

# Asian Resonance

## Imperialist Referents in *Wide Sargasso Sea*



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### Abstract

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is a love story of Jane Eyre who falls in love with an English man named Rochester. The character of Antoinette is Rochester's mad wife. Through a close postcolonial reading of this novel, Jean Rhys reveals the horrifying reality that might lie behind a man's claim that a woman is mad. She also provides several crucial cultural and political orientalist attitudes towards Creole people, Europe's alternative and potential "other," are depicted. Rochester's "othering" attitude towards Antoinette and the Creole way of life in the Caribbean and the related crucial identity problems of Antoinette will be discussed within the framework of this postcolonial reading on *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Since she wasn't accepted by the natives, Antoinette's mother felt isolated and suppressed her emotions causing her to have little contact with others and made her lose her grip on reality. Within the context of this paper a different version of the story of "the othered" will be examined from a post colonialist perception to provide the imperialist referents in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

**Keywords:** Imperialism, Post colonialism, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jane Eyre.

### Introduction

Jean Rhys (1890-1979) was a contemporary British writer, born in Caribbean. Her father was a Welsh doctor and her mother a white Creole—a white West Indian. Rhys came to England at the age of sixteen. Her early publications, such as *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), attracted some attention, but with the outbreak of the Second World War, they and the author were forgotten. Time passed, and many assumed that she had died, but she made a startling reappearance with *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), winning the Royal Society of Literature Award and the W. H. Smith Award. Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) mostly focuses on female survival in a world of male domination and the bitter quest for identity.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is divided into three parts. The first part is told in the heroine's own words. In the second the young Mr. Rochester describes his arrival in the West Indies, his marriage and its disastrous sequel. The last part is once more narrated by his wife, the scene is of England and she writes from the attic room in Thornfield Hall. Antoinette is Rochester's mad wife, who has grown up in the West Indies in the 19th century. Her father died when she was young. Due to the native's hatred and discrimination against whites, Antoinette's childhood was filled with poverty, anxiety and fear. After their house was destroyed and her young brother died in the fire set by the blacks, her mother became crazy. Under the arrangement of her stepfather, Antoinette married Rochester. But Rochester did not love her and had accepted the marriage just for thirty thousand pound dowry. Antoinette was abandoned by her husband even before they completed their honeymoon. Antoinette protested at first, but without success. She got depressed and used alcohol as a support to forget the pain. Later, she was brought back to Britain by Rochester and imprisoned as a madwoman in the attic of Thornfield. She felt too confined within the closed walls, so finally she set fire to the house and ended her life.

The search for a reform of identity in the postcolonial context and an inquiry of imperialist referents as norms was emphasised in Jean Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It examines the paradoxes and ambivalences of the creole woman in a post-colonial society. In Charlotte Bronte's Victorian Classic, *Jane Eyre* (1847); Bertha, the mad wife of Mr. Rochester, is kept locked up in the attic at Thornfield Hall. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, re-establishes Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* by questioning and contradicting

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its underlying assumptions of the character of Bertha. By shifting Bronte's unimportant character into the central focus and making her a subject; Jean Rhys's novel also makes us understand Bertha's point of view as expressed through her seemingly abnormal behaviour, amidst the supposed normality of a patriarchal/imperialist order. It seeks to define the oppressed voice of Bertha and establishes an independent identity for her. Womanhood intertwines with issues of enslavement and madness in Rhys's novel. The author transforms the first Mrs Rochester into an individual figure whose madness is caused by imperialistic and patriarchal oppression. Ideals of proper feminine deportment are presented to Antoinette when she is a girl at the convent school. Two of the other Creole girls, Miss Germaine and Helene de Plana, embody the feminine virtues that Antoinette is to learn and emulate, namely, beauty, chastity and mild, even-tempered manners. Mother St. Justine's praises of the "poised" and "imperturbable" sisters suggest an ideal of womanhood that is at odds with Antoinette's own hot and fiery nature. Indeed, it is Antoinette's passion that contributes to her melancholy and implied madness.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys also explores her female characters' legal and financial dependence on the men around them. After the death of her first husband, Antoinette's mother sees her second marriage as an opportunity to escape from her life at Coulibri and regain status among her peers. For the men in the novel, marriage increases their wealth by granting them access to their wives' inheritance. In both cases, womanhood is synonymous with a kind of childlike dependence on the nearest man. Indeed, it is this dependence that precipitates the demise of Antoinette, as she marries white Englishmen in the hopes of assuaging her fears as vulnerable outsiders, but got betrayed and abandoned. The works of the Nineteenth Century British novelists were predominantly the depiction of patriarchal domination throughout their texts. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is a case in point. In this novel the character *Jane Eyre* was presented as a disciplined, modest, and prototypical English woman. While on the other hand, Bronte portrayed Bertha Mason as a mad Creole woman who was savage, mad and indisciplined. In her novel Jean Rhys' tried to proclaim that 'Bertha Mason is not a mad Creole woman but a strong white negress' troubled by circumstances.

#### **Aim of the Study**

This paper attempts to analyze *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a postcolonial rewriting of *Jane Eyre* which is Jean Rhys's act of showing the 'other' by giving Bertha a right to be heard, and giving her a past and an identity and thus rescuing her from the generalisation done by Bronte. Rhys uses parody and pastiche as methods to rewrite the story of Bronte. Through a postcolonial reading of the novel the concept of the 'other' is portrayed. The Orientalist and attitude of "Othering" Antoinette and the creole way of life in the Caribbean and the related crucial identity problems of Antoinette is the framework of this postcolonial reading on *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

# Asian Resonance

## **Review of Literature**

Although some literary critics view Rhys's representation of Antoinette as the classic case of a woman's descent into madness to escape masculine domination, the novel itself can more effectively serve as "a reconceptualization of the very concept of identity" (Emery 167). In the words of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the appearance of the mirror represents the "voice" of male consent or the standard image of women that men, the dominant social group, try to impose upon them (38). By controlling the way in which women view themselves, the patriarchal European society has the power to continue its subjugation of females and maintain the status quo. This notion is clearly illustrated in Rhys's portrayal of Annette, the Creole mother of Antoinette who, in her desperate attempts to conform to "white" standards, becomes enslaved to the system of patriarchy. In the first part of Antoinette's narrative, she describes her mother as being forced to hope and plan for a better life "every time she passed a looking glass" (10) because it reflects the male dictated norm that she must be dependent on a man to survive in life. Fayad observes, "The mother seeks constantly the approval of a real mirror that is to decide her future and hopes of reintegration into society through marriage" (228).

Rhys's intricate construction of Antoinette coaxes readers to delve more deeply into her character and recognize that the unique identity she develops labels her neither black nor white, neither colonizer nor colonized. Instead, this strong Creole woman is composed of a mixture of socially ascribed qualities that negate themselves, leaving only the autonomous femininity she sees modelled in Christophine and her rich Caribbean culture. Drake, a literary critic, describes Antoinette's triumph at the end of the novel as "her ultimate regaining of an identity stolen by cultural imperialism" (205). On the contrary, however, Rhys does not portray a character that recovers her sense of self from the merciless clutches of an unjust society, but rather discovers it amidst the social constraints that culture imposes upon her. Thus, *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides readers with an illustration of the contradictory qualities imposed on Creoles by the societies between which they are torn. In spite of male imperialists' efforts to put down the strife for identity within Antoinette, Rhys masterfully creates a new sense of self within her that embraces all the opposing qualities comprising her character. In *Modernism and the Marketplace*, Alissa Karl argues that, in Rhys's texts, consumerism is inscribed with imperialist domination because it is the vehicle through which "national culture is accessible" (Karl 17). Only by establishing the boundary between self and colonial other can the English identity be constructed. Anna's constant shift of mind between past and present, London and Caribbean, her seeming inability to demarcate the borders of these spaces, temporal, geographical as well as psychic, illustrates on one hand "the disorienting power of modernity" (Thacker 204), and on the other her resistance to the Empire's insistent mapping of boundaries in all aspects. And her dis-identification

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with the English opened for her a space from which to gaze critically at the constructedness of Englishness and their gendered and racialized manifestations. Stephanie Coartney (2010) discusses the issue of identity crisis for Antoinette as a typical Creole woman. She argues that "this question plagues Antoinette while she struggles to develop her own identity in the face of cultural and racial rejection". Raja Sharma (2013) explains that Antoinette is a Creole who belongs neither to the white Europeans nor to the black Jamaicans. Nibras Kadhim (2011) examines how Antoinette the heroine of Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* reflects the same sense of exile and marginality the author experienced. Akram AL-Deek (2016) explains how the novel reflects Rhys' alienation and reveals the three ways in which she feels displaced: as a female marginalized by her male-dominated society, as a Creole of mixed European and black descent, and as an individual displaced from her homeland.

#### **Imperialist's Referents in *Wide Sargasso Sea***

As a nineteenth century Victorian novelists, Bronte succeeded in demolishing the common place image of heroine by advocating a 'plain Jane' as the protagonist of *Jane Eyre* as she is an unconventional heroine in the background of the Victorian social life which celebrated patriarchy along with capitalism. Jane describes herself as, "poor, obscure, plain and little." (1.11.47) Mr. Rochester once compliments Jane's "hazel eyes and hazel hair", but she informs the reader that "I had green eyes, reader; but you must excuse the mistake: for him they were new-dyed, I suppose" (*Jane Eyre* 27). Jane has no pretensions and did not enact coy. She doesn't have any recommendations which will make her a darling of patriarchy, a heroine powerful enough to demolish the edifices of patriarchy and colonialism. Jane's story portrays the trials and tribulations of women on life's lovely road, trying for survival in a predominant man's world. The creation of a character that embodies a direct challenge not only to patriarchy but also to colonialism could not be hoped for during the heyday of capitalism, patriarchy and empire building. Bertha Mason the ghost like figure verging on the attic of the patriarchal mansion, to offer direct and vehement and the racial issue is altogether ignored. She is relegated to the attic, to the upper storey and equated to a beast, confined to non human levels of existence. The reason of woman being caught precariously between sanity and lunacy can be explained as resulting from the need of these women writers to express their dissent with the dominating systems without being conspicuous. In her paper "A Postcolonial Reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys" Neşe Şenel (2014) also examines the novel from a post colonialist perspective through studying the notion of "othering" and the related identity problems of the heroine.

Rhys has analysed the importance of English attributes tracing it through the colonizer (*Jane Eyre* 27) and portraying its effect in the colonized body (*Wide Sargasso Sea*). While Bronte's text has been constructed the definition of Englishness by juxtaposing English characters against the colonial other, and Rhys' text took an attempt to fight against

# Asian Resonance

Bronte's cultural hierarchy while simultaneously did collude with the colonial project. Via her creation of Antoinette Cosway, Rhys creates a parallel character to Bertha Mason of Bronte with the intention of creating a naïve character from the horrific and mad women in the attic. "The author transforms the first Rochester into an individual figure whose madness is caused by imperialistic and patriarchal oppression" (Swietlik 2). The madness of Bertha is totally related to the double and even triple oppression that she suffers as a woman from the patriarchy and as a creole woman in the West Indies, the burden that places her just in between white English society and newly emancipated slaves. Through out her life she is left to live under a hegemonic oppression from her husband, and the harassment of not being pure white blood from white English society and neither from black. She was always ridiculed for her ethnicity and her individual identity. However Rhys cleverly parodies in '*Wide Sargasso Sea*' a new perspective of sympathy for Antoinette. "The Vision of Bertha/Antoinette as an insane offspring from a family plagued by madness is no longer plausible to the reader" (Spivak 270). Now the readers sympathises with the misfortune fate of the creole heiress instead of having any empathy towards Mr. Rochester.

The novel wonderfully grasps the damaging and maddening results of power oppression forced upon the other. In her attempt to give voice to the marginalized, Rhys portrays what was formerly marginalized and othered as a crucial and dominant figure, displaying the importance of the perception in which the margins could also have the ability to become a centre. Antoinette Cosway as against the story of Rochester is glorified through the narrative of *Jane Eyre*. Antoinette is at the site of a double colorization both in terms of her gender and race. She has to resist colonialism and patriarchy alike with her narrative. Her feminist challenge is achieved by claiming the narrative control and space in *Wide Sargasso Sea* for herself and at the same time exposing the villainy and hypocrisy inherent in the character of Rochester by representing him as callous and calculative who values relationship only in terms of money. Her resistance reaches its destructive edge with the setting fire to the colonialist mansions of Thornfield Hall where she breaks the imprisonment imposed by patriarchy and relates to the motives that leads to the destructive fire in *Jane Eyre* and validates Antoinette's action as the interrogation and challenge of patriarchy.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is noted as the feminist rendering of another feminist text who dealt with the women's issue of inadequately leaving questionable spaces and gaps in between. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as a textual space is comprised of theoretical assumptions and strategic manipulations. It provides feminist challenge to the feminist assumptions of the *Eyre*. The text makes strategic use of the methods of modernism to distribute the conventions of the realist methodology used to perfection in *Jane Eyre*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* she writes back to the colonialist saga not only through its theme and characters but also through the elaborative use of the Gothic elements

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which allows the portrayal of the discourse of aberration.

The story of Bertha, the first Mrs. Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not only a brilliant deconstruction of Bronte's Legacy, but is also a damning history of colonialism in the Caribbean. This story is set just after the emancipation of the slaves in that uneasy time when racial relations in the Caribbean were at their most strained. Antoinette is descended from the plantation owners and her father has had many children but by Negro women. She can be accepted neither by the Negro community nor by the whites. The locale characterisation, the dreams and fantasies, symbols and images that provide the unique textual effects of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is analysed by Rhys.

She gives a voice to the racial other, she concentrates on the voices of postcolonial interrogation that emerge from the text in question *Wide Sargasso Sea* celebrates the discourse of Antoinette Cosway who offers the point of view of the postcolonial resistance of the creoles in the Caribbean. Antoinette is a strong symbol of postcolonial resistance offering the voice of the native blacks against the domination of the whites. *Wide Sargasso Sea's* feminist voice of protest is that of Antoinette Cosway, who redeems Bertha Mason. She talks to the patriarchal canon by questioning the ethos of the master narratives where the women remain as figures of absence and silence. Elaine Savory's in her study of Rhys' (*The Cambridge Introduction to Jean Rhys*, 2009) insists on the importance of a Caribbean-centered approach to Rhys, and shows how this context profoundly affects her literary style. She feels Rhys reflects two major facets of Caribbean culture: a multifaceted cosmopolitanism, which tries to find out complexity and a desire for home and belonging which seeks an uncomplicated self-definition.

Jean Rhys gives a view of the racial and gender marginal. She provides direct presentation of the postcolonial and feminist voices. She talks about the typical Creole experience of colonialism and patriarchy and traces the resistance of Antoinette Cosway to her pre figuring in *Jane Eyre* as Bertha Mason. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is chosen as a representative of twentieth century challenge to the conventions and the discourse systems of the previous era which retain powerful hold on the psyche of the present generations as they represent the phallo/logocentric universe and its power structures. The text offers resistance to the imperialist colonial values inculcated through its prequel Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Even as a feminist study it challenges patriarchy and its glorification.

Rhys aim is to validate woman's discourse and their postcolonial position. Rhys writes back to the patriarchal and colonial hegemony through the rewriting of the unexplored story of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. As *Jane Eyre* is a realist master narrative, *Wide Sargasso Sea* also challenges certain inherent characteristics of realism by the agency of modernism. Jean Rhys achievement in the intertextual rendering of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* consists in disrupting the authority of logo/mono

# Asian Resonance

centric systems of the conventions of canonicity and the dominant discourse of patriarchy and colonialism. *Wide Sargasso Sea* offers counter-discursive narrative in an informed celebration of voices that emerge from the native consciousness.

## Conclusion

An attempt has been made to analyse Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an imperialist text. *Wide Sargasso Sea* analyses imperialism and gender suppression. It apprehends the gender and the racial issues inherent in the textual world of *Jane Eyre* and exposes the imperialist bias and the cultural divide concealed within its texture. Rhys presents the regeneration of Antoinette from her doubly colonised and marginalised location as Bertha. Her anger against the racial discrimination inherent in *Jane Eyre* culminated in rendering an alternate tale of Bertha / Antoinette provides the feminist and postcolonial voices of the 'other' and gives it a character.

The positioning of Antoinette as a Creole exposes the problems of the creoles as they occupy a no man's land between the Black narratives and the white Europeans, not able to negotiate their own space in the vast continuum of reclaimed voices. As a postcolonial countertext *Wide Sargasso Sea* subverts the canonical narrative *Jane Eyre* and exposes the racial bias inherent in Bronte's text by emphasising the marginalised discourse of Antoinette. She symbolises the displacement, the alienation, the crisis with regard to the identity of the self, the hegemony inherent in the forces of domination and the discourse of the marginalised selves which are all critiqued in a postcolonial voice of resistance. This text also brings the plight of the Creole women to the attention of the theoretical preoccupations in the field of feminism. This book is filled with symbolism. Every major occurrence and many minor ones as well, are echoes of another incident that took place in either *Jane Eyre* or earlier in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. And it is often through this symbolism, rather than through the narrative, itself, that the book's true meaning emerges. Though set in the early 1800s, the novel tapped into the present mood when issues of decolonisation, race relations and civil rights are still occupying the global consciousness.

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# Asian Resonance

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