

*The Quest for Identity and Reversing the Colonial Discourse in
Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea*

البحث عن الهوية ورد الخطاب الاستعماري في *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to explore the relationship between the colonizer and the former colonized as well as its impact on the identity's formation in Jean Rhys' (1890-1979) well acclaimed novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). The novel constructs a vision of the female character who is able to voice herself against the authoritative patriarchal society of that time. In addition to empowering the female voice, the paper examines the means through which the novelist reverses the colonial discourse build upon the dichotomy of superiority versus inferiority. In depth, the paper examines the colonial discourse and the narrative implications in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a novel that gives voice and power to the colonized within the light of post-colonial theory.

Key Words: *colonial; discourse; identity; multiplicity.*

المخلص:

يهدف هذا المقال الى تبين طبيعة العلاقة بين المستعمر والمستعمّر السابق وتأثيرها على بناء الهوية في البلدان المستعمّرة ضمن رواية جين ريس المشهودة *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). تحكي الرواية عن شخصية أنثى قادرة على إسماع صوتها ضد المجتمعات التي يسودها نظام أبوي متسلط في ذلك الوقت. إضافة لإبراز دور الأنثى، يعمل المقال على تبين الوسائل التي من خلالها تمكنت الروائية من رد الخطاب الاستعماري المبني على ثنائية التفوق ضد الدونية. ضمن هذا السياق، يشرح المقال بعمق الخطاب الاستعماري والمضامين السردية في *Wide Sargasso Sea*. هذه الاخيرة تعتبر مثالا للرواية التي تمنح صوت وقوة للشعوب المستعمّرة على سبيل "نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار".

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستعماري؛ الخطاب؛ الهوية؛ تعدد

I. INTRODUCTION

Being a sequel to Charlotte Bronte's (1816-1855) prominent nineteenth century novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jean Rhys' (1890-1979) *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is considered a remodeling of the mad voiceless character of Bertha from *Jane Eyre* wherein Rhys renames her Antoinette; a woman who owns a voice and potential of change and power. The quest for identity is a major concern for the novelist who is trying to figure out the meaning of identity in the Caribbean region. Throughout the novel, Rhys develops and explores some attitudes towards concepts like hybridity, dislocation, and identity crisis. She displays a preoccupation with the dislocation of hybrid characters like Antoinette who is half Caribbean-half British. This hybridity results in a kind of identity split and crisis in which Antoinette finds herself belonging neither to the Jamaicans nor to the English.

Besides this crisis of identity that the novel highlights, scholarship of post-colonial studies indicate that writers resort to different techniques to "write back" (Bill Ashcroft & all, 1989) to a certain oppressive ideology, regime, or culture. The new awareness to the issue of representation became a necessity starting at the turn of the century in particular. This awareness coincides with the new discoveries in psychology (Sigmund Freud's subconscious), science (Einstein's theory of relativity), philosophy (Henry Bergson's Duration and William James' Stream of Consciousness). All of them come to reverse the Platonic version of a stable world and an established truth. As a result, new modes of expression like Stream of Consciousness, metafiction, and magical realism appeared to reflect on the chaotic status quo and the complex experience of the world during the twentieth century. Being a contemporary novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* as many of its contemporaries develop a new awareness to the issue of reality and representation. Misrepresentation affects the way our understanding of history and past is shaped especially history of colonialism.

The formerly colonized people who have been oppressed develop certain means to defend and express themselves differently from the way they have been misrepresented throughout history. Theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak are important to understand Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* especially in regard to the issues of identity crisis and colonial discourse. These theorists emphasize language's control over knowledge and the fact that discourse is subjective; therefore, obtaining one single truth is impossible. As such, readers of colonial narratives must be aware that these narratives imply a discourse of silencing and objectifying reality.

Rhys highlights thematic issues in relationship with the history of the empire and contends that these historical narratives are unjust because it ignores the voice of the marginalized people. The novel makes use of the narrative technique of multiple narrators, which becomes an important textual space to offer new views from the dominant ones. The novelist wants to determine that history contains more than one version of truth. Indeed, *Wide*

Sargasso Sea is a multiple-voices novel that tells a story of oppression and resistance from different perspectives. While Antoinette for instance represents the colonized, Rochester represents the colonizer. The variety of narratives gives the reader a vantage point of view to detect the discourse of the colonizer towards the colonized.

1. From Colonization to Post-colonial Theory:

In Said's (2006) *Orientalism*, he indicates that orientalism is a field of study and an academic discipline that started within the European medieval scholarship and developed in the nineteenth century with colonial expansion. Orientalists have subjective and definite views on the East. (pp. 13-57) As a result, they divided the world into us "the exotic East" and them "the developed West". Said's studies offer more than a theoretical background to colonial discourse but also a methodology to apply on literary texts. The aim is to locate the author's strategic images and motifs. Said's *Orientalism* paves the way for the development of Post- colonial literary theory.

Said points out that in a historical context, we should remember that two opposing sides- the colonizer and the colonized- have no possibility of integration. In order to ensure dominance, the colonizer creates stereotypes and value judgments constantly. This movements and motives create many voices and narratives in history. Stereotypes are repeated all the time to exaggerate and normalize the difference (Hook, 2005:p.6). Thus, if we want to read the history of empire, we should investigate and lend an ear to all sides not only the colonizer's narrative. We must always remember that discourse is subjective because of the existing link between desire and language. Indeed, throughout the narrative of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the reader notices that Antoinette's narrative reflects her uncertainty and confusion about identity as opposed to Rochester's narrative which reflects his English patriarchal background.

Another theorist who emphasizes the subjectivity of colonial discourse is Homi Bhabha (1984) who points out that radical inequality of privilege and possession characterize the colonial environment. Injustice separates the marginal groups from the dominant ones. He argues that "the very emergence of the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself" (p.127). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there is an apparent division between races and classes within the same society. In order to normalize the difference between the colonizer and the colonized, the dominant group fixes and places oppressed people in a special frame of dependence. Therefore, the linkage between discourse and positioning of people is central to understand the nature of relationship between different races. Positioning marks the boundaries of cultural and racial difference.

Gayatri Spivak is another theorist who calls for attention to the colonized subjects who are silenced by the colonizer. Spivak's ideas help us to

understand the relationship of Antoinette and Rochester as a colonized versus colonizer's relation. Spivak focuses on the marginalized people and the Post-colonial state. The oppressed cannot express his opinions because he is condemned to be represented, and spoken for by others who exploit him. (cited in Gilbert, 2000:p. 452) Spivak focuses also on the mechanism of silencing throughout discourses of the dominant groups. In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* She maintains that the colonial history is built upon the construction and positioning of the colonized in an inferior status. Spivak refers to the female Indian voice as an example of silencing by the British discourse. This voice can never be heard through direct access because it is mediated and represented by other voices. (Gayatri, 1995: pp.27-31) This oppressive situation resembles the silenced voice of Bertha/Antoinette in *Jane Eyre*.

2. Crisis of Identity:

To situate *Wide Sargasso Sea* within its historical context, we should consider its time zone in relationship with Caribbean history. This is the period of emancipation (1834) which marked a great unrest in the region. The novel tells about historical events and their effects on the Caribbean identity. Indeed, Antoinette's family as an example had owned slaves and wealth but after the emancipation, their economic status declined. In this novel, we notice that racial backgrounds separate people and define conventions and rules of behavior. This intense atmosphere creates a dilemma for people of mixed racial backgrounds like Antoinette.

Because of the split of Antoinette's identity, her narrative is marked by uncertainty and hesitation. Antoinette seeks belonging and this is why she keeps asking questions about the past. She is the daughter of a slave owner but after emancipation, the family becomes poor and their economic status worsens. A racial atmosphere dominates the first part of the novel because slaves mock and tell jokes on white Creoles. Antoinette grows up watching her mother complaining about social and economic status of the family. Even Antoinette's home at Coulibri establishment does not represent a safe loving shelter but rather a cold building. At home, Antoinette appears disturbed and uncomfortable whereas in nature she feels in peace and free. She longs for a place to belong to and this is clear when she says, "watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer." (Rhys, 1966: p.16)

The novelist portrays Antoinette as one who lived an unstable childhood that would leave its scars later into her adult life. She feels distanced from people who are surrounding her; she says that "none of you understand us." (Rhys, 1966:p.18) The

quote explains Antoinette's ability to define and separate between the pronouns "you" and "us". She is able to recognize her difference from other people who belong to other races. The memories and wishes of West Indian childhood and Eden-like life hunt her and make her inappropriate to live in England later in her life. She seems to be rejected from the very beginning of her life and this rejection lasts for a long period. In fact, this dilemma and division between the former colonized societies and the colonial powers prevent the merging of groups with one another. Hall (2019) stresses this division and maintains that the "idea" of the west "provides a standard or model of comparison. It allows to compare to what extent different societies resemble, or differ from one another....It helps to explain *difference*." (p.143) Indeed, creating this imaginary "*difference*" helps explain and intensify the dividing line of superiority versus inferiority just like the character of Antoinette who is classified as different.

To understand the complex narrative of Antoinette as well as her crisis of identity, it is important to tell about her struggle to find a place. For Caribbeans, Antoinette can never be a true Caribbean and for English, she can never be a European woman. Because of her mixed race, none of the groups accept her. Her family does not belong to the dominant group but rather the Creole minority. Rochester's keep complaining about Antoinette's difference from him. They spend their honeymoon on the Windward Island, a place foreign and alien to Rochester. He feels confused and threatened which made it hard for Antoinette to satisfy and please him. As time passes, their relationship worsens. In England, she tries her best to act like a European lady and please Rochester but in vain. During that phase of their relationship, we notice that both of their narratives are uncertain and their different backgrounds distanced them from each other. Rochester is trying to model his wife into a European lady whom she does not recognize. The couple seems to speak different languages and come from different pasts. Unfortunately, the English husband does not appreciate Antoinette's efforts and sees nothing beyond her blackness.

In order to emphasis Antoinette's instability and her quest for identity, Rhys employs some images like the glass image as a recurrent motif in the novel. Antoinette is a desperate woman who is looking for others to project her divided image on them. In the attic where Rochester imprisons her, she looks desperately for a glass to identify herself with "there is no looking glass here and I don't know what I am like now." (Rhys, 1966: p. 107) We have also the character Tia whom Antoinette tries to seek refuge in. She tries to find her missing identity within Tia. Antoinette's madness is employed in a mirror image as well. She fails to recognize

the difference between herself and the “Other”. We see that her borders of identity are uncertain and she tends to project herself with others.

Rhys emphasizes this split of identity sometimes as part of the colonial legacy; nevertheless, she empowers Antoinette at other times. In her relationship with Rochester, the reader sees that Antoinette explains and refers frequently to the history of her family. She tries to make Rochester know more about her Caribbean background. Their talks and few dialogues centers on this part of the world called the Caribbean. Though European background is part of her origins, she denies that she is in England and she fails to understand her husband’s background. She feels lost, alienated, and abandoned. Nevertheless, one of the means through which the novelist empowers the colonized voice is making the protagonist Antoinette able to talk and express herself in order to clarify what it means to be a Creole descendent.

3. Reversing Colonial Discourse:

One of the reasons of writing this novel seems that as a West Indian, Rhys feels that Bronte’s descriptions of that part of the world and the people living there are unjust. Rhys wants to give *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha life and voice after she has been mistreated. She depicts her as a character who is able to talk against the cruelty of her husband. In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte gives Rochester a voice to narrate the whole version of the story. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, he represents one single voice among others. The complex narrative of *Wide Sargasso Sea* reflects many conflicts between races, sexes, and relationships. The reader listens to characters who want to know the past and seek reality from different perspectives. Antoinette for instance asks her mother about Christophine’s past but the mother’s answer is uncertain. She tells Antoinette that these are remote disturbing memories. Even when Antoinette gets married, she does not find rest. This uncertainty is emphasized to maintain the subjective nature of narratives and history. Looking at the narrative of Rochester as another example, one can see that it is dominated by notions of patriarchy and racial stereotypes. These characteristics make his understanding of Caribbean very different from Antoinette’s vision.

Throughout the narrative, the reader can notice that Rochester is undertaking a journey to reach reality and seek knowledge of the past. He says, “How can one discover the truth I thought and that thought led me nowhere. No one would tell me the truth. Not my father nor Richard Mason, certainly not the girl I had married” (Rhys, 1966: p. 62). The quotation illustrates Rochester’s desire and eagerness to know reality

and understand the past of Antoinette's family. He doubts Antoinette's words and he takes Daniel Cosway's letters as a proof to condemn her. These letters are clues to investigate about the history of Antoinette's family. Over the issue of slavery, for example, Rochester believes that it was a matter of "justice" whereas Antoinette thinks that justice is "a damn cold lie...There is no justice" (Rhys, 1966: p. 88). This example reveals clearly Rochester's imperial discourse. He thinks that both Antoinette and Christophine have some kind of secret knowledge. This secret knowledge sets him apart from their world because he cannot get access to it. As such, Rhys gives different characters different voices to make clear that there is always a second version of the story. Knowledge plays a crucial role in narrating and shaping history and through the use of multiple narrators knowledge is rendered and the facts we know constitute only a distorted image of history.

Indeed, Rochester admits that he sees clearly the difference between himself and his wife but he cannot be sure of the time he first noticed that difference. As Said (1994) explained in his *Culture and Imperialism* "separating the natives-Africans, Malays, Arabs, Berbers, Indians, Nepalese, Javanese, Filipinos,- from the white man on racial and religious grounds, the for reconstituting them as people requiring a European presence, whether a colonial implantation or a master discourse in which they could be fitted and put to work" (p.202). Creating differences and separation dominate the speech of Rochester who come to represent the colonizer although he feels lost in this alien world and the novel alludes many times that Rochester is lost between reality and dreams. He expresses this uncertainty when he says "that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream." (Rhys, 1966: p. 48) His distance from Antoinette outrages her and widened the gap between them.

Rochester's narrative made the story more convincing about colonial attempt to shape history from their perspective. His version gives a different dimension to Antoinette's version. He speaks from a European perspective and his narrative is dominative and oppressive. Rochester's voice is direct and stable because he does not suffer from a split of identity like his wife. Antoinette, however, has difficulty to narrate her side of the story because of the split she suffers from. Frantz Fanon (1967) argues that "The colonial world is a world divided into compartments" (p.29) which means that the colonizer and the colonized can never intermingle because of their differences and colonial unacceptance of equality and that is why two worlds living in one but never melting all together

The novel's textual space is divided into three parts in which the content differs from one narrator to another. Antoinette and her English husband are the major narrators with other voices from time to time. Though it is the story of Antoinette but Rochester's version makes the discourse of the dominant groups versus the oppressed ones clear and audible. Through Antoinette's and Rochester's narratives, the reader comes to know their opinions, their actions' justification, and their history. Rochester's narrative expresses his feelings, defect, and alienation in this exotic part of the world. Alongside Rochester's narrative, other voices like Tia and Daniel Cosway appear also. Daniel Cosway has his own letters, and Christophine has her own voice and stories of Obeah. We hear also the voice of Amélie who is sorry for Rochester's marriage, and we hear Daniel's voice as well.

Antoinette jumps between these voices while she tries to make her voice audible. Carine Mardorossian (1999) argues that “ the Straightforward historical narrative is replaced by allusions which not only challenge an essential way of ordering reality but also dramatize the process by which ‘the real’ gets obliterated by conflictive representational discourses” (p.107).

Besides this multiplicity, Rhys employs other strategies in order to reverse the colonial discourse such as naming. The novelist pays special attention to the value of names. Names are a way to define and identify one individual from the other. Naming differentiates selves and distinguishes them. Rochester is nameless as an act of revenge for *Jane Eyre's* Bertha but at the same time he tries to rename Antoinette by calling her Bertha. He keeps calling her Bertha and when she asks why, he does not provide any answer. Antoinette realizes the importance of the name and she seems angry at Rochester's attempt to deprive her from her identity. Antoinette expresses her anger when she says: “names matter, like when-Rochester- wouldn't call me Antoinette.” (Rhys, 1966: p.106) This name in particular foreshadows his desire to imprison her. The image of imprisonment recalls the scene of Bertha's locking up in Bronte's narrative. On the other hand, it foreshadows Antoinette's locking in England. This jump between past and present clarifies the constant desire of the colonial to degrade the natives in different manners throughout all the times.

II. CONCLUSION:

All in all, literary texts and narratives are made up of subjective discourse that reflect the speaker's former judgments and personal views. We have seen that unlike the colonial discourse and imperial vision of Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s narrative space indicates that history of the empire is unjust because it ignores the voice of the marginalized people. The discourse of superiority versus inferiority was conducted throughout history in order to maintain power over the natives. This novel shows that language and knowledge are powerful mean to shape reality and in order to deconstruct a text, the reader should lend an ear to the marginalized voices.

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