

# RESITUATING THE CANON AND IDENTITY FORMATION: A STUDY OF JEAN RHYS'S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

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## Abstract

*In spite of not considering herself to be English and for remaining throughout her life a caustic critic of English values, Jean Rhys (1890-1979) should be considered as a light of English culture. She was patronized as a Commander of Order of the British Empire for her significant contribution to literature. She was born in 1890 on the Caribbean island of Dominica to a Welsh father and a "white Creole" mother. Incidentally, her most reputed novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1939) comes out directly from this 'catharsis' – i.e. Creole identity. Recent critiquing ties to place Rhys and *Wide Sargasso Sea* in geographical, national, cultural or racial categories to interpret the novel's representation of colonial relations. Since the locus of the novel is White Creole character (i.e. Antoinette), the focus of the critics should be to locate whether the novel reconfigures the historic resistance of black Caribbean's to European dominance in the cultural sphere. Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a rewriting of Charlotte Bronte's canonical novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) and her rewriting displaces the monolithic grandeur of western canon by dismantling and deconstructing it through an alternative perspective. As an alternative text to monolithic construct of canonical perspective Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* promotes cultural plurality and multiplicity which act as the source of literary and cultural redefinition.*

**Keywords:** *Identity, Rhys, Canon, Intertext*

## INTRODUCTION:

"... level of literary intertextual referentiality invokes and is paralleled by the extra-textual referentiality to Europe's historical narrative." (Sandra Drake, cited in Rhys 194)

In spite of not considering herself to be English and for remaining throughout her life a caustic critic of English values, Jean Rhys (1890-1979) should be considered as a light of English culture. She was patronized as a Commander of Order of the British Empire for her significant contribution to literature. She was born in 1890 on the Caribbean island of Dominica to a Welsh father and a "white Creole" mother. Incidentally, her most reputed novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1939) comes out directly from this 'catharsis' – i.e. Creole identity. Recent critiquing ties to place Rhys and *Wide Sargasso Sea* in geographical, national, cultural or racial categories to interpret the novel's representation of colonial relations. In the Preface to his edition on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Judith L. Raiskin rightly observes: "*Wide Sargasso Sea* has served as a touchstone text for critics interested in modernism, feminism, and postcolonial theory." (xi) Since the locus of the novel is White Creole character (i.e. Antoinette), the focus of the critics should be to locate whether the novel reconfigures the historic resistance of black Caribbean's to European dominance in the cultural sphere. Interestingly, critics like Helen Carr in the book titled *Jean Rhys* (1996) points out Rhys's position to be in 'no man's land': "Rhys was a colonial in terms of her history, even though she can be considered a postcolonial in her attitude to the Empire and in her employment of many postcolonial strategies." (108) Furthermore, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a rewriting of Charlotte Bronte's canonical novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) and her rewriting displaces the monolithic grandeur of western canon by dismantling and deconstructing it through an alternative

perspective. At this point it would be relevant to mention the renowned critic in the field of Postcolonial theory Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's observation: "The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored ... I read *Wide Sargasso Sea* as *Jane Eyre*'s reinscription." (cited in Rhys 240-1) For such strategic process of decolonization, the dramatic destabilization of Canon becomes irresistible and it results in producing anti-canon texts like J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) which is a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) which is a rewriting of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) which is a rewriting of Hardy's novel.

The development of Rhys's novel revolves around the 'white Creole' – Antoinette who records her childhood in a large house *Caulibri* in Jamaica. Though the novel is set after the Emancipation Act (1833) which was a declaration of abolishing slavery, the novel captures the constant opposition of Blacks (former slaves) and Whites (former slave masters). A house of Whites, (though Creole) the *Caulibri* is set on conflagration by the violent Blacks and Antoinette's brother is vehemently killed. Later her father and mother died too. From this point, the social climate of Colony imposes upon a Creole girl a deep sense of insecurity and further makes her completely alienated. She is continually referred to as a 'white cockroach', a 'white nigger' – the slang epithets for the Euro-Creole woman. Rhys's postcolonial lens posits Antoinette to be in 'no man's land' – between the harshly divided worlds of the Blacks and the Whites, between the former slaves and the former slave-owners. At such critical juncture, Antoinette's notion that she could in fact live peacefully in a different race deteriorates after her interaction with Tia, a representative of former slave group. Tia literally shatters the idea when she throws a rock that pierces Antoinette's face:

When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass. (Rhys 19)

The latent comes to be potent that Antoinette is not wanted by the Black population despite her intense desire to gain safety and security among them. Antoinette's face bleeds, demonstrating a physical pain. At this point it would be relevant to mention Mona Fayad's observation in the essay titled "Unquiet Ghosts: The Struggle for Representation in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*":

The tale of Antoinette, as indicated by the critics, is the tale of a schizophrenic, a Creole whose search for identity leads to madness, or, as some would advocate, the story of a woman too weak to resist the onslaught of a strong male such as Rochester, and whose response is escape through madness. (cited in Rhys 225-6)

Her case is that of a typical anti-canonical 'unknown' and the unknowable - the impossibility of establishing a stable position of the self. Right from the beginning, Rhys's novel is going to deglamorize the British canon text and Rhys's attempt to construct the 'Third World Woman' stands as a contrast to hegemonize the definition of canonical literature.

In Part II of the novel the narration shifts unexpectedly to an unnamed male character who has just married Antoinette. Though he is unnamed, an adept reader can easily understand him to be a replica of Rochester in Brontë's novel. The marital relationship between him and Antoinette deteriorates. Further the unnamed narrator takes to calling his wife 'Bertha' (which immediately reminds one 'the mad woman in the attic' – Bertha Mason of *Jane Eyre*, a name to which she objects. Such kind of imposition is nothing but a kind of subject formation; broadly speaking, it is the circulation of patriarchal power at domestic level. It is against this background that Rhys's subversion of the Canonical text and her Creole heroine's anguished search for identity can be properly understood. The relationship between Antoinette and Rochester is a kind of contact zone where an asymmetrical relationship takes place and it reminds one Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) which focuses on the incompatibility between two cultures. The very location of culture turns into a 'pot' of multi-culture where the problem of accommodation comes to the fore and 'mosaic' remains immobile, not melting - no assimilation, no accommodation, only accidental action. Rochester (as we can take the unnamed figure as Rochester) fails to offer the protection for which his new Creole bride yearns, remaining emotionally and morally unformed:

'You are safe', I'd say. She'd like that- to be told 'you are safe'. Or I'd touch her face gently and touch tears. Tears- nothing! Words – less than nothing. 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 ... (Rhys 44)

Rhys's 'writing back' suggests that Rochester does not bring with him any sense of right or wrong. Unlike the Rochester who appears in Brontë's novel, Rhys's character does not grow morally or spiritually. Being a crass materialist, Rochester returns to England with the wealth of momentary facile marriage and their marriage turns out to be half-flowering, completing only

limited journey. Antoinette's dowries become an additional burden to her and she suffers from homelessness: "... who I am and where is my country and where do I belong?" (Rhys 60). She virtually becomes an outsider; the subjugation of woman within domestic space and the subjugation of the racial other in the colonies – both interlap and overlap with each other. It is a moment when the power of what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan refers to as *meconnaissance* or misrecognition which is also an anti-canon device. Caroline Rody in the book titled *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure* (1993) very precisely observes: "*Wide Sargasso Sea* privileges dialogue between female actors, and carefully parallels the structure of its mother text, taking Antoinette through a series of hunting dreams parallel to Jane's." (cited in Rhys 220) Like a typical anti-canonical text of postcolonial literature Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* reshapes the dominant meaning and demonstrates the possibility of alternative text.

Antoinette's long cherished desire to be merged into some collective identity gets shattered, battered and tampered. She searches answer from the loveless, deadlock marriage: "What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (Rhys 66) Their marriage is a frontal affront of a mismatched couple. Antoinette's passage to England is actually a voyage into the dark from where pilgrim's progress is impossible. Enjoying the carnal carnival and vortex of sensuality Rochester now refuses to help her to merge into the White metropolitan colonial culture. What is expected from him is the throwing away the image of a fixed identity that is propagated by the Australian writer Sally Morgan in *My Place* (1987) and Ruby Langford in *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988). England the mother of Creole is not her homeland, it virtually becomes a Foucauldian 'panopticon'. Living in a Bleak House during Hard Times how Great Expectations can be achieved! She realizes hope no longer exists and relies upon the memory of her dead father:

If my father, my real father was alive you wouldn't come back here in a hurry after he'd finished with you. If he was alive ... But I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate ... I hate it now like I hate you and before I die I will show you how much I hate you. (Rhys 70)

She is suffering from an ontological uncertainty - a case of double colonization and double displacement; she is silenced both as a Creole and as a female. Here is no Shavian or Ibsenite 'New Woman' but a muted 'subaltern'.

## CONCLUSION:

The novel ends with the implied death of its heroine when she realizes that the order of things is impossible in her chaotic life. There is neither emotional logic, nor logical emotion. The abovementioned critic Caroline Rody, by referring to *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a 'revisionary text' observes: "Antoinette/Bertha in her last lines advances in furious opposition to her scripted fate, leaving her potential act, and her end, to our memories of literary history." (cited in Rhys 217) Unlike *Jane Eyre*, here is no recovery from blindness to insight, no regeneration only degeneration, only static progression and kinetic regression. Being in spirit with the anti-canonical representation, the novel draws an undercurrent of contemporary cultural concerns. It brings to the foreground the crucial question of 'location', i.e. the position from which the critic speaks. Much like the Indian novel Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, the ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is marked by incendiarism. Antoinette/Bertha thus embodies a triumphant ending in the triumphant revisionist act of Rhys. To use Ellen Friedman's words, *Wide Sargasso Sea* "enters a reimagines Bronte's text, glossing and subverting, reversing and transforming it". (cited in Rhys 320) Hence my conclusion is that Rhys's cross-cultural labyrinth *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the valorization of mantling the Creole and dismantling the Canon. Like Antonio Benitez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island* (1992), Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an indication of the need to theorize Creolization. At the same time, to use Caroline Rody's words, Rhys makes the "canonical text seem always to have contained the germ of this rebellion, and all literary history, by extension, seem to contain potential transformation, awaiting the right rereader" (cited in Rhys 221). Canon-reading and Canon-resisting are going on in parallel. As an alternative text to monolithic construct of canonical perspective Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* promotes cultural plurality and multiplicity which act as the source of literary and cultural redefinition.

## NOTES:

1. Mary Lou Emery in the book titled *Jean Rhys at "World's End": Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile* (1990) observes: "... Rhys's novels portray an absence rather than loss of identity and the homelessness of one who never had a home." (cited in Rhys 167)

2. It would be relevant to mention Mona Fayad's observation in the essay titled "Unquiet Ghosts: The Struggle for Representation in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*":

... the conclusion comes to represent the rekindling of Antoinette's energies ... her madness is only a tale told by a "sane" male whose motivations are at best dubious. She is a representative of our constant, long struggle against suppression in a society that still persists in perceiving woman as object and not as subject and continues to tell its tale of woman without her sound and fury, signifying nothing. (cited in Rhys 239)

### Works Cited

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