

Loss of Cultural Identity of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and its Reclamation in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: A Postcolonial Study

Navdeep Kaur

Assistant Professor, Government College Hoshiarpur

Abstract

The paper attempts to depict the trials and travails of the colonized and marginalized protagonist of critically acclaimed novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* which is a prequel written by Jean Rhys to fill the gaps in *Jane Eyre* written by famous Victorian novelist Charlotte Bronte. The novelist Jean Rhys has given a voice to Antoinette Cosway, a woman who was named Bertha in *Jane Eyre* and was deprived of her true identity. The paper seeks to explain the deep-rooted cultural alienation, identity crisis and trauma faced by the protagonist and her attempt to reclaim her lost voice, identity and dignity as narrator of *Wide Sargasso Sea* through postcolonial lens. The concepts of double subjugation of the subaltern women, Othering, cultural displacement etc. used in postcolonial discourse by the theorists provide ample scope to analyse the politics of colonial powers and its ramifications in the life of doubly oppressed protagonist and the endeavor of Jean Rhys to write back to the classic English text.

Keywords: Rhys, Antoinette, Bertha, Identity, Creole, Other, postcolonial.

Literature written in the countries that remained colonized by the European powers played a crucial role in challenging colonialism. Writing back to the empire and rewriting the master narratives of Western discourse became a common postcolonial practice. Texts like *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Great Expectations* have been closely scrutinized in this context. The telling of a story from another point of view can be seen as an extension of the deconstructive project to explore the gaps and silences in a text. Since writing has long been recognized as one of the strongest forms of cultural control, the rewriting of central narratives of colonial superiority is a liberating act for those from the former colonies.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a highly sophisticated example of coming to terms with European perceptions of the Caribbean Creole community. It is well known that Jean Rhys wrote this novel as a befitting reply to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* which she found unconvincing because of the distorted portrayal of Rochester's first wife Bertha, who is portrayed as a mad Creole woman.

According to Judie Newman,

“Rewritings may give the impression that postcolonial culture may only rework, that it has no creativity of its own and is fundamentally dependent for its materials on the colonizing culture...” (22-30)

But she has left Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* out of this category because she perceives Rhys as countering “the charge of parasitism on an ‘original’ by historically positioning her novel before *Jane Eyre*. Newman agrees that Rhys’s “retelling” of *Jane Eyre* is more than mere “rewriting”. She proposes that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is “an invention”. For the first time Jean Rhys explores character and situation in a symbolic manner and posits an encounter between two people, two races, two nations and two different worlds. For each one of them, the ‘other’ remains mysterious and inaccessible. She explores the theme of the existential chasm that exists between the white West Indian and her ancestors and the tragic fate that made it impossible to bridge the gap between the two. This is the theme which gives the novel its symbolic significance: physically situated between the West Indies and England, the Sargasso Sea becomes a dividing line between two worlds, two people, two spirits belonging to two different cultures that are never able to meet. Within the context of the West Indian history, even though Antoinette is a descendant of the white master and the slaves just then emancipated, she becomes an outcast, a victim of the definitions into which she is born. The essence of her dilemma is that she finds herself spiritually alone, defined out of both worlds in her life. The novel represents the symbolic reconstruction of a plight into which history has thrown the white West Indian: her sense of spiritual displacement as a result of being caught between two worlds. More than a story of personal relationship, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a profound statement about identity, and about the existential dilemma of a minority condemned by history to a claustrophobic existence which can end in insanity. Antoinette’s imprisonment in Thornfield Hall becomes a symbol of spiritual isolation which is the white Creole’s legacy. Christophine, the black woman in the novel, fails to define Antoinette’s socio-cultural identity:

“She is not ‘beke’ like you (her British husband), but she is ‘beke’, and not like us either” (p. 122).

Being a white settler’s daughter, she is held in suspicion by the colonized, to whom she is a ‘white nigger’, a ‘white cockroach’; and to the white metropolitan British she is alien, strange, ‘not one of us’, - therefore easy to suspect and unacceptable in the long run. Her attempt to relate herself to the metropolitan white ends up in a dislocating experience that frustrates and shatters her. Antoinette sums up her position:

“A White cockroach that’s what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I have heard English women call us white niggers. So, between you I often

wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all” (76).

The shadowy knowledge of the terrible ordeals undergone by her mother was enough to undermine the child Antoinette psychically. The terrified child grows up a sad girl, and her husband, who marries her with a design, finds it easy to “break her up”. She becomes the target of imperialist-patriarchal-racist assault; she ends up as “the mad woman in the attic.” She is deprived of her money, means, freedom and is forced to become dependent on an unloving stranger. He confesses:

“I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love, she was a stranger to me..... who did not think or feel as I did” (69).

The assumption stems from his fear and hatred of the ‘other’. He admits later he hated the place, hated everything about it and “above all I hated her”. He just makes a cynically calculated marriage through negotiations with a male relative:

“The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her” (49).

After having her completely within his power he systematically breaks her up when there is no one to defend except Christophine, her ‘da’ (nurse), the blackest woman. Once Christophine is scared away by the imperial police and their laws, Antoinette is left defenseless. As a result she loses her mental balance, breaks down, and is smoothly carried over across the Sargasso Sea to the cold prison of the English country mansion. Thus, her story becomes a tale of the steady dislocation of a woman’s identity through systematic assault by insensitive, scheming male relations, and finally through transplantation from her native place to an alien land. She loses her place, her name, her loved friends and people, her freedom, even her sense of time and comprehension of reality. Questioning her nationality, birth and personal identity, Antoinette (Bertha) Cosway Mason (Rochester) places herself as lost somewhere in between the two central figures of her life. One is her English husband, gaining all her property along with her person. The other is her black nurse, Christophine the mysterious obeah woman exiled in Jamaica from her native Martinique. These two figures and the cultures they represent divide Antoinette, a White West Indian Creole.

Antoinette, the madwoman silenced in *Jane Eyre* speaks in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and her voice exposes and turns upside down the patriarchal and colonialist values upon which the plot and characters of Brontë’s novel depends. Rhys’s great achievement in her re-writing of the Brontë text is her creation of an external double to the madwoman, which transforms the bestial Bertha into an individual woman who has been ‘othered’ by

imperialistic and patriarchal oppression. Rhys gives Antoinette a voice and restores her humanity. Her madness is shown throughout the novel to be a reaction to oppression, rather than congenital, as the novel *Jane Eyre* implies. Rhys illustrates the injustice of Rochester's assumption that the mother's madness must inevitably be passed on to the daughter. Furthermore, she illustrates how Rochester himself forces Antoinette to become this double of her mother. Like her mother Annette, Antoinette suffers a breakdown of selfhood, which allows Rochester to label her 'Bertha'; the stereotype of madness created by patriarchal society. As always, the cold and rational Englishman crushes the world of Antoinette beneath his feet. Her identity is so completely diminished through patriarchal oppression that when she looks in the mirror, she does not recognize her own reflection:

"It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her." (p. 151)

Antoinette does not realize that what she sees is a reflection of her deteriorated selfhood; for her selfhood has undergone an irretrievable split. O' Conner notes of Antoinette:

"Antoinette is, like her island, "colonized", her independence and autonomy subsumed to British culture and to British law." (193)

In her intervention into Brontë's skewed representation of this white, Creole, colonial subject, Rhys has recoded and rehumanized Bertha. Her project is to cast off the dark shroud of vampirism that weighs upon her in *Jane Eyre*. She presents a critique of English colonialism and capitalist values by depicting post-Emancipation Jamaica and exposing the degraded ideologies of a traditionally slave-owning elite through the relationship of ex-slaves who worked on the sugar plantations and the wealthy Creoles who were the owners. Although the Emancipation Act of 1833 freed the black slaves by the time of Antoinette's childhood compensation had not been granted to them. As a result, hostility flared between the crumbling white aristocracy and the impoverished servants.

As a young girl, Antoinette lives at Coulibri Estate which represents the downfall of the colonial empire. The Whites live there under the fear of revenge by black slaves. In this atmosphere of impurity and decay Antoinette and her mother become increasingly isolated and misanthropic. Left mainly to her own devices as a child, Antoinette turns inward, finding there a world that can be both peaceful and terrifying. The first part of the novel depicts the development of a delicate and exiled Creole girl who finds refuge in the closed, isolated life of the convent and becomes increasingly introspective and isolated.

Christophine brings her friend's daughter, Tia, to play with Antoinette. One day Tia cheats her and

disappears with her clothes. Antoinette and her mother can no longer command the respect of the black community, in which gold purchases allegiance. On the other hand, clothing becomes a symbol closely associated with identity. Tia's exchange of dresses reverses the white over black paradigm, destabilizing categories of victim/victimizer, haves / have – nots. Forced to put on Tia's dress, Antoinette, the poor white, takes on the mantle of the “nigger”.

Mr. Mason, who marries Antoinette's mother is one of those new English colonials, who have come to the islands to make their wealth and to reap the rewards from the old slave owners' misfortunes. He is much prejudiced against the blacks of the West Indies and he also miscomprehends the Creole position. In the somewhat upturned Caribbean world, white Creoles like Cosways live in fear. Mr. Mason, however misjudges the ex-slaves as harmless and childlike, and he is supremely confident that, as a white Englishman, he is safe from all harm. He cannot understand how his wife feels subject to the very people she is meant to control. Raised by Christophine, Antoinette shares the older woman's obeah sensibilities and, as a child, sees everything around her as living. This world view contrasts sharply with the rational, logical and scientific thinking of a man like Mr. Mason, who does not believe that the servants are a threat until they literally run him out of his house on the night of the fire.

The episode with Annette's parrot, Coco symbolically mimics the life of Annette and her daughter. The bird with clipped feathers symbolizes the bound captivity of both mother and daughter. Coco's fall from the burning glaciis prefigures Antoinette's fall from the battlements of Rochester's English home.

Rochester remains nameless throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but readers of *Jane Eyre* immediately recognize him as one of Brontë's characters, Mr. Rochester. He gives voice to his perspective on the marriage with Antoinette and the events that led him to lock her inhumanly in the attic. Rochester's villainous actions, while never condoned, are at least somewhat explained by his own suffering, confusion, and feelings of alienation. He searches for traces of England in the strange world around him. He tries to imagine his wife as a young English girl in an attempt to comfort himself in his decision to marry her. He wonders about the truth of her pure English descent, marveling at her interactions with the black servants. He feels no real tenderness for Antoinette, only lust. The introduction of Daniel Cosway deepens Rhys's exploration of inherited suffering. He is one of Alexander Cosway's bastard children. His letter informs Rochester of Antoinette's depraved background: her father was a detestable, wicked slave owner and her mother a spoilt woman who died a dangerous lunatic. Rochester clings to the worst suggestion in Daniel's message. The brief days of happiness at Granbois are halted by his willingness to believe the worst of Antoinette. He starts feeling that the world is against him, and he begins to view Antoinette

and Christophine as his enemies. Crossing lines of race and class, Antoinette's journey to Christophine's home reflects an instability in the traditional structures, and it invites a reversal of roles in which the ex-slave plays the part of knowing patriarch and the Creole heiress begs for her help. Though Christophine urges independence, Antoinette cannot break from her husband, on whom she is financially and socially dependent. Like Coco, Antoinette has had her wings clipped by an Englishman. Ironically, the love potion that Antoinette gives her husband sends him into the arms of another woman, Amelie.

When the action moves to England in Part Three of the novel, Rochester disappears from the narrative. He now hovers over the plot as the mastermind puppeteer, peering down into what Antoinette thinks of her cardboard prison. He seems to be spying on her just as generations of Brontë's readers have done. At Rochester's house which, although never explicitly named in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is known to readers of *Jane Eyre* as "Thornfield Hall", the old servants have all been sent away, just as Caulibri emptied after the death of Mr. Cosway. Rochester offers money to Grace Poole in exchange for her silence and discretion. Interestingly the barbarity of Antoinette's enslavement takes place on a Western island (England) that Rochester believes to be the seat of civilized logic and reason.

Though the scene of Richard Mason's visit to Antoinette has been adapted from *Jane Eyre*, but the perspective is altered – Rhys allows Antoinette to speak. Antoinette reveals just how confused and dislocated she feels. That she does not remember attacking Richard Mason suggests the extent of her fragmentation: it seems that she and the raving madwoman are two distinct entities, locked in combat over the woman's identity. What troubles Antoinette most about Richard Mason's visit is that he does not recognize her. Without a mirror in the attic, Antoinette can no longer view her reflection and confirm her own identity. She has slowly become Rochester's creation, renamed "Bertha Mason" and transformed into a madwoman. Her attachment to her red dress is particularly poignant. She clings to her dress as a reminder of her past, believing she can smell the Caribbean landscape in its folds. The colour red in itself is a symbol of passion and destruction that led to her current captivity. In forestalling her fatal jump foretold by Brontë's novel, Rhys grants her protagonist a final moment of triumph. She appears active and defiant, about to enact her dream. She is finally allowed to speak and Rochester must listen: the fire is her voice of rage.

As a twentieth-century novel by a West Indian Writer that is, for the most part, set in Jamaica, it should be read and interpreted in a different cultural context-that of the Caribbean. In this context, the achievement of individual identity and the questions that prompt such a quest give way to different questions and a new concept

of the individual, not measurable by nineteenth-century European moral standards. When Antoinette's disembodied voice pleads with Christophine to help her, the question of who she is gives way to the question of where she is. From what place does she speak? The predetermined ending to *Wide Sargasso Sea* prompts the question in a slightly different way-from what place does she act? Although the conclusion repeats the fire in *Jane Eyre*, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* it occurs as a dream. In first person narration, Antoinette describes a dream in which she wanders through the rooms of Thornfield Hall carrying a candle. "I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of a tablecloth and I saw flames shoot up." (p. 151). Through a wall of red fire, Antoinette sees vision of her past life; she screams and jumps. Then she awakens from her dream, steals the keys from Grace Poole, and unlocks the door of her attic prison room. The novel ends here with the dream foreshadowing its "real" conclusion.

The answer to Antoinette's location can be traced in the observation that she inhabits a dream. Dream space is not "real" space, but in this case, it is real literary space since those passage ways and rooms have already been seen by the readers in fiction before. The readers experience an eerie sensation reading these final passages, because the dream is one they recognize; it seems very real to them as an explanation, from Bertha Mason's point of view, of the burning of Thornfield Hall. Then Antoinette awakes. She unlocks the door again. We are returning to a previous place in Thornfield Hall and in the narrative. It hasn't happened yet, and yet it has already happened, once in *Jane Eyre* and again in Antoinette's dream, and now it is going to happen again, for real. The novel ends here.

Self- recognition sets her flying and reunites her with Christophine:

"As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped. There was a wall of fire protecting me..." (p. 151)

In her vision she recrosses the sea, returning to Caulibri uniting her with all of its peoples-the transported English and white Creoles of her family, and finally the blacks from whom her "real" life had inevitably estranged her. Not only does Christophine appear to help Antoinette, but Tia, too, appears and calls to her. She rejects "the man's voice" and his name for her and chooses instead her black friend, rekindling their childhood ties through the wall of fire.

Conclusion: Thus, the ending to Jean Rhys's novel occurring as a dream becomes a site of critical puzzlement and debate. It appears to some readers as a passive flight from reality, to others a suicide and yet a

triumph. The predominantly Caribbean setting of the novel allows Rhys to articulate the complex interrelationship between the condition of oppressed races and cultures under European imperialism and the masculine oppression and silencing of women within European society. She has successfully dealt with the postcolonial ideology of writing back and rewriting by new uses of style, voice and narrative structure. She has not only rejected the fixed representations of non-Western women but also placed them at the center of history as agents and makers, not as mute witnesses to it.

Primary sources:

Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. New York: W. W. Norton 1971.

Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 1968.

Secondary sources:

Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back*, 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory*. New Delhi: OUP, 1998.

Newman, Judie “The Untold Story and the Retold Story: Intertextuality in Postcolonial Women’s Fiction”, *Motherlands*, edited by Susheila Nasta, Rutgers UP, 1992, pp. 22-30.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism / Postcolonialism*. Routledge, 2007.

Punter, David. *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order*. Edinburgh UP, 2000.

Said, E. W. *Orientalism*. Vintage, 2014.

..., *Culture and Imperialism*. Random House, 2014.

Tiffin, Helen. “Mirror and Mask: Colonial Motifs in the Novels of Jean Rhys”, *World Literature in English*, vol. 17, 1978, pp. 328-41.

Wolfe, Peter. *Jean Rhys*. Twayne English Author Series Boston, 1980.

Wyndham, Francis. Introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Penguin Press, 1968.