



## THE PROBLEM OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY: A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST READING OF JEAN RHY'S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper makes a postcolonial feminist reading of Jean Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* which is a subversion of Charlotte Brontë's celebrated novel, *Jane Eyre*. It tries to show how in the novel, Rhys lends voice to Antoinette Cosway, the most silenced character in *Jane Eyre* and how she foregrounds the importance of creolized gendered subject within the hierarchy of European patriarchy. The paper unravels the way in which the sense of unbelongingness and gendered discrimination encountered by a creole, is delineated by the author thereby portraying the subjective dilemma, faced by women of third world countries. The novel writes back to the western literary canons and also to the patriarchal norms. *Jane Eyre* is read against the ethnic and gendered hegemonic discourses with a view to foreground the identity problems of postcolonial womanhood. The paper probes into the trajectory of creolized womanhood and identifies it as a cultural and ethnic issue. It is found that Rhys very deftly and poignantly portrays Antoinette's sense of inbetweenness, which she terms as the problem of the "white cockroach" in the text.

**Keywords:** *Creole, Inbetweenness, White Cockroach, White Nigger, Colonised*

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## INTRODUCTION

Postcolonialism is a critical framework in which literary and other texts can be read against the hegemonic discourse in a colonial or neocolonial context. This framework insists on recognizing, resisting, and overturning the strictures and structures of colonial realism of power. It is a methodology especially invested in examining culture as an important site of conflicts, collaborations and struggles between those in power and those subjected to power. While colonial control over far flung empires was largely accomplished through use of force, the superiority of the colonizer was crucially reinforced through cultural persuasion. This critical stance counters the usual relations of power between the first and third world locations in the linked areas of economics, politics and cultural products. In postcolonial literary analyses, issues of location, of representation and of voicing female subject-hood emerged as important foci.

Postcolonial feminist theory works, on the one hand, to interrupt the discourses of postcolonial theory and liberal western feminism and, on the other to guard against the theorizing of the 'third world woman' as a monolithic, singular figure. Focused on the structures of colonial relations of power and insistently bringing the world into the areas of western scholarship, these critical interruptions find in literary and theoretical projects the expansion of a canon both masculine and western in its biases and blind to what cannot be represented in elite texts. The theorization of the contradictory place of the female subject in colonization and in decolonization, the persistent embedding of gendered difference in a larger understanding of race, nationalism, class and caste etc. are some of the major concerns of postcolonial Feminism. Theories of Spivak marks the trajectory of postcolonial feminist literary studies, which is turning with increasing interest to the questions of diaspora & transnationalism, even as it reflects soberly on location and on its own relation and proximity to power. Postcolonial feminism does not project women as mere victims of male patriarchy, but they find a paradigmatic victimization in terms of culture, race, class etc.

Thus postcolonial feminism, sometimes also known as Third World Feminism, is a form of feminist philosophy which centers on the idea that colonialism and the long lasting effects of colonialism in the postcolonial setting, do not involve non-white, non-western women. They resist western feminists because they have a history of universalizing women's issues and their discourses often marginalize women in the developing nations. Postcolonial feminists argue that women should not only be defined by their gender but by social classes and ethnic identities too. Postcolonial feminists also believe that men and women experience aspects of colonialism and post colonialism differently. Yet they also vigorously maintain that gender was not invariably a fundamental marker of difference. Gender must be understood as operating in tandem with the pressures of race, class, sexuality and location. Postcolonial criticism aims to provincialize Europe and to counter the hegemonic weight of a universalized world view by insisting on the humanity of colonized peoples and on the value of non-European thought and culture. Postcolonial feminists bring to this revisionary reading of centre and periphery, a keen sense of the gendered dynamics of knowledge production in colonial discourse and in the postcolonial critique of the same.

Jean Rhys, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by focusing on the most silenced character of *Jane Eyre* does not just lend her a voice, but also foregrounds the importance, trials and tribulations of a creolized female gendered subject within the hierarchy of European patriarchy. *Wide Sargasso Sea* therefore should not only be read as a Creol writer's attempt at retrieving and reinserting a marginal voice by appropriating a classical text, but also as an understanding in the possible deals, processes and outcomes of the process of cultural negotiation of a creolized gendered subject. It is the sense of 'in betweenness' of belonging to neither culture, which is the primary factor in driving Antoinette into madness. While she is at once able to move between black and white cultures, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she "must navigate her way through the treacherous landscapes of Creole and English identity" (Ciolkowski 3). Existing as a white Creole woman in post-



emancipation West Indies society, Antoinette Cosway “lives a life of ‘inbetweenness’” (Adjarian 4). While she is at once able to move between black and white cultures, she is also scorned by those cultures. Antoinette is “neither English and rich, nor native and part of the community of selves freed by the Emancipation Act” (Nixon 276). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette remembers being harassed while walking to school: “I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us whitecockroach... One day a little girl followed me saying, go away white cockroach, go away, go away, ‘I walked fast, but she walked faster’, white cockroach, go away. Nobody wants you. Go away” ((9)

Even, Tia her early childhood friend would harasses her because of the fact that Antoinette’s family, once a wealthy slave owning family, was just as poor as many of the black families living nearby. Antoinette says there are “plenty white people in Jamaica. Real white people, they, got gold and money. They didn’t look at us, nobody see them come near us.... and black nigger better than white nigger” (10). She is attacked for being white and she is attacked again for not being white enough. Tia later attacks Antoinette when, after her house has been burned to the ground, she tries to turn to Tia for comfort. As she runs to Tia, wishing to “be like her” (24), she gets hit in the face with a rock that Tia threw at her. She looks at Tia and says: “We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on her. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass” (24). The image of the looking glass is important here because it symbolizes Antoinette’s need to find her other self-her real identity. But she fails in her attempt which symbolizes her inability to find the otherself. This desire to see herself in Tia, stems from an experience that comes from the inbetweenness where the boundaries of self are not quite white and black, but rather blurred. This double vision of the self-rendered through the process of creolization makes this novel; a truly postcolonial one.

Antoinette’s narrative is literally shaped by the uncertainties of a Creole and the vision that is fractured by contradictory claims of British colonial history and the cultural residues of a dying West Indies plantation society. Her impossible task in *Wide*

*Sargasso Sea* is to negotiate between the contradictory logics of British colonialism while also wending her way through the Creole culture and post emancipation English society that continues to elude her. She thinks: ... a white cockroach. That’s me. 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’ve 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. (64). Not quite English and not quite native, Rhys’s Creole woman straddles the embattled divide between human and savage, core and periphery, self and other. “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks” (5). And yet, while the dramatic collapse of the Caribbean plantation economy in the 1830s succeeded in transforming the class of affluent Creole planters into economically and culturally disenfranchised “white niggers” and “cockroaches”, locating them outside the ranks of the new community of non-slave holding English colonials, it did not succeed in fully severing the Creole’s stubborn attachment to England. For the white Creole, Jamaica or Barbados was where one lived but England was still one’s home.

The spectre of racial mixing that haunts the West Indian plantation and stubbornly adheres to all of its inhabitants reemerges with a vengeance in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as the obsessive signifier of colonial difference. The hybrid body, half-negro, half-white simply cannot contain the copious signs of its racial and sexual degeneracy. White skin, negro mouth, the colours of a white man and the textures of his debased Negro counterpart, are carelessly sewn together here into the corporeal pattern of the Creole grotesque. And the signs of such ‘unnatural’ subjects are everywhere. The “yellow sweating “face” (79) of the bastard son who calls himself ‘Daniel Cosway’, the sexual appetite of Antoinette’s coloured cousin, Sandi, who allegedly lusts after Antoinette and so returns to complete the incestuous circle of colonial degeneracy.

Englishness emerges in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an empty fiction that is as seductive and dangerous as any of the other tales of identity that



circulate in and around the text. The novel resists English imperial commonsense, mapping out instead the multiple battles over what gets to count as the way things are. That Rhys plays out these battles on the terrain of the English novel, situating her text both beside and against Charlotte Brontë's nineteenth century canonical narrative of English womanhood, is no surprise. Rather such explicitly inter textual struggles have helped critical readers of Rhys's fiction to place Rhys within a postcolonial literary tradition that is specifically interested in rewriting the fictions of English empire. The relationship between complicity and resistance in *Wide Sargasso Sea* calls attention to the highly mystified ways in which the feminist critique of empire also routinely reproduces the empire's most basic philosophical principles and cultural assumptions. The novel breaks all the margins of a single perspective and we feel its jumping words shifting from the old to the new, the high to the low and from eyes to the heart.

Antoinette persists in replicating many of the basic elements of the English imperial narratives she scorns. She follows the path of the English man who routinely elides the differences among the native populations over whom he rules. When she looks out on a crowd of islanders, Antoinette carefully surveys the collection of black people standing before her but is unable to distinguish anyone: "They all looked the same, it was the same face repeated over and over, eyes gleaming, mouth half open to shout" (22). Despite Rochester's conviction that Antoinette's "dark alien eyes" (40) ensure that she is neither a European nor an English woman. Antoinette's failure of vision here brands her such a woman just as surely as Rochester's inability to distinguish between Creole bodies (47) brands him an Englishman.

The marriage contract, for Rhys is ultimately cast as a colonial encounter in the novel. However, the problem of displacement and a shaky sense of one's own identity are already well established in the first part of the text, long before the marriage takes place. The marriage contract itself, interestingly, is negotiated and put into action by a series of men: Rochester's father and brother, Antoinette's

stepfather and subsequently her stepbrother, Richard Mason. When Antoinette herself puts up a half-hearted resistance to the marriage, both Rochester and Richard Mason step in to push the contract along. Already, Rhys, within the marriage, establishes action as a male characteristic and inertia as female. Both Antoinette and her mother are ghosts in their lifetimes, as Rhys was in hers. When Rochester tells Antoinette why she told him her mother died while she was a child when she had actually died quite recently, Antoinette replies: "She did die when I was a child. There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about" (81).

In the novel, Rhys writes back not only to Charlotte Brontë but also to the imperial logics and common sense structures in which Brontë's text was produced and consumed. Her inquiry into the history of certain kinds of social difference and the processes by which English and colonial subjects are differentiated consequently unsettles both the emergent liberal feminist narrative of *Jane Eyre* and the larger colonialist enterprise in which it is so heavily invested. The alien appearances of the Creoles can be very much traced out in the words of Antoinette: "Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (40), or "her eyebrows were thin, finely marked, her very thick dark hair was lit by too red lights and stood out rather wildly round her head. Her hands were slender, narrow-palmed with very long fingers, like the hands of an oriental" (13). This strictly alien Creole appearance and an 'in-between unbelongingness' evoked in her a sense of being 'colonised' and this sense became more strong or rather multiplied with the necessity of being a wife.

Antoinette has a nervous habit of holding her left wrist with her right hand, making a manacle for herself, as though she is a 'colonised' one forever, in an oblique reference to her ancestors' role in the islands, like her mother's significant repetition of the word 'marooned'. Rochester's attempts to own Antoinette and force her to conform make him as insane as he claims she is; his fragmented sentences indicate manic obsession: "Vain, silly creature. Made



for loving? Yes, but she'll have no lover, for I don't want her and she'll see no other. The tree shivers. Shivers and gathers all its strength and waits. There is a cool wind blowing now- a cold wind. Does it carry the babe born to stride the blast of hurricanes (107)?"

### CONCLUSION

The desire to rewrite the master narratives of western discourse is a common colonial practice, the same scrutiny that Rhys's affords to Bronte's text. There 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 the 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. Rhys's text proves to be a highly sophisticated example of coming to terms with European perceptions of the Caribbean Creole Community.

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