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## Interrogating Hybridity: Reading in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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### Abstract

Hybridity, which is the process of creation of new cultural forms and identities, can be described as a result of the colonial encounter. In postcolonial societies, hybridity produces to the strategy of disavowal. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is one of those fictions which beautifully sketches the effects of hybridity and related issues associated with hybridity. The novel, in its first chapter, depicts the time just after the "Emancipation Act" (1833). The period was a traumatic period for both blacks and whites in West Indies. The central character of the novel bears a strong intertextual connection with Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*'s "mad woman" Bertha Mason, who was dismissed in *Jane Eyre* as insane by heredity. Antoinette, the protagonist of the Rhys's novel is a Creole girl and it is her Creolity which is responsible for her marginal status as well as psychological crisis. Antoinette and her mother, at first, deliberately tries to come close to the ranks of white people but at the same time Antoinette associates herself to the black culture. The hybridity of Antoinette produces contension, both in black and white society and after marriage with Edward Rochester the situation becomes worst and Antoinette becomes insane. The terms like "white nigger", "white cockroach", and "black Englishmen" asserts her hybrid identity.

This paper is an attempt to interrogate Antoinette's identity, her marginal status and distorted mental condition. Antoinette sees her life becoming a repetition of her mother's. Antoinette's review of her story makes it evident that the trouble and the tragic result is not only because of her mother's rejection of her, or her husband's rejection, but it is her identity crisis, which is responsible for her disorientation. Antoinette feels "in-between" because she lives between the worlds of white Europeans and that of black Niggers, but scorned by both groups for her difference. The act of suicide at the end of the novel can be seen as the personal revolt of Antoinette of her identity crisis.

Keywords: Hybridity; Identity Crisis; Creolity; Jean Rhys; "Mad woman in the Attic" paradigm, Intertextuality

## Interrogating Hybridity: Reading in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Hybridity, a concept popularized by celebrated postcolonial critic Homi. K. Bhaba, is the creation of new cultural forms and identities which can be seen a result of the colonial encounter. Hybridity is, originally a term related to botany, originally refers to grafting of different species into a singular one. Later, in the cases of race in postcolonial context, the botanical term extends its connotation and refers to 'miscegenation' – the resultant of interbreeding that is considered to be a complete different racial type. Hybridity in postcolonial societies produces to the strategy of disavowal. As the condition of subjection, the hybrid carries the reference of discrimination and contributed to a process of splitting. There is always a difference of the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles which, though has immense possibilities of conjugation, contributes to subtle divergences. Moreover, hybridity disturbs the visibility of the colonial presence as a grand monolithic superstructure and makes the recognition of its authoritative problem. The hybrid identities of diasporic or displaced individuals/communities reflect, at least, three dominant trends: Double consciousness, Multiple identities and solidarities, and finally, as Cultural fundamentalism and ethnic assertion.

Hybridity is actually the clash of cultures and this clash of cultures produces something new and brilliant, as the fiction of Salman Rushdie (India), Wilson Harris (Caribbean) and the plays of Wole Soyinka (Nigeria) demonstrate. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is one of those fictions which beautifully sketches the picture of hybridity. Hybridity also enables the postcolonial writer to negotiate the dangers of cultural binarism (us/them) and the fundamentalist urge to seek 'pure' cultural forms. (Nayar 200) These observations are important for the understanding of Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* and within the limited scope of this paper, an attempt has been made to reinterrogate Antoinette's identity, her marginal status and distorted mental condition that altered significantly due to hybridity.

Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a postcolonial recreation and representation of a major period in Caribbean history, its social situations, the position of the hybrid culture, and above all the psychological duality of hybrid individual and communities. The time depicted in the story is just after the 'Emancipation Act' (1833) with the bankrupt Creoles after the freedom of slaves from the British colonies. "The post-Emancipation period was a period of traumatic transition for both blacks and whites in the West Indies." (Anderson 60) This eventual freedom created racial conflicts and socio-economic disorder. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys re-portrayed Bertha Mason, the Creole in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Because, as

she wrote to her editor, she wanted to write: “the real story—as it might have been”, to tell “a plausible story... (in) a plausible way”. (Yoder 184) “Jean Rhys was concerned that in Charlotte Brontë’s novel, *Bertha* was dismissed as insane without any information being given about her past that could explain her insanity except the assumption of heredity.” (Roper 19) Antoinette, the protagonist of the novel is the daughter of the Creole lady Annette. She is legally white as her fathers’ and step fathers’ names are Cosway and Mason suggest, but her mother is a Caribbean Creole and belongs to Jamaica. The very opening of the novel asserts her marginal status and her psychological crisis: “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their rank. The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother.” (15) The discrimination of Annette points out not only the disavowal based on physical appearance and colour, but also the psychological acceptance of a hybrid. The beginning narrative also shows that Antoinette’s mother, who was still practicing European values and customs, faces cruelty and violence from the blacks: “she still rode about every morning not caring that the black people stood about in groups to jeer at her...” (Rhys 16) In this poor situation, Antoinette tries consciously to come close to the communities of the white people as blacks are hostile to her and her mother. She often finds solace in the portrait of “*Miller’s Daughter*”, their garden, English foods and convent education – all of these can be interpreted as essentially colonial signifier, signifying white culture. But, in real, Antoinette belongs neither to the English fortune hunters nor to the ‘native’ population of ex-slaves. Annette offers her no support, and the lonely girl lives in fear of the ex-slave population, most of who refer to her as “white cockroach”. Antoinette finds comfort only with Christophine, a slave, who was a wedding gift to Annette from her husband. Eventually Antoinette becomes friend with Tia, a black child. But these two relationships are can not be seen as a step towards amalgamation or appropriation, but turns out to be a projection of Antoinette as “other”.

Through the devices of colonialist discourse and ideologies, as they are manifested in Mr. Rochester’s use of language, perception, narrative technique, knowledge production and morality confusion and even in Jane’s. Brontë’s representation of *Bertha Mason* and West Indies is problematic because the white Creole heroine is given no voice to claim her individual identity; by large they are rendered as subaltern subjects, threatened by colonial violence and enslavement. There are no occasions in which *Bertha* speaks and on which Jamaicans are presented as members of peaceful, organized and communicative societies. They are associated with demonic and exotic other as the skeptical and detrimental representations of West Indies in the language of Mr. Rochester.

Although Annette marries the rich Englishman Mason, Antoinette's situation remains same—she does not understand the cultural system with which she is forced to deal. Unwittingly Mr. Mason provokes the black labourers into burning the estate of Coulibri and in this topsy-turvy when Antoinette goes to Tia for comfort; Tia wounds her both psychologically and physically by throwing a stone towards her. As a result of this destruction of Coulibri Annette goes mad, Antoinette's brother Pierre dies and Antoinette is sent to a convent for schooling. With these turns of events, Antoinette becomes more isolated from all her earlier contacts. On her way to convent, she, again, faces much verbal violence. Again, she takes refuge in white culture and tells her harassment to a white nun of the convent and does not disclose to the black nuns whom she met before that white nun. But within the sphere of white cultural environment, she is still discriminated as being hybrid and not being a pure white.

The dominant western discourse always ignores the oppressed subject, colonized people, non-whites, even the voices of women silenced underneath the deepest racial and gender discrimination. Spivak rightly argues the voicelessness of subalterns as the structure of racism, colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy choke their voices and alters them by replacing with the voices of intellectual middleman which further confirms their status of “lower ranking” or marginalized. They are doubly colonized by the colonial past and the postcolonial present in their own society. In cases of women, it is patriarchy which further marginalizes them. The cultural rootlessness of Antoinette along with the oppression of patriarchy plays a crucial role for the doomed fate of her. After the death of Mr. Mason, his son Richard Mason arranges Antoinette's marriage to a young, impoverished Englishman Edward Rochester. The unhappy marriage of Antoinette claims her material possession and she loses over her inheritance, which under English law becomes Rochester's. After the marriage with the white Englishman Antoinette's hybridity makes her most vulnerable and drives her into insanity and ultimately, she becomes the postcolonial version *Jane Eyre's* “mad woman”. “*Wide Sargasso Sea*, then, with its ‘double vision’, both ‘writes a life’ for the ‘poor ghost’ Rhys saw in *Jane Eyre* and places that life under English eyes, in an attempt to construct an identity for it is impossible in the colonial setting itself”. (Erwin 156)

In the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette traces with the brutal honesty her psychological journey from isolation to disintegration. Her childhood experiences reveal her futile search for love and understanding and the stages of her rejection, alienation and disintegration. The language used by Antoinette in the novel also suggests her hybrid identity. She uses the creolised English language and this variety of English contributes in the making of Antoinette's voice and her marginal identity. But her marginal status is different from her mother Annette who was a Martinique. Sometimes Antoinette tries to assert her whiteness and at the same time negotiates her whiteness with her inherited Creolity which has a significant black or local component. In her way to school she was harassed by a little girl singing: "go away, white cockroach, go away, go away." (Rhys 20) The term "white cockroach" is very insulting for the Creole girl. So, this frightened Antoinette and she becomes psychologically weak. Again, Antoinette's childhood companion, the black child Tia shares her culture with Antoinette, but the gap between them is wide. Antoinette identifies herself with Tia only in the basis of poverty but detaches herself in the basis of colour. Tia calls her "white nigger", again an insulting term for the Creoles. So, the hybridity makes Antoinette distinguished from white culture as well as from black culture. She becomes unacceptable for both as "white cockroach" "white nigger" and "Black English(wo)man". Antoinette herself also detaches her identity from the blacks and tries to assert her whiteness by calling Tia "cheating nigger"; but considers Christophine as one of her constant support and almost as a surrogate mother. Therefore, Antoinette's relation with the black marks with a sense of ambivalence. Her mother remains indifferent to her. So, her actual condition of living is shaped by Christophine, the black servant. But if Antoinette is part of black society, she is always aware of—and so are the blacks. Antoinette's narrative in the novel describes her crisis of identity, her marginal and distorted mental condition. The terms like "white nigger", "black Englishmen", and "white cockroach" intensifies her hybrid identity. Tia becomes her mirror image when she thinks after her house set on fire: "I will live with Tia and... be like her." (Rhys 41) Tia becomes Antoinette's black counterpart: "Like in a looking glass." (Rhys 41) But the hybridity does not allow Antoinette to be like Tia. After Annette marries Mr. Mason, Antoinette is forced to leave her Creole culture and habits and to mimic the English culture. This proves the capability of the marginal people to accept other cultures. But it creates insecurity in Antoinette. After marriage, in West Indies, Antoinette again connects herself with black culture. She finds peace with the companion of Christophine and the black tribal climate makes her to some extent mentally stable. But Daniel's letters to her husband Rochester again makes her hybridity problematic. This ultimately converts herself into a mad woman confined

in the attic. As Jeniffer P. Nesbitt points out: “Antoinette’s ultimate reduction to the Gothic figure she becomes in Jane Eyre results from her denial of her real economic subjection in favour of the privileges of white femininity.” (Nesbitt 315)

Antoinette sees her life becoming a repetition of her mother’s. She was not only aware of the similarities in their situation but realised that her own experience is a further stage in the deterioration of the Creole woman. Antoinette becomes the victim of her hybrid identity. Antoinette’s review of her story makes it evident that the trouble and the tragic result is not only because of her mother’s rejection of her, or her husband’s rejection, as Adjarian points out: “Antoinette’s psychological breakdown can also be linked to unconscious expectations she takes into her marriage with Edward Rochester, which in the end are never satisfied”. (Adjarian 203), but it is her identity crisis, the society which is responsible for her disorientation. According to Missy Denn Kubitschek, “both the action of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Rhys action in writing the novel speak for remaining to assimilate.” (Kubitschek 27) Antoinette’s review of the stages of her isolation, rejection and alienation embodies her search for identity and place and culminates in her search for meaning. Antoinette feels “in between” because she lives between the worlds of white Europeans and that of black Niggers and she is able to move between them and mingle with those who live in each culture, but scorned by both groups for her difference. The identity crisis of Antoinette, caused by Hybridity, ultimately leads her to suicide. This act of suicide can be seen as the personal revolt of Antoinette, a resistance over her identity crisis.

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