

Elements Lead to Identity Tragedy: The Voiceless of Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract: Jean Rhys's best-known postcolonial novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* has always been regarded as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* by shifting the focus from Jane to "the mad woman in the attic." It is a novel filled with tragedy and it inquires into the production of knowledge about racial identity tragedy, especially the white Creole women's identity tragedy. The paper attempts to provide a comprehensive view of the "mad woman" Antoinette, who was caught between the control of English imperialist and racial class tension in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and try to prove that Antoinette's identity tragedy is the result of "being voiceless."

Keywords: Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Creole women, Antoinette, voiceless, identity tragedy.

INTRODUCTION

Jean Rhys was a mid-20th-century novelist who was born and grew up in the Caribbean island of Dominica. She wrote many short stories and novels, of which perhaps *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the most celebrated one. It is a novel filled with tragedy and it is regarded as a reclamation of "the mad woman in the attic" [1] in *Jane Eyre*. The story of *Wide Sargasso Sea* was set in Jamaica and Dominica between 1839 and 1845, describing the slavery and its legacy in the Anglophone Caribbean islands and the relationships among the Creoles, the English, and the newly emancipated slaves after the Slavery Abolition Act was enforced throughout the British Empire in 1833.

As a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys focuses her novel on Bertha (named Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*), the white Creole woman who shares a common history of slavery and undergoes sexual and racial enslavement.

Rhys's writing often centers around themes of "isolation, absence of society or community, the sense of things falling apart, dependence and loss" [2]. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the heroine Antoinette is such a tragedy image. Jean Rhys's own comment, "She seemed such a poor ghost, I thought I'd like to write her life," [3] so in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the madwoman who is silenced in *Jane Eyre* is given a voice to tell her story. Some critics think that *Wide Sargasso Sea* begins the process of subverting its dominance in that it involves the dominant voices represented by Rochester that are continually subverted by marginalized ones. Here Joya Uraizee [4] argues that "and it does provide voices to two marginalized women, Antoinette and Christophine, even though both voices are somewhat restricted at the end."

However, the voice of Antoinette is so weak and minor throughout the whole novel. It is not only restricted at the end but can be seen as silent in her whole life, from childhood to her miserable marriage. And it's the subversion that leads to the tragedy of Antoinette. Because at that time, the racial tension and the patriarchy repression do not allow women, especially women like Antoinette who is called "white nigger" to have their voices. To a certain degree, Antoinette can be seen as "voiceless" throughout her whole life, alienated and at odds with life.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

Since the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966, it has been regarded as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Many critics have been fascinated by its relationship with *Jane Eyre*. They focus on the novel's rewrite of Bertha who is named Antoinette in this novel and justify the life events of her.

Joya Uraizee in 'She Walked Away without Looking Back': Christophine and the Enigma of History in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* argues that Rhys's

Wide Sargasso Sea “rewrites” by subverting the feminist bildungsroman *Jane Eyre* to create a clear identity of the Creole woman. It is not a resistant novel but a subversion because “there is no attempt to dislodge Antoinette from her role as scapegoat.” The subversion of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* comes from the novel’s sharp deviation from the “master-narrative” of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. “In fact, Rhys’ intention seems to have been only to subvert Brontë’s narrative and not provide it with an ‘alternative history’. Thus, although Antoinette’s history is predetermined, she does, at least, have a voice with which to tell her history.”

Elaine Savory [5] in *People in and out of Place: Spatial Arrangement in Wide Sargasso Sea* poses that the relationship between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* has much to do with location, “the Caribbean text writing back to the English one.” He argues that “the issue of place and placement as crucial in all Rhys’s texts and most particularly in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It arises precisely because her protagonists are denied a firm and clear national connection, even a secure place to live, so that the absence of long-term connection is constantly a factor in a protagonist’s state of being.” And for Antoinette, who refuses to be re-located, there is only the eventual tragedy.

Michael Thorpe [6] in *The Other Side: Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre* argues that the consequence of re-reading *Jane Eyre*’s relationship with *Wide Sargasso Sea* is to find Brontë’s novel impaired by the crude assumptions about madness, mingled with the racial prejudice inherent in the insistent suggestion that “the fiery West Indian place of Bertha’s upbringing and her Creole blood are the essence of her lunacy.” Whereas in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys humanizes the West Indian exotic represented by Antoinette and portrays sympathetically its effect upon Rochester. He draws out the hidden similarities which are the essence of their tragedy between Antoinette and Rochester.

Kristy Butler [7] in *Kristeva, Intertextuality, and Re-imagining ‘The Mad Woman in the Attic’* uses Kristeva’s approach toward intertextuality theory to explore the intertextual relationship between Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* and questions the role that literary criticism has played in amplifying Jane’s voice and silencing Bertha’s.

Apart from the studies of *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s relationship with Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, critics who are interested in modernism, feminism and postcolonial theory also make further analysis on *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Ambreen Hai [8] in *‘There is Always the Other Side, Always’: Black Servant’s Laughter, Knowledge,*

and Power in Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea analyzes the novel from a perspective of modernism and focuses on black servitude to examine “a social formation by a unique proximity and intimacy between individuals of very different class (and often race, gender, and national) affiliations.” She complicates the reading of Christophine and reads her in a relevant text with others to explore the meanings of the servant’s presence between the lines of the two main narrators.

Laura E. Ciolkowski [9] in *Navigating the Wide Sargasso Sea: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire* analyzes *Wide Sargasso Sea* from the perspective of feminism and mainly talks about the loss of identity and persistent seeking for identity to against the British colonialism of West Indian women. The author draws the conclusion that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a story about struggle and the struggle in various forms of feminism unsettle and replicate many of the commonsense structure of Englishness in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

The Voiceless in Antoinette’s Childhood

Wide Sargasso Sea is depicted by memory and it is composed of three parts. Part one is narrated by Antoinette, who is the daughter of a slave-owner and the heiress to a post-emancipation fortune. She recollects her childhood at Coulibri after the death of her father. Her vague and fragmentary memories are filled with isolation and displacement. She is a complete outsider in her community and a silent existence.

Elaine Savory in *People in and out of Place: Spatial Arrangement in Wide Sargasso Sea* talks about the interactions between placement and consciousness in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Savory shows that “what is important about a given place in the novel is how it affects a narrating consciousness.” Antoinette’s home, the Coulibri house, is filled with class tensions and overwhelmed by hatred between white settlers and black servants. Antoinette recalled “I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches” [10]. The tensions also reveals in the friendship between Tia and her, the connection of intimacy and hatred between the two friends, which destroys Antoinette’s hope for friendship and the desire to communicate.

We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her...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 crumble as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. (27)

Apart from the class tensions between white settlers and black servants, the tensed relationship

between families also make Antoinette become voiceless. Even her mother becomes indifferent to her and never cares for her which drives Antoinette to spend most of her time alone in the kitchen.

Under such circumstances, Antoinette is isolated and marooned. She has no one to talk about her feelings, except the black servant Christophine. Lack of family connection and friendship leads to the voiceless state of Antoinette and makes her become more and more isolated and silent. Though the memory of bitter childhood in the Coulibri house is narrated by Antoinette, she is voiceless indeed. She is a silent existence, an outsider of her home, the Coulibri house.

The Voiceless in Antoinette's Marriage

The narrator is shifted in part two. The English gentleman Rochester, a representative of English imperialist, narrates almost the entirety of part two, talking about his perspective on the marriage with Antoinette and the events that lead him to imprison her inhumanely in the attic in England.

Elaine Savory in *People in and out of Place: Spatial Arrangement in Wide Sargasso Sea* poses that "Rhys's rewriting of Bronte not only privileges the Caribbean but does a great deal to move Rochester out of the realm of the Gothic romance and explain his capacity for cruelty." As a white Creole woman, Antoinette is despised by her husband Rochester and the relationship between Rochester and Antoinette is full of alienation and inequity. "I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did." However, Antoinette, who relies much on the marriage devote her whole love to Rochester and even loses her own judgment. Just as Laura E. Ciolkowski in *Navigating the Wide Sargasso Sea: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire* points out that "In spite of Rhys's celebrated promise to give Bronte's silent madwoman a chance to tell her story---Antoinette persists in replicating many of the basic elements of the English imperial narratives she scorns." Antoinette once regarded Granbois as a lovely place while Rochester made it disgusting due to his love affair with Amelie. Just as the above have mentioned that Antoinette is a totally outsider in the awful marriage. Once again, Antoinette, the weaker one, drops in desperation and loses her voice. She is the "truly victim" in the marriage. She loses the voice and ability to protect herself from the hurt enforced by Rochester.

Due to the loss of her voice, Antoinette can only rely on Christophine, the black servant, who is also an outsider. It is Christophine who accuses Rochester of trying to break Antoinette up by calling her "Bertha." It is also Christophine who blames Rochester for his love affair with Amelie, another deliberate attempt to harm

Antoinette. It is Christophine who keeps telling Antoinette to calm down and cheer up. The reliance on Christophine further shows that Antoinette is a "truly outsider" and "silent existence" in marriage.

The Voiceless in Antoinette's "Madness"

In the third part of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the spot becomes England which is the domain of Rochester while the prison of Antoinette. England is a totally strange place for Antoinette and there she is a complete outsider. Antoinette's narrative in part three works to stress the "voiceless" of a Creole woman, especially under the control of the English imperialist. Despite the voiceless of Antoinette in her isolated childhood and miserable marriage, Antoinette's identity is taken away by Rochester when they come to England. He changed her name and called her Bertha without approval of Antoinette. He diagnosed her as mad and imprisoned her in the attic. In the room where she was locked, there was no glass for her to look at herself. Without her reflection, Antoinette even couldn't remember who she was. Without any connection with the outside world, she lost track of time and place, even her identity. Though Rhys tries to give Antoinette her own narrative voice, what Antoinette reveals is just how desperate and helpless she is. So, in fact she is completely "voiceless." No one takes her seriously and no one listens to her. She is a poor outsider, a silent existence and the truly tragedy.

CONCLUSION

As a Creole woman who is caught between the English imperialist and the black Jamaican, Antoinette becomes an outsider and a silent existence throughout her life. The control of English imperialist and tension of racial conflict cause the tragedy of her. As a weaker one in any interactions, she is never able to have a voice of her own. Though Rhys tries to give Antoinette a voice to tell her own story, the ending is the passive acceptance. Her voice is voiceless. The voiceless goes through her whole life from youth to marriage eventually to her madness and results in the tragedy of her life.

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