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# **Celebrating the Female Cultural Other in *Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea***

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## **Abstract:**

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*<sup>1</sup> (1966) is a postmodern parodic rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's canonical novel *Jane Eyre*<sup>2</sup> (1847) in which the postcolonial woman novelist writes the absented side of the silenced Bertha Mason. This paper seeks to study Rhys's text as a coming-out party for Bertha, who leaves the confines of voicelessness and savageness to celebrate, first, her splitting-subjectivity that endows her with much leeway not only to challenge her readerly representation as the 'madwoman in the attic' in the original work but also to embrace her capacity to rebirth herself as Antoinette Cosway who espouses the multiplicity of her identities and the plurality of her selves. Second, her fragmented narrative structure enables her to upset the conventional concepts of objective truth and conclusive meaning, opening the floor to the free play of signs and the free-floating articulation of different realities. Third, her hybridity is no longer perceived as a dysfunctional space; it turns out to be a liberating site which enables her to subvert the conventional concept of 'purity,' stressing the fact that cultural identity is a matter of being and becoming rather than of being. Fourth, Bertha's excessive passion and uncontained sexuality are openly articulated instead of being repressed.

**Keywords: celebration, Jean Rhys, Charlotte Brontë, fragmentation, hybridity, excessive sexuality**

## **I. Disjointed Identity, Discontinuous Narrative: Fragmentation in WSS**

### **A. Antoinette as a Splitting-Subject:**

In her endeavour to redeem Antoinette/Bertha from her fixed identity as the Creole “horrible lunatic” woman from the West Indies, Jean Rhys recuperates new forms of being for her heroine who embraces the multiplicity of her selves and the fluidity of her evolving subjectivities. She takes her reader on a journey back to the Caribbean of the 1830s where she invites the marginalized Bertha Mason for a coming-out party to re-represent herself as Antoinette Cowsay, the counterpart of Bertha Mason in *JE*. Quickly after her mother’s marriage to Mr. Mason, Rhys’s female protagonist becomes Antoinette Cosway Mason. Antoinette’s nomadic identity that resists closure and finality is further addressed in the novel when she gets married to Edward Rochester. According to the English Law, she is given the last name of her husband to become Antoinette Cosway Mason Rochester. Within this accretion of names, Antoinette is endowed with different identities that display her capacity to embrace different and evolving subjectivities. Indeed, her embrace of her English stepfather’s as well as Rochester’s surnames, without dropping one of them, can better translate her transgressive endeavour to masquerade the British identity. Actually, while identifying herself with the colonial subject, she upsets the imperialist ideology that fixes her within the confines of the cultural Other, opting for a cross-cultural identity. Her self-splitting female protagonist breaks down the conventional boundaries of fixity, dwelling in the realm of openness that celebrates the futurity of her identity and the flexibility of her perpetual state of becoming.

### **B. Fragmented Narrative Structure:**

Rhys merrily overlooks the nineteenth-century chronological order, opting for a disjointed and disrupted narrative structure that fulminates against the seams of cohesion. She projects Antoinette’s fragmented identity on her inconclusive narrative, making her jump into

the future and regales her readers with her coming acts. In so doing, she overturns the hierarchical supremacy of realism in the Brontean text that conjures an alternative reality about Bertha's fatal demise. Shuttling between her past life in Jamaica and her presence in her husband's house arrest, her heroine subverts the traditional spatio-temporal conventions blurring the barriers of two chronotopic zones. Her narrative is ripping off chunks of reality, cutting the logical cords between events and celebrating the process of shuffling back and forth. The eruption of her homeland memory that intrudes into the waking world of the heroine in the attic of Thornfield Hall showcases incompatible fragments of life which break away the logical sequence of events and disturbs its coherence. As she gazes to her red dress lying on the floor, she recalls her past life in Jamaica, where she used to enjoy the natural wilderness of the island, and notably Goulibri's untamed garden which is compared to the Garden of Eden: "Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible-the tree of life grew there. But it had gone *wild*" (Rhys, the emphasis is mine 4). Actually, the lush landscapes of the island represent the maternal space where Antoinette feels immune, fortified and safe. Her nostalgic return to Coulibri which is accompanied by a remembrance of "the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the trees of life," articulates Rhys's tendency to articulate a gendered chronotope (123). In other words, her heroine's non-sequential perception of time and space is well represented in her travelling from the symbolic masculine sphere England, which epitomizes the paternal law and colonial world that are related to linearity and rationality to the pre-Oedipal feminine Sargasso Sea that represents the semiotic or maternal space for her.

In addition to her use of flashback techniques, Antoinette's different dreams also unsettle the chronological flow of events, foreshadow the coming actions in the plot and allow the reader to have access to the character's subjective consciousness. For example, Antoinette's third dream liberates her from the conventional spatio-temporal parameters

through her violation of the bounds between reality and dream, creating a magical realist scene. While blurring the boundaries between her present life in Thornfield with her memories of Coulibri, Antoinette defies the realistic conception of objective truth, creating her own reality and world. She refuses to acknowledge the world of Thornfield Hall that imposes on her a fixed identity and defines her as the marginalised Other. In the final section of the novel, Antoinette “doubts the identity of her residence” insisting that the mansion is not in England (Müller 74). She believes that England, which she previously depicts as “quite unreal, and like a dream” is an imaginary place, a “cardboard world” made of paper. She insists that she has never reached England and that she is still sailing the wide Sargasso Sea. The indeterminacy and uncertainty that Antoinette creates overthrow the conventions of clarity and finality. Her refusal to accept England as an objective and external reality testifies her subversive capacity to create her own reality and to define herself in terms of a space of in-betweenness also stands for fluidity and flux which are in accordance with her hybrid and fluid identity. The novel’s title seems to signify Antoinette’s unstable world of plurality and difference, one that is set against Rochester’s world that denotes fixedness and stability reflected in the word ‘land’ in England. Thinking that she and Rochester have lost their way in the Sargasso Sea casts doubt on the authority and power of Rochester as well as the reliability of Brontë’s objective reality.

## **II. Hybridity:**

### **A. Hybrid Cultural Identity:**

Born to a British ex-slave owner father and White French Creole mother, Antoinette finds herself straddling the boundaries of two different cultural stools; she is Caribbean but not black, white but not English. As a White Creole, Antoinette enjoys the multiplicity of her identities stemming from her cultural hybridity; she subverts cultural hierarchisation and

overturns the realm of imperialist and the colonialist system of binarism based on the dichotomous opposites of 'either/or,' 'us/them,' 'self/Other.' In other words, it calls into question Englishness as the purest cultural and national identity and troubles it as a monolithic and monologic signifier for whiteness. Her hybridity is a liberating force that opens up an "in-between space" which Homi Bhabha calls the "Third Space of enunciation" that works to release the tensions arising from the encounter between the colonised and the coloniser and to celebrate the politics of inclusion rather than exclusion ("Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences" 209).

Antoinette's joyful celebration of her Creole identity and thus of her hybridity is better seen in the closing scene of the novel. To explain more, her condonation of Rochester's calls "Bertha! Bertha" that define her as an English woman and her leap into fire where she sees the figure of Tia, her black Caribbean alter ego, should not be read as a movement towards her personal cancellation in which she seeks a complete identification with the black girl. Instead, it is an instance of rebirth in which Antoinette acknowledges her belonging to the Caribbean world and, thus, asserts her hybrid identity, embracing her in-betweenness and celebrating both parts, black and white, of her national identity. In a self-conscious act, Antoinette resurrects herself by thinking of identity as a production which is never complete or finished. Her embrace of her hybridity becomes a site of resistance, a liberating force that enables her to experience herself as a subject in process who is engaged in a continuous becoming and being.

### **B. Hybrid Language:**

Rhys's novel in English "serves to interrupt pure narratives of nation," creating thus, a variety of dialects and an array of speech styles that ordinary people use in their use of language. Her novel turns out to be a heteroglot writing that encompasses the very presence of

heteroglossia that Bakhtin defines as: “The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects” (“Discourse in the Novel” 484). This incorporates the presence of many marginalized voices and styles that erupt to subvert “the refined and serious language of high culture” and challenge the uniformity and universality of the English language while ceremonially enthrone Caribbean language (Yaneva 42). In other words, the text incorporates both the Standard English used by Rochester and Mr. Mason and the English, French, and Patois used by the Caribbean islanders such as Creoles and Blacks. The novel incorporates many Creole’s songs like Christophine’s lullaby “*Ma belle ka di maman li*” meaning “my beautiful girl said to her mother,” that represents the mother’s voice. Other childish words are also used by Christophine when she talks to Antoinette such as “doudou,” meaning “little darling,” “doudou ché” meaning “dear little darling,” and others as “béké” meaning a white person (Rhys 70-71-70, Sumillera 29). Rhys’s embodiment of these terms in a text written in English is not only directed to decentralize the universality of her Rochester’s mother tongue, but also to display the linguistic diversities and complexities of the West Indian society, rejecting Brontë’s imperialist ideology that presents her Creole heroine as a voiceless beast that “growled like some strange wild animal” (Brontë 321). She goes beyond that to display “that Creoles do have linguistic vitality.

### **III. Celebration of her Sexuality:**

Although both women writers address the issue of female sexuality as a way to subvert the patriarchal society, they approach it differently. In *JE*, Brontë violates the muteness that enveloped the nineteenth-century Victorian connubial intimacy by providing her readers a glimpse of Bertha Mason, the ethically perverted wife of her Byronic hero. She reproduces patriarchal and racist binary thought. She represents the proper female behaviour by encountering two antithetical figures of women: “The angel in the house” symbolized by Jane

and “the madwoman in the attic” represented by Bertha. In other words, while Brontë defines Bertha’s sexuality within the confines of the evil and monstrous and thus, lapses in the reproduction of the patriarchal sexual politics that force women to be passive, Rhys gives voice to the female passion negated in *JE*. She re-examines the appropriate English norms of female sexual politics. Antoinette represents herself as a woman who is sexually lustful and full of wolfish of excess, subverting the traditional conceptualization of the female body on which the conventional moral etiquettes enacting normality and abnormality are written. While acutely embracing the physically and sexually immoderate pleasures and desires, Antoinette/Bertha violates the officially established cultural order which is used as a tool of gender domination and control in *JE*. Thus, unlike the Brontëan narrative which is motivated by Jane’s journey of maturity as she learns the necessity of controlling her passion, the Rhysian text celebrates Antoinette’s celebration of her body’s excesses and signals the heroine’s subversive energy to resist the patriarchal desire to control, contain and master the female body.

Rampant with Antoinette’s obsessive and excessive expression of her anarchic sexual intercourse, *WSS* becomes a festive merriment of the female body’s corporeality that unseats the sexual/textual politics of the Brontëan text. While challenging the cultural ideologies written on her heroine’s body, Rhys presents *WSS* as a text written through the body as it blends the sexual and the textual instead of arranging them in opposite poles. Conscious of her textualized sexuality in the original text, the Creole heroine strives to challenge the panoptical bodily statement of her husband who inscribes her excessive sexual proclivity within a discourse of savage grotesqueness and bestial madness. In so doing, she offers new textual and sexual poetics which castrate male textual/sexual politics while liberating and redeeming herself from the regulatory system that incarcerates her within the ideological discourse of either passivity and purity or absence and lack. Rhys’s text becomes a body that

heeds to voice the repressed sexual desires of the grotesque Antoinette/Bertha who challenges the stimulus/response approach which is used to indoctrinate women how to behave properly, turning them to “docile bodies” disciplined to obey structures of cultural order, to use Michel Foucault’s own words. Antoinette Cosway turns out to be a projection of patriarchal fear of female sexuality. On the one hand, she threatens the English conceptions of morality and normality. Her transgressive and excessive sexual appetites drive her to perversion and promiscuity as Rhys writes: “She thirsts for anyone- not for me ... She’ll *loosen her black hair*, and *laugh* and coax and *flatter*” (Rhys, emphasis is mine 107). Antoinette has a sexual affairs and notably with her cousin Sandi. She jeopardizes her husband’s sense of superiority: she is no longer a sexual object of a male gaze as she redefines her subject position while disturbingly inverts and subverts the traditional sexual politics based on the binary opposite of active male/passive female. Antoinette’s active sexuality overpowers her husband who is captivated by her physical beauty that looks alien and strange, as Rhys writes: “[he is] bewitch[ed] with her. She is in [his] blood and [his] bones. By night and by day” (59). The patriarchal Rochester finds himself sexually dependent on his wife who performs the active role of the dominator. Antoinette’s provocative sexuality and unrestrained passion horrify the English patterns of proper femininity.

## **Conclusion**

WSS releases the Creole Bertha from the shroud of vampirism while endowing her with an alternative identity. By offering her a plausible past life, the Caribbean female novelist opens the ground for her heroine who shares with her the same origin and background to celebrate her fragmented identity that defies the unified and fixed identity of Jane Eyre as well as her cohesive and chronological narrative. While breaking off the spatio-temporal barriers, the heroine inserts fragments of her past that trouble the objective

reality/truth of Rochester's account of her story of madness, opening the floor to a liberating and celebratory space that embraces the mushrooming of multiple 'truths.' This process of celebration is also manifested in her cuddle of her cultural in-betweeness as well as her hybrid creole language that enables her to upset the conventional concept of purity. This latter is also challenged while making Antoinette/Bertha mock the pure and chaste Jane. The Rhysian female protagonist comes to liberate, articulate and celebrate her excessive sexual desires, subverting thus her female precursor's complicity with the patriarchal sexual politics.

### Endnotes

1. It will be referred as *WSS*
2. It will be referred as *JE*

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