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THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, CLASS AND GENDER IN JEAN RHYS'S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

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Abstract: *Jean Rhys's postmodern retake on Charlotte Bronte's classic text, Jane Eyre finds an exploration into the backstory of the villainous Bertha Mason in Wide Sargasso Sea. Bertha, considered a monstrous dark double of Jane, the eponymous heroine has been given a narrative voice in order to challenge Bronte's characterisation which was widely popular in the Victorian period. Rhys has dismantled the colonial tropes that inform Bronte's text and revisited the story with a sympathetic and a tragic take on Bertha, who has been given a different name, Antoinette. The novel critiques how systems of power work together to form the character of Antoinette, they are interlocked in a way that she cannot escape one from the other. Her descent into madness is a direct overlapping of her postcolonial identity, a rigid social class structure and patriarchal authority. Her madness cannot be understood in isolation of her social position as an upper class Creole woman in a newly emancipated nation. The paper therefore attempts to make an analysis of Rhys's masterful critique of the systems of power which can violently erase a person's identity and their eventual rebirth as a gothic monster in Bronte's story. This intersection is essential in postcolonial reading of any literature with a colonial subject as its main character as it provides how these forces violently work against their identities and story line.*

Keywords**:** *Postmodern, postcolonial, madness, class, creole, power, patriarchy*

INTRODUCTION

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1968) is an indispensable text of postcolonial and feminist revisionism, challenging the colonial and patriarchal myths embedded in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. By giving a voice to Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic," Rhys constructs a powerful critique not of a single axis of identity, but of the mutually reinforcing forces of gender, class, and race in the colonial apparatus. The novel proves that it is the convergence of these identities that ultimately leads to Antoinette Cosway's tragic erasure and re-invention as the monstrous Bertha. The trope of the "madwoman in the attic" can be defined as "the representation of female characters who are confined, marginalized, or driven to madness within patriarchal societies, particularly in literature. This concept highlights the struggles women face against societal expectations and restrictions, serving as a critique of gender roles and the silencing of women's voices in the narrative." (Fiveable, 2004, n.p.)

Rhys's criticism of overlapping systems of power is brilliantly presented in the character of Antoinette and the Caribbean society following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. This turbulent period provides crucial background information on the novel's key themes of racial tension, identity and women's position within it. Such a context provides a more sympathetic portrayal of Antoinette, the tragedy that defines her character right from the beginning of her story. In Rhys's version there is so much more to her story than what Bronte did not engage with for whatever reasons. Race as projected by Rhys is an unstable foundation of identity in post emancipation Jamaica, as she does not "deny the historical, racial and social hierarchies enforced by English planters and civil servants in the West Indian colonies as rhetorical tools to carry out the work of empire building." (Halloran, 2006, p. 87) The Europeans maintain their racial superiority as seen in the case of the English ladies who constantly gossip about the Cosway family and disapprove of the Martinique (French) origins of Annette and her beauty. Whereas the Creoles are always eager to please and aspire to get into the circles of the elite Europeans. These "artificial" constructs stand in place in a volatile region purely because the Empire's need to control and regulate the masses is greater than its desire for assimilation. In such a climate, race is established by the novel as the primary determinant for social position and the power it affords.

I. Volatile Race Relations in the Caribbean

Antoinette is at the brink of racial boundaries, she is a marginalised European and also a rejected Black woman. Her liminality as a White Creole makes her position very vulnerable and lonely. "Through the performative utterances of racial others, by name calling or insults, these … characters are transformed from plantation owners and slaves, to "white niggers". (Halloran, 2006, p. 88) The ex-

slaves who are the new neighbours of the Cosways never miss a chance to taunt them as "white cockroaches". They are never made to forget that their future is in a perilous state. The racial ambiguity that Antoinette faces makes her homeless, friendless and hopeless. She has never known firm roots and the same restlessness that consumed her mother becomes a terrible example for her. She knows that she along with her mother and brother will always be rootless and finally comes to accept it. Although time and again she hopes for better and tries to trust people such as her English husband. This proves to be fatal just as the fire that destroys Coulibri and metaphorically consumes her.

Antoinette and her mother Annette lack the firm standing of their trusted servant Christophine, a Black former slave, an obeah woman. They cannot match up to her command and the respect she gets from everyone, even Rochester fears her. Yet she too is ultimately powerless compared to the White Rochester who fires her in order to remove the last obstacle in his way. In this manner Rhys is able to address the complex nuances of West Indian race relations:

> By foregrounding the West Indian racial and social divisions, Rhys does to her own protagonist Antoinette what she has been acclaimed for doing to Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, i.e., shows her as constituted within and by the processes of colonization and imperialism. Instead of extolling the unified and autonomous (feminine) subject Jane had—and Antoinette could have—come to embody, *Wide Sargasso Sea* calls forth a model of reading that scrutinizes the negations and devaluations which such a definition of identity may involve. (Mardorossian, 1999, p. 1072)

There is no "unified and autonomous (feminine) subject" in this text as the West Indian society is a heterogeneous group which leads to the other kind of isolation of the Cosway women. It is their Martinique heritage that makes them the *other* in the English Jamaican circles and is something that only a proper West Indian author such as Rhys herself can address. She knows the nuances of multiplicity in this society which is so different from Bronte's Jane whose experiences are not so different from another poor English orphan girl. Antoinette's case is so much more complex than Jane's. She has to deal with her Creole heritage within an English colonial society while living her isolated life in an estate surrounded by ex-slaves owned by her family who immensely hate them.

II. Precarious Class Position

The Cosway family's class position in the Jamaican society is a precarious one and is a crumbling symbol of privilege. Antoinette is born into the riches of her slave-owning family, but by the time the Emancipation Act is brought into force, they are financially ruined and her father dies shorty after. The family is plunged into poverty, losing all their slaves, making Coulibri a ghost of its former self. The slavery that built their wealth becomes their curse as the ex-slaves taunt them and in a way find satisfaction watching the family lose their former glamour and riches. They are isolated now that they are poor and not accepted into the colonial circles who valued Old Cosway more due to his pure English heritage. The arrival of the next batch of English plantation owners who will work with the new indentured servants from India promise to make their lives better. Annette hopes she will find acceptance in the new neighbours, sadly she finds only ridicule and pity.

The marriage of the new Englishman, Mr. Mason with Annette is also a business transaction for his sights are set on Coulibri. With the marriage, the estate automatically transfers to him and undergoes a tremendous change. This did not go well with the blacks as wisely understood by Annette and Antoinette:

> The black people did not hate us quite so much when we were poor. We were white but we had not escaped and soon we would be dead for we had no money left. What was there to hate?… Now it had started up again and worse than before, my mother knows but she can't make him believe it. I wish I could tell him that out there is not at all like English people think it is. I wish… (Rhys, 1968, p.31).

This reversal in class position ignites the same fury in the former slaves and Annette and others find no respite, they know the doom is near, except for Mr. Mason.

After the destruction of Coulibri and the death of all of her family, except her step-brother, Antoinette is left alone, her class position makes her vulnerable. She only has the name of an upper class person, her paradoxical position rises from the fact that she has no real white privilege or power. Her inheritance is the sole reason a proper Englishman like Rochester agrees to marry her which goes on to highlight how her class value is her only worth. In this crumbling world of slavery and colonialism, this wealth that Rochester derives from her is deemed tainted as it is rooted in the exploitative history of the plantation, and becomes a source of resentment for him. Her weak class position makes her an easy target for him. Through his letters to his father it is learnt that as a second son, he is forced to marry her which emasculates him; added by the foreign exotic locale, further poisoning their marriage.

III. The Postcolonial Heroine

Antoinette's position as a Creole woman is the single defining feature of her tragic life. It is important to not forget that Bronte's inhuman rendering of Bertha is dismantled by Rhys who is Dominican herself and has thorough understanding of the nuances of a postcolonial woman's identity and the power structures that define it:

> At present, decolonial feminist perspectives benefit women as the character of Antoinette, other than omitting and not considering them, for they opened a path to better understanding and viewing women that were marginalized by the universal eurocentric dominance of the world. Decoloniality allows us to see these women through new intersectional lenses. In contrast to what happened to Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre, for instance. (Oliveira, 2022, p. 17)

In a period which dictates that she is the property of each men that come into her life, she has no real agency despite the colour of her skin and wealth. Perhaps she does not care about it in the beginning but it eventually dawns on her. When Christophine asks her to take her inheritance and leave this strange marriage, she is shocked to learn that under English laws Antoinette has nothing left of her own.

Christophine argues with Rochester when he fires her, "Who you to tell me to go? This house belong to Miss Antoinette's mother, now it belongs to her?"Rochester is enraged as he replies back, "I assure you that it belongs to me now." (Rhys, 1968, p. 122) Patriarchy has become the personal law as was a prevalent and acceptable practice in this era. Rochester's letters make it clear that he unwillingly married Antoinette as he was disgusted by his financial dependency or perhaps cut off completely by his father as the

second son. He is softer in the beginning but soon settles comfortably with the English patriarchy that he was born into, he becomes menacing and monstrous towards his own wife who is only but a commodity for him.

Gender dictates Antoinette's personal fate for she has no agency of her own and will be deemed and established as a madwoman if her husband wants her to. Rochester is not only territorial about his wife's estate and property but mostly about owning her body and agency. He fully possesses her, "Hide yourself but in my arms. You'll soon see how gentle. My lunatic. My mad girl." (Rhys, 1968, p. 127) His is a chilling account of patriarchal control and he systematically breaks her apart. He exploits her body, rejects her exotic identity, commits infidelity, takes away her agency, isolates her, transports her to a foreign land, drugs her, locks her up and finally drives her to her death. This list of exploitation is endless and his actions are sanctioned by the English law which has granted him absolute power over his wife. He makes her emotions pathologized as madness and establishes that insanity is her inherent condition and that she must he locked up.

CONCLUSION

Therefore the paper attempted to examine the inextricable intersection of power structure such as race, class and gender which becomes integral in shaping the madness in Antoinette. The novel emerges as a powerful critique of Victorian stereotypes whereby the racial other is imagined as the figure of the excess, the monstrous. Rhys refuses to deny or separate these forces which makes the novel a critically powerful tool in postcolonial studies. Antoinette is oppressed simultaneously from all sides, not just by her English husband. She is essentially an outsider due to her racial ambiguity.

The decaying Caribbean gentry class that she belongs to will not accept her and her situation on the verge of poverty makes everything worse. The only way she can rescue herself from that situation is by turning herself into a commodity to be transacted in the marriage market. Her stepfather and stepbrother makes that choice for her and gives a hefty dowry to secure her future. Finally her gender makes it impossible to resist any changes or have any autonomy whatsoever. In a similar manner Rochester's character is also defined by these interlocking systems of power. He is the younger son who is financially dependent on his father and is forced to maintain his social class. He can reassert his power through the only means which is made available to him, that are his patriarchal and colonial authority. Although he is in a much better position compared to his wife who is racial other in her own native country.

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