marriage to an unnamed Englishman who imprisons her in the attic of his ancestral home. The text is full of ominous foreshadowing, mostly related to Antoinette's ultimate descent into madness and her final violent assertion of agency - setting fire to the house where she is captive.

It should be noted that Rhys made two significant changes to the details of *Jane Eyre* as established by Brontë more than one hundred years earlier. First, she changed the time frame of the narrative, pushing Antoinette's childhood ahead by several decades. In Brontë's novel, which takes place between 1798 and 1808, Bertha Mason is an already a grown woman, but in Rhys's work Antoinette Cosway is still an adolescent when the story begins in 1834, one year after Emancipation. This modification enabled Rhys to emphasize the racial tensions as well as the antagonism of the natives toward the colonizer: the revised time frame places Rhys's story as an end-of-empire text, while Brontë's novel takes place at the height of British imperialism. Additionally, Rhys revised the lineage of the madwoman as outlined in *Jane Eyre*, making it so that Antoinette/Bertha is not related by blood to Richard Mason; instead, she is his stepsister. As critic Judith L. Raiskin³ points out, this enables Rhys to introduce "Antoinette's larger 'colored' family" to the tale and thus, again, to address racial issues in a more direct manner.

² Charlotte Brontë (21 April 1816 – 31 March 1855) was an English novelist and poet, the eldest of the three Brontë sisters who survived into adulthood, whose novels are English literature standards. She wrote *Jane Eyre* under the pen name Currer Bell.

³ Judith L. Raiskin is a published editor. A published credit of Judith L. Raiskin is *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Norton Critical Editions).

Race is a prevalent topic though the entirety of this story. Hybridity and colonialism are two examples of racially inspired ideas that are expressed. There are many divisions within groups of people who have the same color of skin. For example, Christophine, who acts as a sort of mother figure for Antoinette, has dark skin but is treated differently because she is not Jamaican but instead hails from the French Caribbean island of Martinique. Also, there is a clear disparity between the whites born in England and the creoles, people who live in the Caribbean and although they possess black ancestry, have white skin.

In the Caribbean, there is a large population of mixed-race people, usually because white slave owners would often rape and impregnate their black female slaves. It is implied that Sandi and Daniel Cosway are born this way. Speaking of Antoinette's now deceased father, Alexander Cosway, and her mother, Annette, people familiar with their past say, "And all those women! She never did anything to stop him - she encouraged him. Presents and smiles for the bastards every Christmas" (29).

Finally, it is interesting to note that Antoinette and her mother do not share the same racist views as the other whites on the island. Both women understand the importance of black slaves in their lives, and Antoinette seems to identify more closely with the blacks in the story than the whites.

Wide Sargasso Sea is an end-of-empire text that charts the downfall of English colonialism in the Caribbean, a process that began with the abolition of slavery. By moving the timeframe of the story to just after the passage of the Emancipation Acts, Rhys emphasizes this aspect of her novella. Much of the descriptive detail in the work serves to underscore this theme; for example, Coulibri Estate has fallen into a state of utter disarray and Antoinette says that she "did not remember the place when it was prosperous." Throughout the work we see the English struggling to maintain their tenuous grasp over the island while simultaneously grappling with the reality that this domain is very different from Europe. Rochester's intense need to control Antoinette represents the British fight to maintain economic and legal control over an area they considered their territory.

Related to the theme of British imperialistic decline, nostalgia plays an important role in the text from its outset. "My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed - all belonged to the past," Antoinette says wistfully on the very first page, and throughout the story she longs for a return to what she remembers as the innocent and happy days of her girlhood. She remembers Coulibri as having a garden as "large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible," but laments that over time it has "gone wild." Rhys repeatedly represents the past in Biblical terms, as a state of grace from which mankind has fallen. This conception of history, however, is somewhat ironic; the time for which Antoinette yearns so desperately is the same period in which the vast majority of the island's inhabitants were living as slaves.

The notion of the minority as "other" is important to postcolonial studies and to our understanding of the tensions at play in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Both the black majority and white minority on the island marginalize Antoinette and her Creole family, making them outsiders on two fronts. As a result they live in a state of almost complete social isolation. "Now we are marooned," Antoinette's mother says after the death of her horse prevents her from leaving the grounds of the family's estate. Later she repeats that they are "abandoned, lied about, helpless." Even though she marries to get out of this predicament, Antoinette finds herself in the same position as Rochester's wife.

The subjection of women to male authority is an important theme in both Charlotte Brontë's nineteenth-century novel and Jean Rhys's twentieth-century revision. Like Brontë, Rhys illustrates the painfully limited role of women in Victorian society. Antoinette, for example, is unable to free herself from Rochester's brutality because she has no financial independence; when she married him all of the money in her dowry was given to him without condition or stipulation. Rochester represents the ultimate in patriarchal tyrants, but other male characters in the novella also display deep-seated feelings of misogyny, including Mr. Mason and Daniel. With the possible exception of Christophine, men deprive all of the female characters in the text of their agency, something Rhys clearly finds deplorable.

The theme of feminism and the dependence of women on men is prevalent throughout the novel. Miss Germaine and Helene de Plana, two of the young women at the convent school, represent the feminine ideals that Antoinette is meant to emulate. Such values expected of women at the time were properness, mild tempers, chastity, beauty, elegance, and good manners. Such values seem to be contradictory to what Antoinette represents, who possesses a quite fiery temper, as demonstrated by her fight with Tia at the beginning of the novel.

Annette, Antoinette's mother, attempts to use men as a means to gain financial and, as a result, social status. She marries Mr. Mason, a wealthy white man, with the hope that she may be able to escape Coulibri and return to her previous status among her peers, one of wealth, power, and importance.

Antoinette marries Rochester, a white man who hopes to gain the inheritance left to Antoinette by her late father, Alexander Cosway. In society at this time, a single woman, no matter how wealthy, didn't possess the same type of social power as men did. It appears as though Antoinette does truly love Rochester, but it is clear that Rochester is using Antoinette simply as a means to gain wealth. Eventually, both Antoinette and Annette are driven insane as a result of their dependence on men.

Money, Rhys suggests, is the medium by which a new and legalized form of slavery has been instituted on the island now that emancipation has been granted by the British government. The incidents in which financial inequality sullies the emotional relationships between characters are innumerable: Tia steals Antoinette's pennies, Rochester marries Antoinette for her dowry and pays Amelie for sleeping with him, Daniel tries to extort money from Rochester in exchange for his silence, and even Antoinette attempts to use her pounds to convince Christophine to perform a black magic ritual. Without exception, the awareness of economic inequality destroys the ties that bind the novella's characters, as those in power lord their wealth over others who are less fortunate.

It is no surprise when Antoinette loses her mind in the last section of the novella. Like Rochester, readers have been expecting it to happen for a long time. Daniel insists that both of Antoinette's parents suffered from mental maladies, and indeed Annette displays her instability over and over in the first part of the text, first as a recluse at Coulibri and later as fiend who tries to kill her husband. Yet Antoinette's mental breakdown is not only the result of her hereditary susceptibility, Rhys suggests. The circumstances of Antoinette's upbringing and marriage - in particular her confinement in the attic in the last section - contribute to her deterioration. Readers should ask themselves at what point Antoinette's conduct truly becomes "madness," as Rhys hints that insanity is at least in

part a condition constructed by those in power to subordinate their inferiors. Hence female madness is closely related to patriarchy.

Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an alternative version of the events described in *Jane Eyre*; a revision in which the madwoman in the attic could tell her own side of the story. Toward this end, perhaps the most important theme in Rhys's work is the idea that, as Antoinette says in the text, there are always at least two sides to every story. Critics have often asked whether Rhys's account of British colonialism is more valid than Brontë's and vice versa. Still, even within Rhys's own text there are irreconcilable differences between the different narrators' recollections of the same events. Some scholars tend to privilege Antoinette's account of her life over that offered by Rochester, but while it is tempting to do so it must also be remembered that this is exactly the type of reading that Rhys warns against. In this alternative Caribbean world, she suggests, memory is malleable and imagination is influential; reality, if it exists, is different for each individual. To attempt to discover a definitive interpretation of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, then, is to make the same mistake as Mr. Rochester, attempting to fix something that by its very nature is variable.

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