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The Retrieval of Relegated Identity of Bertha Mason in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract:

Wide Sargasso Sea is a post-colonial parallel novel by Dominican author Jean Rhys. It is inspired by and acts as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The novel is set in the lush, beguiling landscape of Jamaica in the 1830s. It is the story of Antoinette Cosway (known as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*), a white Creole heiress, from the time of her youth in the Caribbean to her unhappy marriage with Mr. Rochester and relocation to England. Caught in an oppressive patriarchal society in which she belongs neither to the white Europeans nor the black Jamaicans, Rhys's novel re-imagines Brontë's devilish mad woman in the attic. Jean Rhys actually retrieves the Creole girl 'lost'/relegated to the margins of Brontë's page. In *Jane Eyre* Bertha Mason is no longer a woman; or even a human. Jean Rhys explores this problematic issue of the creole (woman's) identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, – a novel that engages with white colonial discourse, and at the same time expresses an embedded marginal consciousness; as result here is a subversive discourse which displaces the monolithic and oppressive constitution of identity through an assertion of racial otherness. After nearly one hundred twenty years Rhys brings into focus the marginalised and effaced racial other of Brontë's novel by rewriting it in the Caribbean context.

Key Words: Caribbean, Creole, Identity, Antoinette, Bertha Mason

Wide Sargasso Sea is a post-colonial parallel novel by Dominican author Jean Rhys. It is inspired by and acts as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The novel is set in the lush, beguiling landscape of Jamaica in the 1830s. It is the story of Antoinette Cosway (known as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*), a white Creole heiress, from the time of her youth in the Caribbean to her unhappy marriage with Mr. Rochester and relocation to England. Caught in an oppressive patriarchal society in which she belongs neither to the white Europeans nor the black Jamaicans, Rhys's novel re-modules Brontë's devilish mad woman in the attic. As with many postcolonial works, the novel deals largely with the themes of racial inequality particularly the 'other woman' in the hands of white. Rhys in a letter made it clear that her target was the marginalized creole girl who, she thought, has not received a fair deal by Brontë in *Jane Eyre*. Feminist discourse has upheld the cause of female self-determination in the metropolitan context. Paradoxically it has effaced or ignored the identity of the 'third world woman'. On the other hand, feminist discourse within the 'third world' has to grapple with a complex challenge in the combined imperialism with androcentrism and patriarchal domination. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys fractures the text of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and instills a new meaning into the old tale as Rhys explores the issue of female identity.

As Gayathri Spivak has rightly argued that "talking about gender without a commitment to dismantle sexism, racism, and homophobia can degenerate into nothing more than a talk

show” (44). Rhys thus brings out the social politics that condition the plot of *Jane Eyre*, which can uphold Jane at the cost of the humiliation of a Bertha.

Bertha Mason serves “to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby weaken her entitlement under the spirit if not the letter of the Law” (Spivak 249). She has been fixed up in the role of ‘the madwoman in the attic’ i.e., prison/madhouse; and her story, if she had one, remains untold. In contrast to her, Jane, the ‘pure’ British girl, achieves her entitlement as a natural claim. Jane’s struggle for independence reflects the central concern of the *Jane Eyre* with the predicament of women in nineteenth century England; it explores the possibility of the woman’s liberation from roles of subservience to the male. But this discourse excludes another woman who represents the racial other; the question of racial difference remains inscribed in her untold story.

Jean Rhys actually retrieves the Creole girl ‘lost’/relegated to the margins of Brontë’s page and scoops her up as Antoinette Cosway particularly from chapter 27 in *Jane Eyre*, which sums up the entire past of Bertha from the unsympathetic point of view and warped description of Rochester:

Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations. Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard (320).

In *Jane Eyre* Bertha Mason is no longer a woman; or even a human. Jane hears the laughter of the ‘invisible (wo) man’ from a distance, and is jerked by the ‘distinct, formal, mirthless’ laugh which she supposes to have come from Grace Poole. Between themselves Rochester and Jane construct the image of a Bertha which is indeed despicable and terrifying. After being exposed on the morning of his abortive attempt to ‘marry’ Jane, Rochester justifies his act by vilifying his legal wife: “The lunatic is both cunning and malignant” (337). Jane’s reaction is even more frantic, as she reports to Rochester her traumatic glimpse of the creature in the night before her wedding: “It seemed, sir, a woman...It reminded me... (Of) the foul German spectre – the vampire”(311). Though obviously a woman, Jane mentions her as “It”, suggesting her dehumanized status. After seeing her in daylight Jane is puzzled: “What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it groveled, 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 mane, hid its head and face” (321). Rochester reinforces the perception by stretching it further in terms of comparison between the desirable and the despicable, i.e., between the English and the Creole: “Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder –this face with that mask –this form with that bulk” (322). According to Rochester’s report she is not only mentally sick but morally depraved too, a debasement which Rochester, like the typical European of his time, would relate to her lineage and roots. “Bertha Mason, the true daughter of an infamous mother, dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste”(333-34).

Bertha Mason is not only reduced to the bestial, but also rendered almost ‘invisible’ (being pushed back and kept hidden in the attic as she is) and inarticulate –like “the trope of blackness in Western discourse (that) has signified absence atleast since Plato” (Gates 315). Yet she is despised and feared by those who are visible and have a voice. Indeed this dangerous racial Other has not been uncommon in canonical works of English Literature. The threatening

or destructive other appears as the Moor in *Othello* (1602), the Jew in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), Man Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), the 'mysterious' alien in the colonial stories of Kipling, Conrad, Forster, etc.

Jean Rhys explores this problematic issue of the creole (woman's) identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, – a novel that engages with white colonial discourse, and at the same time expresses an embedded marginal consciousness; as result here is a subversive discourse which displaces the monolithic and oppressive constitution of identity through an assertion of racial otherness. After nearly one hundred twenty years Rhys brings into focus the marginalised and effaced racial other of Brontë's novel by rewriting it in the Caribbean context. She presents a re-reading, or what Said would have called "contrapuntal reading" (1993:78) of *Jane Eyre*; and the re-reading the canon as a means of subverting it. It is not just replacing one text with another. Rhys reconstructs the canonical text by dislodging and dismantling it through an alternative perspective.

The woman as the racial other suffers from "double otherness" under imperial condition. She was "the forgotten casualty of both imperial ideology, and native and foreign hierarchies" (Gandhi 83). In western literature black women have been doubly effaced and silenced both as black and female. The question of identity becomes extremely complex as well as urgent since the protagonist presents herself in a situation of one who belongs neither at the centre nor to the periphery. Rhys explores this problematic issue of the creole identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. A major concern of postcolonial writing was to interrogate the colonial assumptions of the European discourse by which it maintained its culture hegemony over vast part of the non-European world. Thus the re-reading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record emerged as a vital and inescapable task at the heart of the postcolonial literary enterprise.

The novel actually foregrounds the dialectic between place and displacement. The displacement generates the crisis in self-image which goes beyond the usual categories of social alienation such as master/slave, free/bonded, ruler/ruled, and includes the free settler as well. "The free settler also shows clear signs of alienation, and manifests a tendency to seek an alternative differentiated identity" (Ashcroft et al 9). Removed far away from the centre the white settler in the Caribbean had undergone this experience of alienation.

Jean Rhys projects the disastrous encounter between the two worlds –of the centre and the periphery –across the great cultural-ideological psycho-cartographical divide symbolised by the 'wide Sargasso sea'. In Rhys's novel this creole woman gets the chance to narrate her own story; the "subaltern" "speaks" for herself. Rhys humanises the 'mad woman', and gives her a voice, a past, a name, and finally an identity.

The opening of the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set a short while after the 1833 emancipation of the slaves in British-owned Jamaica. The protagonist Antoinette conveys the story of her life from childhood to her arranged marriage to an unnamed Englishman (implied as Mr Rochester from *Jane Eyre*). As the novel and their relationship progress, Antoinette, whom he renames Bertha, descends into madness. The novel is split into three parts. Part One takes place in Coulibri, Jamaica and is narrated by Antoinette. Describing her childhood experience, she includes several facets of her life, such as her mother's mental instability and her mentally disabled brother's tragic death.

Part two alternates between the points of view of her husband and of Antoinette following their marriage and is set in Granbois, Dominica. One of the likely catalysts for Antoinette's downfall is the suspicion with which they both begin to view each other, fuelled by the machinations of a supposed relative of Antoinette's, Daniel Cosway (Boyd). Antoinette's old nurse Christophine's constant mistrust of the husband and Rochester's unwavering belief in Daniel Cosway further aggravates the situation, added in when he becomes unfaithful to her. This increased sense of paranoia tinged with the disappointment of their failing marriage unbalances Antoinette's already precarious mental state.

The shortest part, Part three, is once again from the perspective of Antoinette, now known as Bertha, as she lives in the Rochester mansion, which she calls the "Great House". It traces her relationship with Grace, the servant who is tasked with 'guarding' her in England. It also traces her even more disintegrating relationship with Rochester as he hides her from the world. Making her empty promises to come see her more, which only become less as he adventures off with relationships with other women, eventually with Jane Eyre. Narrating in a stream of consciousness, Bertha decides to take her own life as she believes it to be her destiny.

The narrator finds it important to remember that her name is not Bertha, as she is called by her British husband, and that names matter: "Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass" (WSS 147). A fine way of suggesting the sensitive girl's reaction to the deprivation of her original identity through the superimposition of another image by her imperial husband who now controlled her life. She also misses Antoinette's look-(I.e., self-image) which would have shown her real face and thus would remind her that she was not a born lunatic to whom a noble English gentleman had been tied by tricks; that she was a fine sensitive girl who had once lived in and loved a lush green island separated from England by thousands of nautical miles until she was "broken up", uprooted and shipped off to England. Since then she has been kept locked in this ugly room without a looking glass. This drab dull alienated life –where she has been dislocated, isolated, and branded as a lunatic –has eventually undermined her grip on past and future, memory and hope; only yesterday and tomorrow remain. As the past recedes from the narrator's consciousness she also fails to relate to an adequate self-image. Significantly, during this period she is not allowed a looking glass. The mirror image has been, indeed, carefully built into a motif in the text. Antoinette's search for identity has been effectively reflected in this motif, –a search that, after repeated frustrations, attains success at the end. "Long ago when I was a child", Antoinette faintly remembers, "and very lonely, I tried to kiss her" (the image in the glass). It was a failed attempt at reaching out since in the sheer loneliness of her childhood there was no one else to reach out, and relate to. Later, when still a child, she had an epiphanic moment of self-recognition in the flesh of the Coulibri fire, when under a desperate longing to stay on ("Not to leave...Not to go, not") she ran to Tia, the black child who was her only playmate. Tia threw a stone: "I looked at her ... we started at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass" (WSS 38).

But the trauma of her painful marriage and the subsequent attic prison gets the better of her, and she loses the memory of this glimpse of self-knowledge she had once attained. In the absence of a mirror during this period she feels lost and does not know how to relate herself to the world around her. She says, "there is no looking glass here and I don't know what I am like now" (WSS 147).

Even as a child, the daughter of a creole mother and a British father –a plantation owner and ex-slave runner, now dead –Antoinette had known desertion, despise and poverty; in her secluded childhood she had already imbibed a deep sense of insecurity which was aggravated by her domestic situation and further intensified by the social climate of the colony that generated impersonal hatred for the creole. The story of the Cosways may be seen in relation to the same violence-ridden historical-social process that operated in various ways throughout the Caribbean islands and maligned the ethnic groups against one another.

The lonely girl grew up in an unstable world where the father had died, relatives-friends-assistants had asserted, the garden had gone wild. Then one morning the only remaining horse is found dead by poisoning; the dear old house is burnt down one night by an angry mob; and the fire, by killing Antoinette's little invalid brother and the pet bird, drives her mother mad. When Antoinette comes out after her few years in the convent which followed the Coulibri fire, both mother and stepfather have already died, and Aunt Cora, the only loving relative is in death-bed. It is in this orphaned state that she is partly enticed, partly forced into marriage with a British fortune-seeker, a marriage arranged by her half-brother in exchange of her entire property. The marriage proves disastrous in consequence. And this was only to be expected. The shadowy knowledge of her mother's last days, when the helpless mad woman, left by her husband in the hands of paid people, was sexually exploited by all and sundry, was enough to undermine the child psychically. The terrified child grows up into a sad girl; and her husband, who married her with a design, finds it easy to "break her up". As target for his imperialist-patriarchal-racist assault she is shattered soon and completely.

Antoinette's attempt to get merged into some collective identity by means of relating herself to the metropolitan white ends up in frustration and disaster. It is only at the end that she sees in the light of the fire the entire vista of the life and recognises her own identity in the form of her childhood friend Tia, and this time she does not fail to respond. The creole woman, under the yoke of racial-sexual-imperial domination, realises that ultimately her identity lies with the black women in the islands and not with the metropolitan white. She finds it possible to identify with the victims –the Christophines and Tias –because she herself has also been a victim of the imperialistic-androcentric power and ethos which had so ruthlessly victimised slave-girls in the colonies.

Rhys makes a richly artistic use of certain folk-elements in the novel to show how and where does Antoinette can really belong after all. This is evidenced by the way local beliefs, superstitions, dreams, fire-rituals, dirge-songs recur in the text and create meanings. Even Antoinette's interior monologue is narrated in the tune of the dirge which happens to be a strong element in the folklore of any ex-slave black society – particularly so in the Caribbean – a memory of the days of slavery. The dirge-like tone desperately tries to reconstruct her past casts the spell of an overwhelming sadness over the brief novel. It is in tune with the lonely moaning of the Caribbean Sea lapping the desolate islands, and is also in tune with an exhausted woman's last-ditch effort to attain an identity by means of groping along the darkening passages of a semi-forgotten past, littered by scraps of extremely painful memories.

In Antoinette's own life this very tale seems to have been reenacted with slight variations, and her dreams appear uncannily prophetic in the context. On the eve of three crucial turns of her life Antoinette is visited by the same dream in slightly varied forms. The second one is an extended repetition of the first while the third comes as a reversal. An echo of the above-

mentioned tale is clearly audible in the first two dreams. The first time she sees it is in the night that follows her desertion by Tia, and her mother's excitement over the new visitor to the house.

In her childish way she has a hunch that things are going to change. That night she dreams: "I was walking in the forest. Not alone, someone who hated me was with me out of sight. I could hear heavy footsteps coming closer and though I struggled and screamed, I could not move. I wake crying" (WSS 23). Waking up she tried to feel comforted: "I am safe. I am safe from strangers" (23). The reader knows how ironically pathetic this self-assurance will prove within a few years. The second time she has her dream is when the rumour of her impending marriage, and the necessity to leave the convent where she had left safe make her feel uneasy and scared. This dream is a pre-vision of her fatal marriage and its disastrous culmination in the attic prison. This dream, carrying unmistakable echoes of the folk-lore also sums up the entire span of her unhappy marriage; the essence as well as every detail of this dream is later worked out in reality including the terrified journey through the wilderness (sea in this case) and beyond it, terminating at the house of 'Skulls' (meaning cold calculation divorced from tenderness, emotion, love).

The Coulibri fire which destroys both the house and the home of Antoinette. Towards the end of the novel Antoinette is seen holding her candle shows that she is going to merge into Brontë's Bertha, to meet the latter's terrible end. She cannot escape death as she cannot escape the virtual imprisonment in the attic and her death in the anterior text – *Jane Eyre*. The novelist has only liberated Bertha from the attic by giving her , prehistory and identity though not a complete emancipation from reader's awareness of *Jane Eyre*. This is necessarily done by the form of prequel the author has chosen. As a prequel portrays events which precede those of a previously completed work. It cannot alter the outcome.

The characters of Jane Eyre and Antoinette are very similar. They are both independent, vivacious, imaginative young women with troubled childhoods, educated in religious establishments and looked down on by the upper classes — and, of course, they both marry Mr Rochester. However, Antoinette is more rebellious than Jane and less mentally stable, possibly because she has had to live through even more distressing circumstances. She displays a deep vein of morbidity verging on a death wish (making her more similar perhaps to the character of Helen from Jane Eyre) and, in contrast with Jane's overt Christianity, holds a cynical viewpoint of both God and religion in general.

Jean Rhys shows daring linguistic realism in this novel by linking character, dialogue, mood to the expression and intonation of the place. Thus she comes to represent what D'Costa defined as the Caribbean writers' and readers' "growing appetite for their own words and their own voices. Nothing less can represent the complexities of these cultures" (809). With all these elements of Caribbean culture interwoven by means of a rich imagination and commendable aesthetical sense as also a deep nostalgia for a particular place, Rhys makes the novel emerge as a saga of the islands in a particular time-space continuum, while underscoring the rejection of imperial values and the assertion of a new self-hood of an ex-colony. Rhys in fact blames hypocrisy, betrayal, racial inequality and the fear of voodoo magic. A white Creole, like Rhys, the heroine is neither accepted by her colonial masters, nor by the black islanders

Rhys, however, on the other hand, "secures the reader's compassion for Bertha without maligning Rochester" (Shastri 96). She achieves this by means of using a 'mechanism of

defamiliarisation', which is common in intertextual rewritings. "By coaxing an alternative reader-response for Bertha from virtually the same text, Jean Rhys shows how Jane Eyre internally sabotages itself" (Shastri 96). Rhys writes with an agenda regarding the reader's response, -- response not only to her own text, but also to the text of Bronte. For example, when we come to the scene of Bertha's attack of Richard and Rochester, in Bronte this is rendered from the point of view of an unsympathetic outsider [Bertha has to stop outside the frontiers of this woman's sympathy], in Rhys it is an empathic inside view. At the same time Rhys's book seems to be a more balanced one, giving Rochester a voice too, which even Bronte does not give. Sylvie Maurel, who describes *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an "echo-chamber" (129), relates the intertextual process here to the geographical implications of the title; as the Sargasso Sea is a calm stagnant zone, generating seaweed, and yet provides the eels an annual abode for breeding, similarly the intertextual space for the novel exploits the paradox of 'creation within repetition'.

The most striking difference between these two novels is that *Wide Sargasso Sea* transforms Rochester's first wife from Bertha Mason, the infamous "madwoman in the attic," to the lively yet vulnerable Antoinette Cosway. She is no longer a cliché or a "foreign," possibly "half-caste" lunatic, but a real woman with her own hopes, fears, and desires. *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells her side of the story as well as Rochester's, detailing how she ended up alone and raving in the attic of Thornfield Hall. In Rhys' version of events, Antoinette's insanity, infidelity, and drunkenness are the result of Rochester's misguided belief that madness is in her blood and that she was part of the scheme to have him married blindly. The novel gives a voice not only to Antoinette, but to the black people in the West Indies whom Rochester regards with such loathing.

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