
Representational strategies in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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In my paper, I aim to explore *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s projection of race and concern with 'purity'/'impurity' given the fact that a debate has always centered around the novel's representation of racial 'otherness' from the perspective of feminist and post colonial studies. On one hand while critics like Benita Parry contend that we need to recover historically repressed knowledges and to construct "the speaking position" of the subaltern, a "conception of the native as a historical subject and agent of oppositional discourse"¹, critics like Spivak and her followers emphasize that our very effort at resuscitating the subaltern's voice / self by invoking historical context reproduces the "epistemic violence" of imperialism- it acknowledges that the 'other' has always already been constructed according to the colonizer's self image and can therefore not simply be given his or her voice back.² Thus both for Spivak and for Parry, the novel's representation of black Creoles define their individual approaches.

While for Benita Parry the black obeah woman Christophine symbolically emerges as a point of counter discourse to the metanarrative of white European discourse, rooted as she is to the

1. Reference to Benita Parry's essay "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse".

2. Spivak discusses the colonialist perspectives of these two approaches respectively in "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern : A Woman's Text From the Third World" and in "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice". This thesis is derived from a study of indigenous and imperialist historical archives documenting the practice of Sati in 19th century India which shows that the widow's voice is caught between indigenous patriarchal and colonial constructions and can therefore not be heard (see "Rani of Sirmur").

practice of black magic real or imagined within the domain of African and West Indian cultures, for Spivak an unmediated access to the subalterns' history is impossible as Christophine is "tangential to a narrative written within the interests of the white Creole protagonist." ("Three Women's Texts" 253).

Recent critics are in agreement with Spivak's reading that the novel provides its readers with a sympathetic representation of the white Creole alienation at the expense of the black Creole perspective³. By foregrounding the West Indian racial and social divisions, Rhys perhaps metes out to Antoinette the same predicament as that has been the fate of Emily Bronte's *Jane Eyre*- which is that of being projected as being constituted within and by the processes of colonization and imperialism. However the double narrative structure of the novel which only gives the readers insight into the world of the black Creole's through the narrative registers of the two major characters bears testimony not only to Rhys' imperialism but also to her intuitive understanding of the various categories of representation. Rhys herself was deeply influenced by her Creole heritage – she was born in Rouseau, Dominica West Indies – her father was a Welsh doctor and her mother a Dominican Creole. She experienced being Creole both in the Caribbean and in England and was thus personally aware of the conflicting cultural tropes she depicts in the figure of Antoinette who by virtue of her Creole

3. According to the influential Caribbean critic Brathwaite, Rhys' "socio-cultural background and orientation" makes it possible for her to grasp the experience of the primarily black and poor West Indian people. Moria Ferguson similarly argues that "the text favours Jean Rhys' class – the former white planter class" and "does not allow the implied victors (Christophine) ...to be articulated as victors". Mary Lou Emery and Veronica Greg also object to Rhys' representation of black and mulatto people and see her insight into the workings of ideologies as limited to dismantling Rochester's, the British colonialist's discursive constructions of his female Other (Antoinette). Rhys is thus perceived as unaware of the operations of imperial history when it comes to her black and coloured Others and guilty of "the usurpation of race/ blackness in the service of gender" (Greg 46).

inheritance is accepted neither by the black community nor by the white representatives of the erstwhile colonial European power.

Rhys by describing Antoinette's precarious sense of belonging implies the need for or right to a sense of belonging or solidarity within the Creole community and a justifiable sense of integration because "the Lord makes no difference between black and white, black and white the same for Him".

In Antoinette's 'mimicry' of other people and their habits or behavioural patterns lies concealed her desperate attempt to locate her own identity. Bhabha used the term 'mimicry' to refer to imitation, the capability of the marginalized people to construct, create or recreate their space or identity. Mimicry according to Bhabha becomes a complex strategy of recreation and subversion, the most profound setting involving religion, language and habits of the colonizers leading to the creation of a palpable sense of anxiety and insecurity culminating ultimately to a sense of inferiority. The white Creole female protagonist Antoinette gives vent to an obvious and marked sense of uncertainty and anxiety in her behavior – "I am afraid of what may happen" – she states to Rochester before agreeing to marry him. As the novel progressively unfolds and develops it becomes apparent that Antoinette's anxiety is related to the question of identity or lack thereof and that it bears a multiplicity of implications on her spiritual or mental being than with the reality of her life.

Rochester too displays signs of anxiousness but it for him is intrinsically connected with the repercussions of the choices he makes (his marriage with Antoinette) in his personal life. It is only after his marriage that his 'European'ness with its culture, prejudices and presumptions about the Creoles emerge and make him ponder on his decision which was taken on the basis of material and financial aggrandizement. Thus when he and his newly married wife arrive on

the island for their honeymoon, he starts to take note of her beautiful appearance as well of her Creole origin. Her eyes now appear “too large and can be disconcerting ...long, sad, dark, alien eyes”. The eyes which suddenly appear ‘alien’ make him wonder if he “did notice it before and refuse to admit what he saw”. From his European perspective he draws the inference that to him seems justified for his later on course of action – she is Creole of “pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either”. As the novel progresses, we find Rochester gradually getting obsessed by a sense of acute anxiety that Antoinette is not entirely white and this anxiety driven consciousness of his makes him regret his matrimonial choice. The only probable excuse that he is able to console himself with at least temporarily is that he “hadn’t had much time to notice anything. I was married a month after I arrived in Jamaica and for nearly three weeks of that time I was in bed with fever”.

For Rochester the West Indian landscape is unbearably wild and menacing. He destroys Antoinette because she belongs with everything that he cannot understand: “I hated the sunsets of whatever colour. I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. And above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness”. Rochester starts the process of destruction by calling her ‘Bertha’. It is her mad mother’s name and the name by which she is later known in *Jane Eyre*. In *Thornfield Hall*, Antoinette recalls the effect of her renaming – “I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass”. The image is gone forever with nothing to replace it with. What follows therefore is madness. Antoinette becomes mad because she is dispossessed.

What is striking in Rhys’ novel is that Rochester remains completely nameless throughout. Described only as ‘the man’, ‘he’, ‘ husband’

and the “man who hated me”, this speaker is given no body – the physical description of the ‘man’ is deliberately omitted. Thus ‘castrating’ the formidable lord of Bronte’s English manor, Rhys rewrites him as an anonymous lost voice in a place where the very existence of his fatherland is under question⁴. Discrediting the father, Rhys recuperates the mother who mentioned in Jane Eyre only to suggest a genetic source for Antoinette/ Bertha’s madness is portrayed by Rhys to have been driven mad like Antoinette and under similar circumstances of loss, violence and exploitation in marriage. Thus by reimagining Bronte’s ‘monster’ in the land of her birth, Rhys recuperates for Antoinette/ Bertha’s plot “a space of privileged contact with the maternal “ for which Bronte’s protagonist might have longed⁵

With her marriage Antoinette completely loses her tremulous sense of identity to her domineering husband through a slow but steady process symbolized by images of hair. The image of the black West Indian women’s hair covering or handkerchief is made more comprehensible as being one of power, strength, independence when examined in juxtaposition with the contrasting hair images of white English women like Antoinette, Annette and Aunt Cora. The different images of hair as portrayed within the dynamics of the novel correspond to the women’s mental or emotional state – plaited, coiled, brushed or otherwise, hair emerges as a potent symbol of a woman’s mental composure and her ability to act in accordance with

4. Chantal Delourne contrasts this ‘castrated’ nameless man with the ‘nom- roc’ ‘nom-forteresse’, that dominates *Jane Eyre*. Christophine doubts the existence of England because she has never seen it herself. It should be noted that Rhys’ depiction of Rochester is not entirely unsympathetic, for example she carefully delineates his legal victimization as a second son under the laws of primogeniture.\

5. Klopfer links Antoinette’s madness to Rochester’s “denial of her language, her name, and her matrilineage”(“The Unspeakable Mother” p.145 -46). But by privileging the maternal Klopfer adds, Rhys’ rewriting “forces the son to experience... (female) psychological and linguistic space” (p.158). Similarly Nancy Harrison reads in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the construction of a distinctly female fictional space she calls a “woman’s text.” (see Harrison, *Jean Rhys and the Novel as Woman’s Text*, Chappel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

the prescribed social standards. On the other hand, undone, unruly, unmanaged hair is again suggestive of a woman's mental instability and defiance of acceptable yardsticks of social behaviour. Also women's hair also became associated with their sexuality – images of long flowing shiny hair conveyed sexuality and desire. In a similar manner, loose hair besides representing a loosening of powers of sensibility and mental agility also stood for sexual freedom. Therefore what becomes obvious is that the exposure of a woman's hair becomes equated with the expression of her emotions, desires and motivations.

Interestingly enough, when Rochester appraises the hair of black West Indians he is degrading and dehumanizing in his attitude, calling them 'creatures' and 'savage'. Through images of hair Rochester displays his prejudiced perspective against black West Indian people as a representative of the English colonialist mentality - one that is based on the assumption that black inhabitants of the colonies were inferior on the basis of racial distinctions. Due to his racial and national prejudices that colours his personality and influence the choices he makes, he is repulsed by all that is black and foreign. As an English colonizer he makes a futile attempt to dominate his foreign surroundings which he considers inferior and antagonistic. This is perhaps also the reason why he pays meticulous attention to Antoinette's hair as he also feels alienated and different from her in the same way that he does from people belonging to the West Indian community.

Thus images of Antoinette's hair come to signify to the readers Rochester's convoluted intentions of lust and tyranny towards her. When Antoinette appears before Rochester, dressed in a fashion 'acceptable' to his English sensibilities, he immediately takes note of her hair, and it changes his attitude towards Antoinette from one of disdain and indifference to that of attraction – "I wonder why I had

never realized how beautiful she was”. In here, it is made obvious that Rochester is intoxicated with her beauty and desires a physical union with her. But even then there is a lack of emotional attachment and warmth and no attempt to relate to her on any level – she is just a beautiful object of sexual and physical appeasement. The morning after this intimate episode is also relevant on a symbolic level – as a contrasting image of the state of Antoinette’s hair discloses another destructive side to Rochester’s character – he wakes and sees Antoinette – “her hair was plaited and she wore a fresh white chemise. I turned to take her in my arms, I meant to undo the careful plaits, but as I did so there was a soft discrete knock”. What needs to be noted is that while the image of styled and managed hair is symbolically associated with mental stability, Rochester’s declaration to ‘undo’ Antoinette’s hair becomes synonymous with an intent to decimate Antoinette both mentally and emotionally.

As Antoinette finally succumbs to the relentless onslaught of mental and emotional torment that Rochester deliberately unleashes on her, her pain finds physical expression through images of her hair- her hair is unkempt and when Rochester meets her he is ‘shocked’ by the sight of her – “her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen”.

Towards the concluding section of the novel, with the house all ablaze Antoinette is made to confront the reality of her identity – she is forced to succumb to the definition of ‘the mad woman in the attic’ – she is the ‘mad’ Creole woman unfit to live in ‘civilized’ English society. Her only escape from this predicament of an enforced identity thrust upon her lies through an escape from life itself. The last and final image of Antoinette as she jumps to her death is that of the wind catching her hair like wings – symbolic of her last fleeting hope of creating her own autonomous identity. The image however is

strikingly reminiscent of the wing-clipped parrot Coco's jump from Caulibri as it burned.

Antoinette's tragic fate and the history of a relationship with Rochester thus assumes a symbolic significance in relation to the theme of existential chasm that Rhys portrays in the novel. It is also precisely this theme which gives the novel its title –physically situated between the West Indies and England, the Sargasso sea becomes a symbolic divide between the two worlds and the two people attached so deeply to their respective worlds with its individuated cultural identities that it hinders them from meeting each other in the most elemental way. It is only at the end of their disastrous relationship that Antoinette becomes fully aware of her real relation to Rochester and his world as she states –“We lost our way to England. When? Where? I don't remember, but we lost it”. It is this sense of loss that permeates the dynamics of the novel.

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