

# Wide Sargasso Sea: Robust Defence of Protagonist rather than a Strong Post-colonial Statement

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## ABSTRACT

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic masterpiece 'Jane Eyre' written by Charlotte Bronte was created with much expertise. The protagonist of the novel is Jane Eyre, a woman who starts her life from an extremely humble beginning and reaches a position of strength at the end. In order to provide a contrast to her heroine and also to add a dash of drama to her novel, Bronte created another woman character, Bertha Mason who is the wife of the male lead, Mr. Rochester the owner of Thornfield and the lover of Jane. In the novel, Bertha spends most of her life incarcerated in the attic of the house. She is insane and several rather derogatory words are used to describe her. She is marginalized for being a Creole and is used as a contrast to Jane. Disturbed by the unfair treatment of this woman, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jean Rhys took up the mantle of providing Bertha with a background and a story in her novel 'Wide Sargasso Sea'. Several critics see this novel primarily as a post-colonial statement against the oppression of the colonizers on the people of the Caribbean. This article focuses on the main preoccupation of Jean Rhys in this novel which is to defend her heroine Antoinette, name given by her to Bertha Mason, rather than make a general post-colonial argument.

**Keyword:** -Post-Colonialism 1, Creole2, Marginalization 3, Deconstruction 4.

## Introduction

The 1960s, the decade in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published by Jean Rhys, coincided with the time when post-colonialism as a critical theory got popularity. This piece of work has been acclaimed as an advocate of 'post-colonialism' by some critics. There are however divergent views on this claim. Other critics have observed that Jean Rhys, instead of writing about the colonized, mainly concentrated on the colonizers -the Creoles. The novel has several features which on the one hand clearly exhibit post-colonial traits and views and on other hand show elements which might throw a different light. Whether the novelist wanted to make a post-colonial statement or she primarily wanted to defend her heroine who was a Creole and lift her out of the dismal existence which was her lot as presented in Charlotte Bronte's masterpiece *Jane Eyre* is a matter deserving of examination.

## 1 To the Rescue:

*Wide Sargasso Sea* was written almost as a protest against *Jane Eyre*, a novel written by Charlotte Bronte in the nineteenth century. Bronte created a character Bertha Mason who is the evil entity which lurks somewhere in the attic of Thornfield where her protagonist Jane goes. The presentation of this hapless character appears to be rather unfair to Jean Rhys. In her work she sets out to give a voice to this unfortunate woman who is left incarcerated for ages in the attic of this mansion and all kinds of aspersions are heaped on this woman without giving her a chance to defend herself. Jean Rhys comes to the defence of this woman. About the presentation of Bertha in *Jane Eyre* Spivak Gayatri Chakravarty writes:

In this fictive England, (Bronte's Bertha) must play out her role, act out the transformation of her "self" into that fictive other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist

individualist heroine of British fiction...At least Rhys sees to it that the woman from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sisters consolidation [S, 251].<sup>i</sup>

Rhys gives Bertha a story, a background and also explains to the reader why this woman became insane. Bronte explained her insanity rather irresponsibly by merely pointing out that madness was inherited by Bertha and also because she was too passionate. Rhys throws light on the trauma experienced by Antoinette, Rhys's name for Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette was marginalised because she was a woman and also because she was a Creole. The reader thus begins to understand this woman and understands the reasons for her madness. Moreover, she is left unloved by her husband Rochester. An emotional and insecure woman Antoinette is marginalised and ignored and has to deal with the turmoil which rages in her mind. Rhys successfully describes the upheaval within Antoinette.

### 1.1 Emotional Turmoil:

*Wide Sargasso Sea* tells us how a Creole woman, through the disturbing storms of life reaches the edge and plunges into the depths of insanity. The man, who is supposed to be her protector and husband, shuns her and leaves her unloved so that her yearning heart in desperation damages her mind. While relating a tragic story, because Antoinette's Creole background is revealed, Rhys succeeds in adding a post-colonial flavour to the novel. Many bold cultural and political attitudes towards the Creole people are laid bare for all to see. However, it has to be examined how emphatic was the post-colonial argument that Rhys forwarded and if it was only restricted to the situation of her heroine and through her to the Creoles. Most of the evidence in her novel points out the suffering faced by Antoinette and so we can essentially say that Rhys' attention is on the predicament of her protagonist rather than on that of the blacks, the natives of the Caribbean.

### 1.2 Marginalization on the Basis of Race:

While endowing a say to Antoinette, Jean Rhys in effect emphasises the situation of Creole people. They were the descendants of the original white settlers who colonized the Caribbean. Antoinette, Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, was suppressed on account of being a Creole. Bertha's feelings are never expressed in *Jane Eyre* and when Rhys set out to give expression to them she naturally made an oblique post-colonial statement because there is discrimination here which is meted out to Bertha because she hails from the Caribbean. Rhys' novel is not primarily about the marginalisation of black inhabitants of the Caribbean. While strongly defending Antoinette, Rhys has to enumerate the oppositions her heroine has to encounter. One of them is her husband Rochester. His blatant imperialist thoughts are exposed when he describes the West Indies:

The air was like sulphur-streams- I could find no refreshment anywhere. Mosquitoes came buzzing in and hummed sullenly around the room: the sea, which could hear from thence, rumbled dull like an earthquake- black clouds were casting up over it; the moon was setting in the waves, broad and red. Like a hot cannon-ball-she threw her last bloody glance over a world quivering with the ferment of tempest [JE, 305].<sup>ii</sup>

A description like this certainly paints a negative picture about the Caribbean. Rhys showcases a unique deconstruction of *Jane Eyre*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a very insightful work where the reader will find a blend of a parody as well as an independent creation. Rhys has connected her novel beautifully with the plot structure and characters of Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. In this attempt she has added a dash of post-colonial flavour to her work.

## 2 Human or Animal:

In *Jane Eyre*, the narrator is Jane herself. The reader looks at this world through the eyes of this woman. At the time of Charlotte Bronte this was a revolutionary narrative style. Jane says:

In the deep shade, at the further end of the room a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a man, hid its head and face [JE, 295].

Jane presents Bertha in this way. Charlotte Bronte presents the unfortunate Creole woman like a wild animal and her protagonist Jane has the privilege of painting this pathetic picture. The reader hears the voice of Jane loud and

clear. Where is the voice of Bertha? Nowhere, at least nowhere in *Jane Eyre* can it be heard. She is the other woman. She needs to stay unsung and maligned to show Jane in a good light. Bertha certainly is 'othered' in *Jane Eyre* just the way the blacks were 'othered' in the colonies of the English. It is taken for granted that a woman who comes from the Creole background as does Bertha does not need to have a say. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in Part I, Antoinette says:

I was so shocked that everything was confused. And it happened quickly. I saw Mannie and staggering along with two large earthenware jars of water which were kept in the pantry. They threw the water into the bedroom and it made a black pool on the floor, but the smoke rolled over the pool [WSS, 21].<sup>iii</sup>

### 2.1 A Human Voice:

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha or Antoinette is given the freedom to express the deepest feelings which churn relentlessly. Jean Rhys's main concern is to convey this to her readers and while she does this, the oppression felt by Antoinette as a Creole and at times by the blacks, is often brought to the fore. However, Rhys's attention is on her protagonist and while writing about her, Rhys has to venture into the West Indies at a time when slavery was being abolished. As a result the case of the native blacks was mentioned automatically and the readers got a glimpse of the cauldron in which were whisked all the racial identities.

### 2.2 Vindication of Antoinette:

Surely the aim of Jean Rhys is to set right what she believed was the wrong done by Charlotte Bronte to Bertha and her family background. Bronte's novel certainly argues that Bertha's Creole antecedent was responsible for her excessive passions and her ultimate madness. Rochester justifies his attempt at entering a bigamous relation with Jane by claiming to be a victim of intrigue when he says he was tricked into marrying a Creole woman with insanity running in her family. Not only is Bertha blamed for being from a different background and for nursing an insane family history but by calling her 'the true daughter of an infamous mother' (JE, 124), Rochester accuses Bertha of carnal excesses. Thus Rhys takes up the mantle of demolishing Bronte's Victorian prejudices against the people from the Caribbean. However, Rhys' preoccupation is the vindication of her heroine who was a Creole, not the entire black colonised population of the West Indies. Rhys adorns Bertha with human qualities. She paints a pathetic picture of this lonely and marginalised girl traumatised by problems at home and outside. Scared witless by the upheaval she faces everywhere, a world gone mad, her house set on fire, familiar people turning hostile, losing her brother, tossed and buffeted by frequent movements and finally locked in a loveless marriage, what could happen to this young girl apart from what actually happened. She is also tossed between the world of the Caribbean and that of England. In her article *Double Complexity in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea*, Sylvia Panizza writes '...Antoinette carries within herself two opposing worlds, but it would be more accurate to say that her mind is suspended between those two worlds, so, ultimately, it belongs to neither.' (P, 5)<sup>iv</sup> Thus she is wandering in a 'no-man's-land' and it is this predicament which Rhys wants to focus on in order to win sympathy for her heroine.

### 3 Three-fold Marginalisation:

Jean Rhys successfully earns compassion for Bertha. This woman was despised in *Jane Eyre* but when Rhys points out the triple marginalisation, as a woman, as a Creole and as an alien among the native blacks, heaped on the delicate shoulders of Antoinette, the readers sit up and take note. As a woman Antoinette is at the receiving end of Rochester's patriarchal mind set. As a Creole she is treated as being inferior because she is not completely white. According to Sylvia Panizza Rochester marks Antoinette as an 'outcast' and by doing this makes a wide 'chasm' inside her. He equates her with a 'black savage' and accuses her of being overtly sensuous. Finally, after the passage of the Emancipation Act, the blacks' ire is also directed towards Antoinette and her family. Tia, a little black servant girl was a companion to her but Antoinette is shocked to notice the transformation of this little girl. She says:

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... We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass [WSS, 35].

Antoinette, devastated to see a ragged stone in the hands of this former companion, feels acute alienation. The reader begins to understand the repercussions of the triple subjugation. 'the vision of Bertha/Antoinette as an insane offspring from a family plagued by madness is no longer plausible to the reader' (Spivak, 259).

All around Antoinette are shocking situations and she keeps bracing herself against one blow after another, both internal and external. Sylvia Pannizza observes:

The psychological disorientation and emotional confusion that make Antoinette's understanding of her so difficult are then due to both internal and external factors: tormenting her from within is a mixture of complicated situation from the political tumults that mark the beginning of decolonization to the instability of a collapsing family. [P, 7]

### 3.1 A Shift in Sympathy:

In *Jane Eyre* the reader felt sympathy for Rochester who was portrayed as a victim. He is burdened with a mad woman who could not give him any happiness. Moreover, her presence thwarts the possibility of forming another romantic liaison. Bertha creates havoc in his life sometimes by making weird noises and at other times by attacking him or by setting his bed on fire. The reader's heart goes out to this hapless man. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the empathy of the reader shifts towards Antoinette. The woman who was marginalised in the former novel and was hovering in the periphery, comes into the centre. Although Bertha is brought to the middle of proceedings in Rhys' novel, the writer does not appear to be too harsh with Rochester. She has allowed him to narrate the middle part of the novel. Rhys mentions that Rochester was at a disadvantage because of the inheritance laws of England. He is a younger son and thus has to seek his fortune and for this reason has to marry an heiress who happens to be Antoinette. Rhys even allows the letter Rochester wrote to his father to be included in her novel. Rochester writes:

Dear Father, the thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision 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 requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son were there [WSS, 59].

By including this letter in the novel, the author gives us a glimpse of what she really thinks about Rochester. Surely she is not overtly critical of this man. She acknowledges the disadvantage he is at by being a second son. Also the reader can see that he wants some provision to be made for Antoinette financially and lastly his wistful mood is also quite clear when he mentions his father's preference for his elder sibling. Rhys also presents to the reader the confusion that Rochester feels when he comes to the Caribbean. There is a major culture shock for him. On his way to Granbois for their honey moon, Rochester says, 'Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger' (WSS, 42). This tone used by Rhys regarding Rochester moves away from a strong post-colonial angle which would condemn the master race. If *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an emphatic protest against colonialism, Rhys would not have displayed this attitude towards Rochester and neither would she have allowed him to be part narrator of the novel. Rhys's preoccupation is with providing her heroine with a voice. In the process if there is a comment about colonial atrocities, it is incidental. Jean Rhys however leaves Rochester unnamed in the novel. This probably is her way of taking revenge for giving Antoinette a truly English name, Bertha.

### 4 The Rise of the Oppressed:

Jean Rhys probably made a deliberate choice when she selected a time frame to set her novel after the passage of the Emancipation Act which abolished slavery. This is an indication that she wanted to present to her readers a world free of oppression and opposed to any kind of suppression. This also indicates the downfall of the colonizers and the rise of the suffering populace. Antoinette is part of the former and is seen to be at the receiving end of the ire of the blacks many of whom worked as slaves in her own house. Her house is set on fire and Antoinette and her immediate family suffer physical as well as mental trauma. This whole thing flings her in the midst of privations and insecurity. A nostalgic tone creeps into Antoinette's voice when she expresses her sadness at the loss of the glory of the past. She says, 'My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed-all belonged to the past' (WSS, 68). She even compares the garden at Coulibri with the Biblical Garden of Eden. This reference brings to mind the hapless duo that fell from God's grace and had to leave the idyllic garden. Such was the fate of the white, Creole colonizers. The yearning for



the bygone splendour of the era when slavery was rampant is contrary to the post-colonial mind set. The struggle of the English to get back what was lost is seen in the novel.

Rhys introduces a black woman Christophine in the novel who is from Martinique, a French colony. She works in Antoinette's house and has a considerable influence over her. She almost is like a surrogate mother, especially when her own mother departs. Antoinette feels completely comfortable with this strong woman and this is the proof of her affinity with the culture of the Caribbean. Antoinette describes her as being different from Jamaicans. She says:

Her songs were not like Jamaican songs, and she was not like the other women. She was much blacker-blue black with a thin face and straight features. She wore a black dress...and yellow handkerchief...No other Negro woman wore black, or tied her handkerchief Martinique fashion [WSS, 5-6].

There is some ambiguity about Christophine's loyalty. She is affectionate towards Antoinette and is seen as giving her useful advice but there is speculation about her relation with Cosway. A serious question which can be raised about her is why she did not come to wish goodnight to Antoinette like she usually did, on the night their house was set on fire. This lapse on her part points towards a possible collusion with the other blacks in setting the house on fire. However, the novel also presents Christophine as being shunned by other blacks for her relationship with a family that endorsed slavery.

Rhys presents Christophine as an independent, emancipated and strong woman. Most people find her intimidating and it is also known that she was arrested formerly because she practised Obeah.<sup>v</sup> Rhys does not present this woman as a weakling, a subjugated black woman. She is like a protector to Antoinette. Her views about marriage are extremely modern. Christophine says, 'Three children I have...each one a different father, but no husband, I thank my God' (WSS, 68). Christophine has more freedom than Antoinette. The latter has to deal with a dominating husband and a loveless marriage and pays a high price by losing her sanity. She does not even think of deserting her husband. She accompanies him to England, an alien country. She accepts the new name given to her. In fact, it is Christophine who advises Antoinette to exert her independence.

When Rochester has a conversation with Christophine, he is quite shaken. In the novel, this fact topples the domination of a white man over a black former slave. Even vocally Rochester fails to control Christophine.

In her only major exchange with Rochester, Christophine's words penetrate the Englishman's psyche in such a manner that he cannot escape the loud echo of them in his head [WSS, 99].

How Rhys projects this black woman is a good indication of her preoccupation in this novel. She is mostly concerned with her heroine Antoinette because of whom she launched upon the writing of this novel. Since her protagonist is from the Caribbean and this part of the world has the colonizers and the colonized, Rhys has to mention both. Rhys wants to tell her readers where exactly the loss of Antoinette's identity began. With the passage of the Emancipation Act began the loss of wealth and status. With her marriage to Rochester and after the honeymoon when he begins to hate her begins her suffering. All these factors lead to the beginning of her unhappiness and insecurity and when she is taken to an alien country and finally imprisoned in the attic, it is complete.

#### **4.1 Mixed Identity:**

Being a Creole is not easy. It essentially means the merging and blending of two cultures. Edward Kamau Braithwaite has done an in depth study of this mingling which can also called 'Creolization'. He says it is, 'a way of seeing the society, not in terms of white and black, master and slave, in separate nuclear units, but as contributory parts of a whole' (B, 25).<sup>vi</sup> The Creoles are sandwiched between the English and the indigenous cultures and as a result have a unique identity of their own which is completely different. Rhys' concern is about her Creole heroine. She has affinity towards both the whites and the blacks and we can see this in her relationship with Christophine. Antoinette has also lost her wealth, her father has abandoned her and she has no family support. Lastly she marries an Englishman whose sole purpose of the marriage is getting his hands on her wealth. She is left unloved; her emotional and physical needs are unfulfilled. She is dragged to another country; her original name is stripped from her. According to Veronica Marie Gregg Rhys did not adequately represent the blacks and the mulatto<sup>vii</sup> people. She writes about the presentation of the different formerly colonized people by Rhys - 'Tia as cheating, hostile nigger and container for the self; Amelie as the lusty mulatto wench who hates the Creole; Daniel as the hateful mulatto and

mirror image for the husband; Christophine as nurse, black mammy, and obeah woman' (G, 115)<sup>viii</sup>-all these have been mentioned in the novel to project effectively the world of Antoinette which went topsy-turvy. And to this list should be added- an unloving mother; an inadequate and absent father; an alien and unfamiliar husband; financial deprivation and much else. All the things which held together her sanity are pulled apart layer by layer. And when she goes out of her mind, she is flung into the attic of a house for years. Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* shows this unfortunate woman like an animal. And like a hated monster she jumps to her death after setting the house which had kept her captive on fire. It is this hapless woman originally from the Caribbean whom Rhys tries to vindicate and defend in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

### Conclusion:

Charlotte Bronte's priority in *Jane Eyre* was to present her protagonist in a positive light and she succeeds in doing so. Jane, despite being an orphan ends being an accomplished woman with a husband. What is heartening is that from a position of being a dependent, she turns into a woman in control. The priority for Jean Rhys in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is to give her protagonist, Antoinette a story so that the readers, who had shunned Bertha Mason and dismissed her as a mad woman, understand this unfortunate woman as a woman much wronged. Both the novelists achieve their respective goals. Antoinette's life as a Creole from the Caribbean reveals a lot about the way of life there before and after the passage of the Emancipation Act and the reader gets a glimpse of the predicament of the oppressor and the oppressed and how the roles of both do not remain constant.

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#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> See <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343469> accessed 4.6.16. References by this author are included with the abbreviation S.

<sup>ii</sup> See Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (Penguin, 1994); all further references from this book are included with the abbreviation JE.

<sup>iii</sup> See Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Penguin, 1997); all further references from this book are included with the abbreviation WSS.

<sup>iv</sup> See <http://www.lcm.unige.it/pub/17/panizza.pdf>. Accessed on 4.6.16. References from this article are included with the abbreviation P.

<sup>v</sup> Obeah is a term used in West Indies to refer to folk magic, sorcery, and religious West African slaves. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obeah>; accessed 4.6.16

<sup>vi</sup> See Braithwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Sovacou, 1974). References from this book are included with the abbreviation B.

<sup>vii</sup> Mullatto is a term formerly used to refer to persons born of one white parent and one black parent. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mulatto>; accessed 4.6.16.

<sup>viii</sup> See Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole* (University of North Carolina Press); reference from this book included with abbreviation G.

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