

Cultural Assimilation and Migration in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract

Jean Rhys' novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, stands as a profound exploration of cultural assimilation and migration, set against the backdrop of the Caribbean during the 19th century. This literary work intricately dissects the lives of its central characters, Antoinette and Rochester, as they grapple with the intricate web of cultural and racial complexities prevailing in a colonial context. At the heart of this narrative lies Antoinette's relentless endeavor to find her place in a world characterized by the coexistence of European colonialism and the indigenous cultures of the Caribbean. Her identity becomes fragmented, and her quest for assimilation into the dominant European culture is met with fierce resistance and hostility, thereby emphasizing the broader thematic concern of cultural assimilation and the prevailing power dynamics intrinsic to colonial settings. The novel also underscores the role of place and environment in the configuration of cultural identity. The lush, enigmatic landscape of the Caribbean assumes the role of an active character, profoundly influencing the behaviors and attitudes of the protagonists. The characters' transitory movement between distinct cultural spheres accentuates the challenges associated with adaptation to new environments, while simultaneously accentuating the sense of displacement that frequently accompanies migration.

Keywords: *identity, social isolation, depression, culture, self-concept.*

1. Introduction

Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* opens with a clear forewarning of the presence of racial conflicts and the disapproval from Jamaican women. Rhys illustrates how the protagonist found herself ensnared within a restrictive male-dominated culture where she didn't truly belong to either the Europeans or the Jamaicans. It seems that both Jean Rhys and Anita Loomba are looking for the meaning of identity within the cultural or racial context. In Rhys' perspective, Antoinette symbolizes the individual caught in the middle of two distinct cultures. Being a white European girl raised in Jamaica, she doesn't truly identify as exclusively Jamaican or European. This is the reason behind her frustration because she does not find any affiliation of neither cultures. In fact, Loomba realizes these issues in many postcolonial texts. This realization is obvious in her book, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, in which Loomba states that when the European encountered the new worlds, they interpreted the native as "other" who are different from them in order to justify colonization and enslavement (112). Rhys' work offers a narrative account of the negative effects of European colonization by providing accounts from the perspective of the colonized people. The author also deals with themes such as: the

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complexity of racial identity, ethnic inequality, the harshness of displacement, slavery oppression and assimilation.

Although some literary critics view Rhys' representation of Antoinette as the classic scenario of a woman's descent into madness to escape the patriarchal and the cultural restrictions, the work itself can more effectively serve as a reconceptualization of the identity aspect. Raiskin describes Rhys' unusual position as a white Creole:

Her ambivalent assessment of her family's responsibility for the atrocities of slavery and of the potential glamour or corruption inherent in power deny her an easy identification with either Whites or Blacks. In most of her writing, she focuses less on the disadvantaged position of Blacks (as Schriener did in her portrayals) than on her own exclusion, alienation, and envy as a white Creole living among blacks. (Rhys, 1982, p.100)

Rhys' novel delves into the challenges faced by individuals caught between two cultures, but what makes the work truly engaging is her reinterpretation of Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre," providing a narrative and depth to the mysterious woman locked in the attic. By centering on the identity struggles of the white Creole, Rhys has crafted a standalone text that simultaneously alters the reader's interpretation of "Jane Eyre." Antoinette/Bertha is no longer portrayed solely as the deranged woman burdened by her family's inherited mental illness. Conversely, she emerges as a character with whom the reader can empathize, given her personal quest for identity. Rhys' unconventional portrayal of "Bertha" challenges the traditional English narrative by prompting the reader to see Antoinette as a tormented victim and Rochester as a ruthless manipulator.

Hence, this study aims to investigate Antoinette's character in *Wide Sargasso Sea* emphasizing her assertion of narrative control and symbolic reconnection with her Caribbean heritage. Her oppression by her spouse and memories of her island homeland motivate her to take action, ultimately granting her an identity previously denied. This research delves into various significant aspects of the novel tied to identity, including the functions of mirrors and dress colors within the narrative.

2. Discussion

Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* was received by the public with shocked reactions. Most people thought Rhys was dead in Paris during the second World War because she was absent from the literary scene for years after the publishing of *Good Morning, Midnight* in 1930. Rhys' state of mind and her life difficulties are melted in the opening parts of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This book brings back many feelings about the author's suffering between two cultures. The interesting, long and troubled journey in writing this novel started in the late 1930s when she had written the first version of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and then burned it. The reason behind that was her West Indian past. In fact, Rhys was born to William Rees Williams and Minna Williams in Roseau, Dominica, an island of the British West Indies. In the West Indies, Rhys had experienced a variety of cultures and people as well that armed her with the essential tools to create her own analysis about the female characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, such as the character of Antoinette. For example, her mother was a third-generation Dominican Creole of Scots ancestry. Creole referred to white European colonial settlers. Rhys seemed to hate being different in Dominica so she moved to England where she separated completely from her past and began a life with doubts and troubles until the end of her life. Because she was caught between two different cultures she constantly felt unaccepted. Thus, Rhys burned *Wide Sargasso Sea* because it had burned her and touched many forgettable stories in her past (Angier 411). Some critics such as

Gayatri Spivak, in her article, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism", has a pessimistic interpretation of *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

We can read this as having been brought into the England of Brontë's novel: "This cardboard house" – a book between cardboard covers – "where I walk at night is not England" (WSS, p. 148). In this fictive England, she must play out her role, act out the transformation of her "self" into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction. I must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer. At least Rhys sees to it that the woman from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister's consolidation. (Spivak 251)

Spivak argues that Rhys' work, instead of empowering the Other, actually strengthens the dominance of Western tradition. This critique aligns with Spivak's previous essays, particularly "Can the Subaltern Speak," where she asserts that the colonized individual is inherently diverse and that attempts to liberate or criticize imperialism often end up reinforcing the idea of Otherness within the colonized subject. For instance, Spivak's observation regarding works like "Wide Sargasso Sea," which seek to narrate the story of the Other (Antoinette), is that

No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self (Spivak, 1995, p. 253).

Spivak demonstrates that any written critique of imperialism does not remove the state of being an Other from the Other. The Other's inherent diversity is a result of the historical violence of colonization, an unalterable historical past that established its heterogeneity. An Other can only exist when it is juxtaposed with a self, within the realm that designates it as Other. Stuart Hall similarly emphasizes that for identity to exist, there must be entities that differ from the subject sharing that identity.:

Moreover, they [identities] emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly raised, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and that its 'identity' – can be constructed. (5)

Hence, if one agrees that a sense of identity for the self is reinforced by the presence of an Other, then it becomes apparent how Rhys, through her critique of *Jane Eyre* skillfully positions Antoinette as an Other, thereby reasserting the English self. Spivak suggests that the novel inadvertently supports imperialist ideals by echoing the discourse it seeks to challenge, ultimately resulting in the same outcome: the tragic suicide of the mad Creole through fire, which supplants the accomplishments of British fiction. Furthermore, it implies that there is little hope for the colonized subject to escape their status as Other. This is depicted through Spivak's description of Antoinette, confined within the confines of the cardboard book and compelled to "play out her role," albeit with the Creole portrayed with greater dignity in Rhys' work.

Rhys did not determine to use *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a title until she ended her doubts about it and finally convinced her soul to accept it because these words sank in her Caribbean conscience. She wrote: "I am a tormented person, and even writing is clutching at clouds and shadow" (qtd in Angier 476). Rhys wrote about her book and how she finally had the title of her work from her cousin's "Lily's Poems," Creole song. The opening lines of the poem began with "Across the gold Sargasso Sea, I watch my heart come back to me" (qtd in Angier 476).

3. Cultural Assimilation in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Wide Sargasso Sea centers on the character of the "madwoman in the attic" from Charlotte Brontë's well-known 1847 novel, "Jane Eyre." The novel delves into the consequences of displacement through the character of Antoinette, who was previously only known as the deranged figure in Charlotte Brontë's work. Jean Rhys, the author, comes from a cultural background that combines Caribbean and English traditions. However, the conflicting nature of these cultures posed challenges for her in forming connections within her native Dominica. Rhys' aim is to familiarize the readers of the beautiful Caribbean woman who was humiliated by the English man, Rochester, just because of the differences in culture and values. Rhys tried to break the silence of Mrs. Rochester into feelings and concepts that reflect Antoinette's attractive personality. Sometimes, Rhys felt that there was a mysterious power that prevented her from writing this book. She called it the devil of the book and wrote "sometimes I really do feel it would need a devil to write it well. I live in hope- who knows? I may qualify" (Angier 477). She considered the difficulties in writing *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a curse because she thought that Charlotte Brontë would not be satisfied because Rhys has touched her silence madwoman. She was doubtful that the two parts of Antoinette and Rochester did not seem to match each other, and then she moved to a big dilemma about who should tell the whole story after all. She thought of Grace Poole, but she was not sure how Grace Poole would think, talk or act. Then she thought that Antoinette could tell the whole story, but Rhys had decided that it would be too much that the voice of a madwoman appeared everywhere throughout the whole story.

Therefore, Rhys decided to make it as two first-person narrators, Rochester and his mad wife. Rhys had struggled with Rochester's part and would not be able to do it unless with bottles at hand, and then put it away to return to it later to make it more accurate. After that, she revised Antoinette's part to make it clear and smooth, and it was really difficult for her to do these revisions because she lived with Antoinette in every minute and dreamed of her at night. The summer of 1959 was encouraging for Rhys, as she received offers from the German radio that they desired to broadcast a dramatist version of *Good Morning, Midnight* (Angier 478). *Wide Sargasso Sea* was Rhys' literary genius and it represented the whole of her. It showed her struggle, despair and her weakness. Sometimes, Rhys connected herself to Antoinette's confusion in being like a stranger in her surroundings. The history of *Wide Sargasso Sea* was not just the major events in the process of writing the book, but Rhys' passions of mind in writing the story that she had burnt in her soul. The nine years she spent in writing this book was the time she needed to decide her exact relationship with Bertha Mason, in *Jane Eyre*. Rhys dreamed several times of Bertha's voice and her sufferings. Rhys encounters a certain challenge with this concept because she is both a white Creole and a writer delving into this colonial history. She places her focus on the sense of isolation she experiences due to this historical context, also depicting herself as a victim grappling with issues of cultural and racial identity. Rhys aimed to give voice to Antoinette's dreams, struggles with identity, and feelings of frustration through the novel.

In the novel, Rhys' perspective on the concept of place evolves in relation to the growing humanizing experiences of the white protagonist, Antoinette. Antoinette finds herself

residing on an English-Caribbean plantation following the emancipation of slaves in 1838. While Antoinette's personal narrative of colonizing the Caribbean remains untold, readers acknowledge that her presence and influence in the Caribbean are rooted in the property rights stemming from the "discovery" of the islands, which facilitated the accumulation of European colonial wealth through the enslavement of Africans. Antoinette hails from a family that owned slaves, and their prosperity was founded on the belief that white individuals were entitled to absolute control over black individuals because the latter were considered less than human and were regarded as the "Other" by them. This matches with Loomba's question "Are human beings essentially the same or different and are differences defined primarily by racial or cultural attributes?" Rhys' presents a complex answer to this question in which identity, race and culture are all involved in deciding such difference. Spivak's earlier critique is undeniably compelling, especially her notion of the cardboard house as a metaphor for the text, and her observation about Otherness holds true – once someone is labeled as the "Other," reversing this process can be extremely difficult. Regarding Rhys potentially being bound to imperialism, one can agree that the moment Rhys starts writing, she becomes part of the Western literary tradition. However, Spivak's assertion that the only notable difference between Rhys' book and *Jane Eyre* is that Antoinette/Bertha is portrayed as less monstrous seems overly limiting and doesn't sufficiently acknowledge the potential for a Caribbean identity. There are various ways in which the Creole character can be viewed as the dominant figure in the narrative, overcoming the tragic fate assigned to her counterpart in *Jane Eyre*.

4. Migration in Wide Sargasso Sea

The initial distinction lies in "Wide Sargasso Sea," where Rochester, the Englishman, can also be perceived as the "Other." While Antoinette experiences a sense of Otherness in both the Caribbean island and England, she initially wields control at the outset of part two. Rochester, on the other hand, feels uncertain and relies on his wife and the local Black population for guidance in the island. He keenly senses their lack of respect for his authority, and his inability to assert control fuels his growing resentment toward Antoinette. By juxtaposing him with the conditions of the Caribbean, Rhys ingeniously reverses the roles, portraying Rochester as the fictitious "Other" in a Caribbean narrative. Even though Rochester attempts to regain control by bringing Antoinette back to England, her setting in Thornfield Hall does not emphasize imperialist self-interest but rather defends the oppressed "Other." Antoinette doesn't simply conform to her expected role by setting fire to the estate and taking her own life. Although she remains within the confines of the metaphorical "cardboard house," which Spivak interprets as the book's covers (representing *Jane Eyre*), this book is consumed by flames, a powerful image if the reader accepts Spivak's analysis.

Arguably, Spivak's arguments may still hold merit, as Rhys' critique of *Jane Eyre* and her attempt to empower the Other, while well-intentioned, might not fully succeed. Nevertheless, a part of Spivak's perspective on postcolonial critique suggests that theorists aiming to liberate the Other inadvertently reinforce its position as subordinate. However, even if Rhys falls short in her endeavor to transform the Other into a self, she does succeed in influencing the way readers will interpret *Jane Eyre*. For example, Rhys introduced Antoinette into the literary canon, and once there, she cannot be removed. After reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette's narrative will come to mind when readers encounter Bertha in Thornfield Hall within the pages of *Jane Eyre*.

The novel encapsulates a haunting sense of bewilderment that mirrors the intricate nature of racial and cultural identity. Despite Antoinette's stronger identification with Caribbean culture over European, she cannot be neatly categorized into either, as elucidated by Christophine when she explains to Mr. Rochester: "she is not béké like you, but she is

béké, and not like us, either" (Rhys 155). An intriguing illustration of this uncertain relationship with Caribbean culture is found in Antoinette's connection with Tia, a native black girl. While they are friends, they have a dispute at the river, during which Tia derogatorily refers to Antoinette as a "white cockroach" and takes her clothes. Consequently, Antoinette is compelled to wear the clothes left behind by Tia. In donning these garments, it appears as though Antoinette relishes the notion of becoming more like Tia. However, when she returns home and puts on another dress, it tears apart, symbolizing that her former identity no longer fits. Nothing seems to fit Antoinette: her original attire has been stolen, and her new dress is torn. This "new" dress, Tia's dress, symbolizes Antoinette's yearning to emulate Tia. Antoinette struggles to find an identity that suits her, and this sense of not belonging extends to her difficulty in assimilating into Caribbean culture. In her book *Jean Rhys at World's End* Mary Lou Emery remarks on this situation:

When Antoinette emerges from the pool, she discovers that Tia has exchanged her dress for Antoinette's. In the black child's dress, Antoinette arrives home to meet a visitor from England, Mr. Mason, who eventually marries her mother and takes over their neglected estate. She has become Tia's double, by a forced exchange, and in that costume meets the man who will forcefully exchange her in marriage to another white Englishman. (39)

In this scenario, Antoinette not only mirrors Tia but also when her house is set ablaze, she immediately aligns herself with Tia and comprehends that she is fundamentally different from her:

Then, not so far off, I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass. (Rhys 45)

In order to explain this important quote, I will analyze the representation of the mirrors in the novel, which draw attention to the idea of the complexity of racial identity. Throughout the novel, mirrors serve as a symbolic element that underscores the central characters' profound questions about their identities. For instance, Annette, Antoinette's mother, had a consistent habit of searching for her own reflection, a behavior that her daughter adopted. This shared inclination highlights their mutual need to be visible in a world that neither accepts nor welcomes them. In fact, Antoinette, as the observer, uses the mirror as an object of desire. She longs to be accepted by the island's inhabitants, despite their evident hostility towards her. The island is her sole familiarity, and she desperately seeks a connection to it through Tia, believing that they share similar experiences. She yearns to belong to something, thus she earnestly desires to be like Tia. This desire becomes particularly pronounced when Antoinette gazes directly at Tia, almost as if she were gazing into a mirror.

Margaret Paul Joseph explores the themes of duplication and reflected images in *Wide Sargasso Sea* with a particular emphasis on the following occurrence:

Mirrors are used with other, more specific, intentions as well. Antoinette has a playmate, a black girl called Tia, whom she envies because Tia belongs as Antoinette never does. It seems as if fires are always lit for her, as if sharp stones never hurt her bare feet, for she never saw her cry. While Antoinette longs to be

black in order to identify with her, Tia is conditioned by the master-slave relationship that links them both; so the feeling of sisterhood is one-sided. (39)

The representation of a dress, similar to the one taken by Tia from Antoinette, frequently appears as a symbolic motif in the book. These dress references typically signify Antoinette's connection and identification with both England and the Caribbean. Furthermore, these dress references often highlight the colors white and red, with white symbolizing England and red representing the Caribbean.

To illustrate, early in the story, Antoinette wears a white dress in her second dream, which foreshadows her unhappy marriage to Rochester. In this dream, Antoinette initially holds up her white dress but then allows it to drag along the ground. She expresses concern about soiling it, and the man with her reassures her, saying, "Not here, not yet." Antoinette follows him, weeping, and no longer attempts to keep her dress clean; it drags in the dirt, losing its beauty (Rhys 59). This image of the soiled dress recurs in part two of the novel, describing Christophine, whose dress also trails along the floor.

However, the recurring motif of the dress, instead of drawing parallels between the two women, actually underscores their differences, once again highlighting the distinction between Antoinette and her Caribbean identity. Rochester is the one who comments on the dress, remarking, "Her coffee is delicious, but her language is horrible, and she might hold her dress up. It must get very dirty, yards of it trailing on the floor." In response, Antoinette explains, "You don't understand at all. They don't care about a dress getting dirty because it shows it isn't the only dress they have" (Rhys 85). In Antoinette's dream, she is following the man who will later reject her and take everything from her, and she makes a conscious effort not to soil her white dress. Allowing it to fall to the ground represents her submission to Rochester. In contrast, Christophine is unmarried and independent. She doesn't worry about her dress getting dirty, as she later tells Antoinette, saying, "I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man" (Rhys 110). The theme of the dress continues in part two when Rochester comes across Antoinette's white dress lying on the floor, which arouses strong desire in him. Antoinette desires to please him (England) and expresses a desire to have another dress made just like it: "I was thinking, I'll have another made just like it," she promises happily, asking, "Will you be pleased?" (Rhys 94). This illustrates how Rhys's protagonist embodies a dual culture, blending English and Caribbean traditions.

In fact, she desires to acquire an identical white dress, which reveals her genuine intention to remain loyal to her husband, symbolizing England. Additionally, this desire for duplicate white dresses underscores her lack of space for her Caribbean heritage. However, Antoinette cannot achieve this goal of complete Englishness, as evident when Rochester later sees her wearing the dress and becomes annoyed, remarking, "She was wearing the white dress I had admired, but it had slipped untidily over one shoulder and seemed too big for her" (Rhys 127). Much like Tia's dress, the white dress representing England doesn't fit Antoinette, symbolizing the complexity of her identity. Rochester's perception that the dress is too large for Antoinette signifies his inability to accept the idea that Antoinette is attempting to embrace an English identity. For him, Antoinette is firmly rooted in Caribbean culture.

5. Conclusion

Conversely, the red color symbolizes the Caribbean in Rhys' narrative, exemplified by the dress that Antoinette possesses in the attic at Thornfield Hall. While in England, Antoinette pens a somber note, stating, "I am dying because it is so cold and dark," echoing the recurring motif in the book that characterizes England as a "cold dark dream" (Rhys 183). In part three of the story, as Antoinette narrates once more, her connection to her identity begins to rekindle when she encounters her red dress. The description of the dress incorporates elements reminiscent of the Caribbean:

As I turned the key I saw it hanging, the color of fire and sunset. The color of flamboyant flowers. 'If you are buried under a flamboyant tree,' I said, 'your soul is lifted up when it flowers. Everyone wants that.' She shook her head but she did not move or touch me. The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grew stronger... the smell of the sun and the smell of the rain. (Rhys 185)

The smell of the flowers, sun, and the rain suggest that Antoinette long to her Caribbean identity. She can smell the land of the island and the colors which have connotations to the island such as the red color. Moreover, she wants to get Rochester's admiration when she asked Grace pool if he will like her wearing the red dress:

I said, "if I had been wearing my red dress Richard would have known me."

"your red dress," she said, and laughed.

But I looked at the dress on the floor and it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do. I will remember I thought. I will remember quite soon now. (Rhys 187)

when Antoinette asked this question, she wants to show Rochester that she belongs to the Caribbean culture. Grace Pool realizes this and that is the reason she laughed because she had known that Rochester is no longer recognize Antoinette as a human being or even as an Other. In fact, Rochester's role as an oppressor has destroyed the identity and the belongings of Antoinette.

Antoinette's choice to return to her native Caribbean culture reflects her determination to assert her identity. Conversely, she looks through the mirror as an object of desire and desires acceptance from the island's inhabitants, despite their evident hostility towards her. The island represents the only world she truly knows, and she yearns to connect with Caribbean culture. Ultimately, Antoinette must confront the hostility of the island's inhabitants and integrate herself into the oppressed society. This also signifies how the text resonates with Rhys's own struggle between two cultures. Antoinette's ultimate decision to assimilate with Caribbean culture underscores the themes of identity struggle within the context of culture and race, as emphasized by scholars like Loomba and Rhys.

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