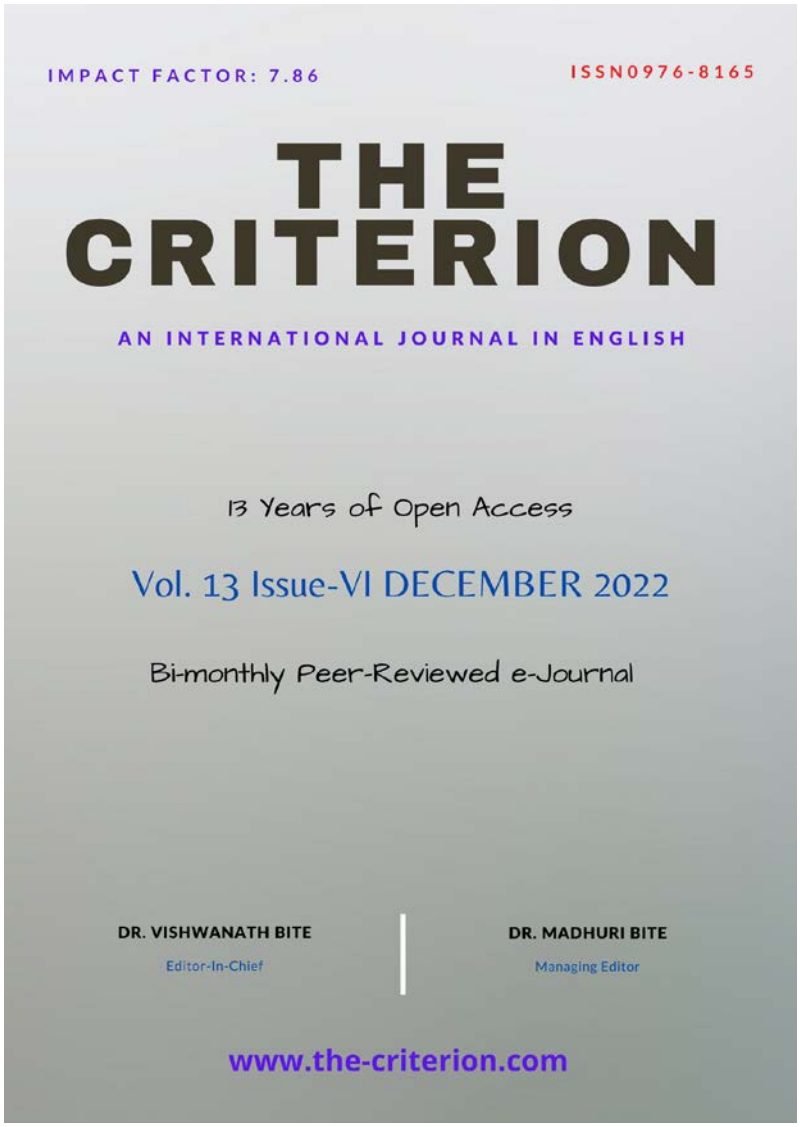


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Literary Hybridity in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract:

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* answers Gayatri Spivak's question: Can the subalterns speak? In the novel, Rhys gives voice to Antoinette, the young creole girl. She also employs first and third-person narration to provide greater authenticity to the narration. Thus, through the novel, Rhys writes back to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and the portrayal of women in the canonical novel. This paper tries to show how Jean Rhys employs literary hybridity to achieve her aim of writing back.

Keywords: postcolonialism, hybridity, deconstruct.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold

'The Second coming' by W. B. Yeats

The dawn of the twentieth century saw a gradual demise of colonial empires of the Euro-centric world. These Imperialistic European Countries, such as England, France, Germany, Spain, and Turkey, ever since the 1500s, claimed new world colonies in Africa, India, South America, North America, Asia, and Australia (Cappello 47). Later smaller Pacific Island nations were also colonised. There are numerous reasons to colonize a state or a country. The reason that tops the list is material gains from the said colony. These materials or resources were gold, diamonds, sandalwood, spices, sugar, cocoa, and artifacts. After the extraction, the materials were delivered to the ruling country for 'home' industries. Colonies also offered trade advantages and a shield from rivals, especially in sea and land routes. These materialistic gains were under the guise of civilization. The Eurocentric world made-believe that it is 'The White Man's Burden' to civilize and 'humanize' the rest of the world. In his seminal text, Critical Theory Today (2006), Tyson attempts to demonstrate how the

colonizers created binaries to validate their actions. Some binaries created are Explorer-Native, Ruler-Ruled, White-Coloured, and Civilized-Savage. These binaries were based on the assumptions of the Rulers' superiority and the Ruled's inferiority. Religion, particularly Christianity, was used to bring out 'the others' from their darkness. Western philosophy and European languages completed their 'Ivory Tower' tripod. Because of colonization, there have been many effects on the colonized people. These effects are total or partial erosion of culture, mediation of identity, hegemony, subjectivity, the adaptation of western values, the emergence of bourgeoisie communities, and stigmatization as 'Others'–someone who is savage, uncivilized, God-less, stupid, sexually easy, cruel, and exotic.

As colonized countries gained independence, a renewed sense of self-esteem emerged in many facades: in politics, culture, art, and literature, to name a few (Cappello 47). A new literary theory, Postcolonial Literary Theory, emerged as a critique of western representations of race, ethnicity, culture, and human identity after colonization (Childs and Williams 1). The predominant discourse of the theory is that no culture is better or worse than other cultures. It also studies the power relationship between previously colonized cultures and people. Postcolonial literature or writings emerged because of these reactions. One role of literature is to show what matters and what has happened in society. Therefore, Postcolonial literature act as an agent to represent a changing world, from the world of the part where colonial literature presented colonial ethos to the new world with a re-established identity.

According to Cappello, the re-established identity and freedom resulted in many new literature in recent years. She further asserts that Postcolonial literature seeks "to define the many voices of the previously marginalized 'Other' and establish a claim to cultural identity" (47). To add on, these works also challenge the mainstream culture's identity and question the established concepts of cultural superiority. Some prominent postcolonial critics and writers are Edward Said, Kamau Brathwaite, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Dominick LaCapra, Chinua Achebe, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, and Jean Rhys.

Jean Rhys, the author of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), was born in Dominica in 1890. Her father was Welsh and her mother, a Creole. At the age of sixteen, she came to England. After her father's death, she drifted into a series of jobs–chorus girl, mannequin, and artist's model-in England. After her first three marriages broke up, she began to write. By then, she was in her thirties and living in Paris. Here she was encouraged by Ford Madox Ford. Ford is known to discover D. H. Lawrence's literary abilities. To encourage Rhys, Ford wrote an enthusiastic introduction to her first book. Jean Rhys' first book is a collection of stories

called *The Left Bank* (1927). *Quartet* (originally *Postures*, 1928), *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) followed her first collection. Astounding but true, her books did not find success as expected. Some critics reasoned that her attempts were way ahead of their time. Others argued that the theme and tone of the books were monotonous. All books dealt with women as subalterns and the exploitation of their sexuality. Rhys portrayed the same woman with different names and minor details at different stages of life. These women were all drifters, "unhappy, and unstable, but with clear self-knowledge and understanding of others" (Jean Rhys Page, World Literature in English).

With the outbreak of war and the subsequent failure of *Good Morning, Midnight*, Jean Rhys literally went out of sight. Many thought that she was dead. Almost twenty years later, she was rediscovered, largely because of the enthusiasm of the writer Francis Wyndham. She was living reclusively in Cornwall. During those years, she accumulated stories and published them in a collection titled *Tigers are Better-Looking* (1968). But in 1966, she reappeared with *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The novel won two awards: Royal Society of Literature Award and the W. H. Smith Award. Her only comment on the latter is that "It has come too late." She was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1966 and a CBE in 1978. Rhys's work is often about women who are in various stages of their lives. These female characters live 'hands to mouth' in London or Paris. They are always on the economic edge, needing money, receiving cash and clothes from men, drinking, sitting in cafes, and endlessly walking. The books are very spare, stark, unsentimental, and wonderful.

Rhys' novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, emerges as a substantial postcolonial literature where national and regional consciousnesses try to assert differences from the imperial centre (Cappello 2009). She further says that the novel subverts the imperial privilege of the 'centre' to give voice to that 'periphery' which has been silenced for long. It is time that the world hears "the other side" (Rhys 82) of the story, the voice of denigrated and supplanted native cultures, the point of view of those who have been inferior for unjustified reasons. In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Ashcroft et al. distinguishes between the Standard British English inherited from the Empire and the English which the language has evolved in postcolonial countries.

Homi Bhabha, in his notion of hybridity, particularly linguistic hybridity, discusses the inter-transfer of words from the dominant language into the local language or vice versa. This gives way to slang, patois, pidgin, and dialect. He provides an example of the long history of British colonialism in India. Several Indian words entered the English language,

first amongst the white "Anglo-Indians" and later into British society. Today, words like "pyjamas" and "bungalow" are often used without an awareness of their etymology. Similarly, words from African languages like "mumbo-jumbo" have entered the English language.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys uses language to subvert the ideologies of the West, deconstructing European discourse and mono-centrism. She uses both Standard British English to represent the European discourse in the character of Rochester. To represent Creole and the black community, Rhys uses the Jamaican varieties of English as the language of the periphery. By employing language, she emphasizes and constructs the setting; the Creole, Black, and European identity; and the race relationships of the novel. From the first paragraph of chapter 1, Rhys displays the two language types, the proper and accepted, and the Creole variant "… because she pretty like pretty self" (5). The novel is full of Creole expressions like "I too old now" (6), "She hear all we poor like beggar. The old house so leaky, you run with calabash to catch water when it rain" (10), and "read and write I don't know" (104). Rochester, the representative of European discourse and power, vehemently rejects the varieties of English. He refuses to accept Creole as a language and he dislikes, refuses and refrains from understanding utterances like "He spoke good English" (43), "her coffee is delicious but her language is horrible" (52), "I can't say I like her language" (53), and "he hasn't learned any English that I can understand" (111).

The *wide Sargasso Sea* also falls in the scope of Homi Bhabha's notion of Literary Hybridity. In the essay "Of Mimicry and Man," Bhabha questions the ambivalence of western authority (Singh). Singh attempts to explain the notion of mimicry and hybridity. According to Singh, literary "hybridity at the level of narrative form is fundamental to what we now know as postcolonial literature. Modern literary forms such as the novel and the short story are modes of writing invented in the West" (2009).

However, colonial authors readily adopted them in Africa and Asia. Ironically, the novel form in the western genre became one of the primary ways Africans and Asians collectively imagined a sense of national and cultural identity. Instead of projecting limitation for the first generations of Asians and Africans s, the novel form became a major form of expression. To them, the novel has proven to be incredibly flexible and open. The western literary genres offered an avenue for literary hybridity. Another way of thinking about literary hybridity relates to postcolonial literature's response to the Western Tradition (the Canon). While postcolonial writers have freely adapted western literary forms for their own purposes, as with the question of language, there remains some anxiety regarding how Canonical

authors have represented (or misrepresented) Africa and Asia in their works. As a result, postcolonial writers have often attempted to "write back" to the British Canon with revisionist adaptations of classic works or give voice to the subalterns. The writers try to answer Gayatri Spivak's much-acclaimed question in her essay, *Can the subalterns speak?*

The *wide Sargasso Sea* is recognized as being a re-writing, a reply to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). As a white Creole from Dominica in the West Indies, Rhys declares she was "vexed at her [Brontë's] portrait of the 'tiger paper' lunatic, the all wrong Creole scenes" […] (Letters 262) and that Brontë was only presenting "one side—the English side" (Letters 297). She clearly states her intention of reversing Bronte's text and tell the story from the mad wife's perspective. The Creole in Charlotte Bronte's novel is a lay figure—repulsive, which does not matter, and not once alive! She's necessary to the plot, but she always shrieks, howls and laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry—off-stage.

As an apt reply, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has several instances of inter-textuality. Rhys' protagonists reflect the earlier cast like Antoinette Cosway Mason is Bertha Mason, Bronte's madwoman in the attic, her unnamed husband is Mr Rochester, Mr Mason, the Englishman who marries Antoinette's mother, is named after Bertha's brother. In both the texts, the woman who nurses mad Bertha is named Grace Poole. The narrative events are similar. For example, the materialistic motives for the arranged marriages are identical. Both Rochesters are depended on marriage for financial prospects because their elder brothers inherited the family estate. Simultaneously both brides are married-off to an Englishman to restore the identity and stability of their families in the dominant social order. Also, both Antoinette and Bertha have a brother who is ill; their mother who goes mad. Lastly, the lives of the husbands in both texts are identical. In both novels, the unions are set in Spanish Town, Jamaica, and Part III of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set in *Jane Eyre's* Thornfield Hall. Rhys even uses Bronte's imagery of fire and ice (or heat and cold) and her use of colour symbolism (texts.crossref-it.info).

Although Rhys has similar symbolism, imagery, and characters, there are significant differences. One difference is that in her tripartite structure, the different narrators tell the story from their points of view. The narration moves from first person to third person, giving a balanced perspective of the conflict that existed in their lives, unlike in *Jane Eyre*, where it is only linear first-person narration. The first-person narrative is employed in the first and second parts by Antoinette and Rochester, respectively, and the third part is in third-person narration by Grace Poole. This technique gave the novel a somewhat episodic feel in contrast to Bronte's linear one-sided narration. In *Jane Eyre,* Bronte attempts to provide closure to the

plot, whereas Rhys, in the end, leaves the plot open-ended, a sign of renewed hope and further aspirations of the main character.

Conclusion

Jean Rhys practices the postcolonial concepts to write back to the founding imperialist novel *Jane Eyre*. The choice to re-write canonical narratives of Western discourse is a common postcolonial practice where telling a story from another point of view is considered an extension of the deconstructive project to explore the gaps and silences in a text. In this case, Jean Rhys is writing back to Charlotte Bronte. As she deconstructs *Jane Eyre*, Rhys also gives us a condemning history of colonialism in the Caribbean. *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes us into the past of one of fiction's most famous characters: 'the mad wife in the attic' of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Rhys turns this classic novel inside out and explains the character's story with no authentic voice in Bronte's book. She reasons out the actions of a woman who has been alienated all her life. Obviously, it would be solitary, doomed, marooned, and stagnant like the Sargasso Sea. The solitariness, doomnation, maroonity and stagnantation of the uprooted and supplanted communities are not caused by internal conflicts but by some external forces such as colonisation under the guise of 'White man's burden.'

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