

Race and Gender in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract

This article explores the social demarcations between English and Creole cultural identities foregrounding race and gender in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Set in a post Emancipation West Indian colony, the novel dramatizes the impossibility of mutual and creative exchanges between the fragments of a disintegrating world. When the novel begins, the English hegemony is already structured and symbolically cast in the Caribbean islands in terms of patriarchal family. We aim to demonstrate that the characters' minds are shaped in conformity with the theory of racial essentialism and nativism which suggests the existence of a myth of an identifiable and homogeneous natural character. Such an approach sets a white-black binary of race relations and assigns roles of masters and subaltern to the two social groups. It accounts for the fact that Whites and Blacks refer each to the racial others using stereotypical and over generalizing discourses. This study contradicts also the idea according to which Whites make up one homogeneous racial group. In fact, those who were born in Britain maintain their Englishness pure and whole throughout the narration. Their place of birth confers on them superiority over the other Whites whose birth in the West Indies instantly renders Creole.

This paper analyses as well the gender issue within the framework of the patriarchal order imposed by the imperialist's ideology foregrounding the lives of two female characters: the white Creole protagonist and a woman of color. Throughout her life, the former constantly strives to replicate the dominant ideals, values, and conceptual structures. As for the latter, she appears as a self-determining agent, a defiant subaltern who opposes a strong resistance to the oppressors' ideology. Her resistance appears in many different forms.

Introduction

Published in 1966, *Wide Sargasso Sea* reports on the life of a West Indian community during the post emancipation period. The people whose lives are dramatized in the book belong to various races and are from different classes. Their respective destinies are shaped by conflicting relations that stem from their respective contradictory histories and social backgrounds.

The present article aims at scrutinizing the attitudes and psyches of the characters foregrounding race and gender. Race and gender can be viewed as intertwined categories of experience which are at the basis of all aspects of human life; they mould and structure the experiences of people in a society. It is true that race, class and gender can be more prominent or powerful in a given person's life, but also that they often overlap in their impact on people's experience.

From another angle, race and gender can be considered as axes of social structure used as means of domination. The levels of domination determine the configuration of

the societal relations between people in the community. This structural pattern affects individual consciousness, group interactions and group access to power and privileges.

The approach to these two axes will focus on their independent effects on the humans who populate the diegesis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This cumulative approach will help underline the oppression of both black Creoles and white Creoles. The model will analyze the fictional West Indian community as Black and White categories and the consecutive distribution of and subaltern and powerful.

Wide Sargasso Sea is recognized as a historical novel the central issue of which textualizes the abolition of slavery and the set of social relations in the newly emancipated Caribbean community. The main social and textual referential of the narrative is England.

As far as the social referential is concerned, it is well known that long before the post emancipation era in this part of the world, English hegemony had already been cast over the world and consequently structured the areas it controlled following its own vision of mankind. Black human beings were just commodities; they could be bought and sold. Women had no better fate in the sense that they had no real independence; legally they were economically subjugated to their male relatives. To sum up, Black slaves and women were considered, by the colonizer, as inferior and dependent by nature.

Concerning the textual referentiality, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is constructed following the terms of a literary and historical discourse which takes Europe, and precisely England, as origin and reference. The starting point of the novel is *Jane Eyre*; consequently, it bears the features of the English classical literary canon which celebrates western standards while looking down upon non-Western values. The relationship which is at stake in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that of the Creoles, Black or White, and women, to the colonizer. It foregrounds the issue of race.

Race

Following the English referentiality, there are two races in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: the Blacks and the Whites. This distribution derives from the prevailing nineteenth century English assumption of an inherent relationship linking the geographical delimitations of a state and the essential character of its national culture. Such an approach, enforced by English planters in the Caribbean colonies, considers Englishness as a homogeneous racial category distinctive by colour, of the Black Jamaican Creole, another racial group. In other words, the English assumption suggests that there is an identifiable, unified national character evident in such terms as Englishman and Creole, based on socially codified patterns of behaviour, and a person's inherent physical and racial attributes. This means that, referring to the English approach, race is based on essentialism and nativism. Besides, such a view marked England's involvement in the slave trade and plantation economies in the West Indian colonies.

Since the English point of view is the reference, we are going to see how the Blacks are perceived by the other racial group in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Essentialism and nativism are the core elements of the colonizer's racial ideology. That is the reason why, in the novel, according to the white characters, the black Jamaicans have all the same physical, moral, and social attributes. Reporting on the fire destroying Coulibri estate, the adult Antoinette says about the black people: "Still they were quiet and there

were so many of them I could hardly see any grass or trees. There must have been many of the bay people but I recognized no one. They all looked the same, it was the same face repeated over and over, eyes gleaming, mouth half open to shout..."¹

Here, blackness appears as an essential identity, a foundational category. The black Creoles are depicted as an undifferentiated and unreasoning mass of people, physically alike and full of hatred. This overgeneralization is internalized by all white people in the book, even the younger ones, including Antoinette. In the following brackets used to illustrate such an internalization, the young narrator says derisively about the black Jamaicans: '*They*' notice clothes, '*they*' know about money.² The black individual has no personal identity, no distinctive psyche; he is just a portion of a whole body of undifferentiable people. The knowing here has nothing to do with a cognitive operation, an expression of intelligence. Knowing here is not the result of a perception and an analysis of the relationships between things, it is something very close to animal intuition.

The same objectivising and derisive use of "*they*" to talk about the black creoles is recurrent in the narrative. The young narrator offers an illustration: referring to her mother standing in the glaciais and visible to anybody who could pass by, Antoinette says: "*They stared, sometimes they laughed.*"³ Another illustration is given by her mother Annette, two years after her second marriage. Eager to leave Coulibri, she contemptuously talks here about her black neighbours who, in her eyes, are all alike: "Do you suppose that they don't know all about your estate in Trinidad? And the Antigua property? They talk about us without stopping. They invent stories about you, and lies about me. They try to find out what we eat everyday."⁴

Mason, Annette's second husband, looks at the Blacks the same way. His generalizations illustrate more explicitly his essentialist and nativist views about race. In an attempt at comforting his wife, he declares pompously about the former slaves: "*They are curious. It's natural enough.*"⁵ He confers to all of them the same natural inclinations, including laziness; that is why later, still talking about the black Jamaicans, he adds: "*but the people here won't work. They don't want to work.*"⁶

The essentialist ideology is expressed through stereotypes. Stereotypes usually construct the other as a generalized object of knowledge. In the book, the Whites consider themselves as the centre, and consequently think that they know thoroughly the Blacks and that what they say about them is unquestionably true.

The white planters equate ex-black slaves with hatred and moral inferiority. The depiction of the black Creoles during the burning of Coulibri is very telling. Antoinette declares that she sees a "*mass of hatred and betrayal*"⁷ constituted by "*a malevolent mob of black and mulatto people.*"⁸ The same feelings about the Blacks are already noticeable

¹ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Penguin Books, London, 1997, p. 22.

(Any further reference to this book will appear as follows: I.R, WSS followed by the page number.)

² I.R, WSS, p.5

³ Ibid. p. 7

⁴ Ibid. p. 15

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. p.17

⁷ I.R, WSS., p.22.

⁸ Ibid. p. 22

during Antoinette's quarrel with her childhood friend Tia by the pool. When Tia takes her money, the young narrator resorts to stereotypes about black Creoles and shouts biting: "*Keep them then, you cheating nigger.*" Tia is her only playmate, yet that does not prompt her to refrain from using racial stereotypes when addressing those she considers inferiors. Antoinette's role here is primarily that of a spokesperson for the white Jamaican society. She uses the racist name calling as a synonym for blackness and a sign of Tia's and all other Blacks' moral inferiority.

To the Whites in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, moral inferiority includes also ungrounded and unjustifiable hatred. They consider that all the ex-slaves hate them without any reason. That is probably the reason why Adama Coly says: "*Annette and Antoinette are victims of persecution and marginalization by the Black community of Spanish Town.*"⁹ Antoinette confesses: "*I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us.*"¹⁰ Her mother has the same feeling which transpires when she says to her husband: "*the people here hate us. They certainly hate me...*"¹¹

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the British racial classification equates ex-slaves with poverty or lack of economic resources. Consequently the Whites resort to a rhetoric of racial prejudice to ostracize those people of low socioeconomic status. When she says "*take them, you cheating nigger*", Antoinette means to remind Tia of her origin and the subsequent wretchedness it goes with. In the novel, black Caribbean own nothing, which, according to colonial history, is not a distortion of the past. The imperialistic ideological system which has structured the West Indies has set the categories of representation. The legal castes of slaves are replaced by a race-colour system of stratification. Consequently binary oppositions which are at work in the diegesis assign the lower level of the society to the black characters, deprive them of any power, consider them as subaltern and ultimately reduce them to silence. The dominant white characters make up the hegemonic group while black Creoles form the landless rural proletariat.

Poverty is illustrated in the fiction by Tia's dress, the one she leaves by the pool and which Antoinette is obliged to wear to get back home. The scene occurs after their quarrel about the few pennies Christophine had given her earlier. The dress is so shabby and so dirty that Annette is repulsed when she sees her daughter wearing such a horrible garment associated with race and lower socioeconomic class. "*Throw away that thing. Burn it.*"¹², she shouts bitterly to Christophine.

Christophine is also used as a symbol to depict poverty among the black Jamaicans. She is one of the well-off black characters for she can claim ownership of a house Annette has generously given her. Yet, her dwelling is characterized by utter destitution. She has no real furniture. When she is outside, in the yard, under her mango tree, she has nowhere to sit except on a box. Inside the house, apart from a bench, there are only two wobbly chairs.

⁹ Adama Coly in: *The West Indian Woman as a Scapegoat in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Harold Sonny Ladoo's *No Pain Like this Body* (1972), an article in *Women's Studies, Diasporas and Cultural Diversity*, edited by Mamadou Kandji, Presses Universitaires de Dakar, Dakar, 2008, pp. 145-162

¹⁰ J.R, WSS. p. 9

¹¹ Ibid. p. 15

¹² J.R, WSS., p. U

¹³ Ibid. p. 74

On her bed, she has the same counterpane she has always used because she is unable to afford anything else to replace it. Antoinette reports on the destitution: "I followed her into the house. There was a wooden table in the outer room, a bench and two broken-down chairs... She still had her bright patchwork counterpane."¹³

From the essentialist perspective, materialistic destitution goes hand-in-hand with ignorance and savagery. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the white characters cannot see coloured people as human beings who are capable of thought and reasoned determination. They are stereotyped as children and the ignorance associated with them is usually read as the source of their laziness and passivity. They cannot make deductions or come up with sound conclusions. That is why in the scene of the burning of Coulibri, the racist planters portray the white Creoles as victims of a malevolent mob of Blacks. Yet, the episode preceding Antoinette's depiction of the collective face sheds light on the seemingly unjustified and unreasonable violence of the ex-slaves. Myra, one of the servants, overhears Mason saying in the course of a conversation, that he intends to bring indentured labourers from India to replace the newly emancipated black Creoles he considers as too lazy people. These labourers are called "coolies", an Indian word meaning hired worker or burden carrier. The narrator says:

My stepfather talked about a plan to import labourers – coolies he called them – from the East Indies. When Myra had gone out Aunt Cora said, 'I shouldn't discuss that if I were you. Myra is listening.'

.....Do you mean to say –'

I said nothing, except that it would be wiser not to tell that woman your plans – necessary and merciful no doubt. I don't trust her.'

'Live here most of your life and know nothing about the people.

It's astonishing. They are children – they wouldn't hurt a fly.'¹⁴

Aunt Cora thinks that it is not wise to disclose such plans as importing labourers to replace the ex-slaves; Myra may go and notify the others and tragic consequences may follow. To Mason, one of the paragons of white supremacy, this is next to impossible for the people of colour do not think; they are deprived of the ability to establish relationships and to anticipate any future occurrence. They are just children and that is a conspicuous peculiarity of theirs.

What happens next is the burning of Coulibri estate by an *angry and malevolent mob*. There is not a straightforward and linear narration of the events but the reader can easily infer that the importing and commodification of human beings is considered by the ex-slaves as a way of resuming slavery, which they do not want to happen. So the episode of

¹⁴ Ibid, pp.18-19

¹⁵ According to Carine M. Mardorossian in her article entitled *Shutting up the Subaltern, Silences, Stereotypes, and Double-Entendre in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in *Callaloo*, Vol 22, NO 4 in 1999, the critic Louis James refers us to the *Guerre Negre* in Dominica to elucidate this scene. The taking of census in 1844, Le., "of names" misled the freed populations into believing that slavery was going to be reinstated and generated riots and incidents similar to the burning of Coulibri.

the burning of the estate is not a corroboration of the whites' stereotypical representation of the black Jamaicans. It rather reveals the black Creoles' unyielding commitment to freedom. This interpretation of the burning of Coulibri is sustained by Louis James, as Carine M. Mardorossian demonstrates it in her article.¹⁵

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the representatives of the racist western ideology cannot see the ex-slaves as actors in their own history of liberation. In addition to that, they view the black subjects' metaphysical beliefs as signs of backwardness. That is the reason why they consider the beliefs in zombi and Obeah practices as foolishness. Primarily, "negro religious tradition" such as Obeah was identified as criminality. It was appropriated by the dominant power as grounds for punishment. *Wide Sargasso Sea* foregrounds Obeah as a secret African religion that survived the period of slavery in spite of the colonizers' prohibition that the slaves practice any religion from which they might draw for empowerment. "*It is traditionally represented as a source of resistance that assisted in slave rebellions and inspired fear and awe among believers.*"¹⁶ This statement is corroborated by Mary Lou Emery¹⁷

According to Brathwaite, in African/Caribbean folk practice, where religion had not been externalized and institutionalized as in Europe, the Obeah-man was doctor, philosopher, and priest, whereas in the white Jamaican/European mind Obeah was associated with superstition, witchcraft, and poison. As a matter of consequence, throughout the narrative, Obeah is identified as black magic and foolishness by the white characters. Christophine informs us here: "*If Béké say it foolishness, then it foolishness.*"¹⁹ Béké is Creole for white people. The black characters who describe the practice as foolishness use such qualifications not to mark their distance from Obeah. To them, "*Béké clever like the devil. More clever than God....*"²⁰ Thus, their attitude must be understood as a way of appeasing the British colonizer by dissimulating resistance behind a mask of docility.

So, from the white characters' experience of the island and its inhabitants, it appears that the black race is associated with ignorance and backwardness the representations of which appear through beliefs in practices synonymous with *foolishness and nonsense*. Such a view stems from the essentialist approach to race which portrays the dominant group as the centre and makes them fairly confident in the naturalness of their power and supremacy, and in the soundness of their socially sanctioned ways of knowing.

The second racial group is composed of the Whites. The social structure at work in *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicts a binary system which holds a fundamental assumption about races: wealth attached to Whites and poverty to Blacks.

The white group includes, on the one hand, the British who were born in England and who came to the island after the Emancipation Act, and on the other hand, the white

¹⁶ Carine Mardorossian in *Shutting up the Subaltern, Silences, Stereotypes and Double-Entendre in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea*.

¹⁷ For more insight into this religious practice, one can refer to Mary Lou Emery who deals extensively about the historical significance of various Caribbean cultural practices such as Obeah in her book Jean Rhys at 'World's End.'

¹⁸ More information can be found in Brathwaite's *The Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica*, London, New Beacon Books, 1981.

¹⁹ J.R. WSS, p.74

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Creole, the planter class who were born on the island.

The Whites are the dominant group. They own everything, including the lands and the rich, big, and comfortable estates. Before the Emancipation Act, they even owned the members of the first racial group. Though slavery has come to an end, the white people remain the rich group. The privileges and social status attached to their race is perceived by both black and white characters as natural attributes. Tia, Antoinette's young playmate says: "*Plenty white people in Jamaica. Real white people, they got gold money. They didn't look at us, nobody see them come near us.*"²¹

Because their status has changed from former slave owners to the dominant wealthy group today, the Whites cannot imagine having egalitarian relationships with the other race. They have total power on the island and on its inhabitants. Consequently, they adopt exclusionary attitudes and rhetoric toward the black Creole, which transpires in their constant resort to stereotypes. Stereotypes are derogatory generalizations which designate visual shameful and humiliating attitudes occasioned by the ex-slaves' skin colour. So, in the minds of the dominant whites, they function as instances of crossing racial boundaries and assigning debasing roles to the black community kept at distance. The white characters have an unquestionable and unshakable conviction in the exactness of their assertions concerning the other race.

An analysis of the colonizers' views reveals a certain number of flaws embedded in the dominant imperial ideology. In Rhys's book, the whites are haughty, disdainful and paternalistic. An illustration is provided by Mason when he says to his wife: "*Annette, be reasonable.you were never molested, never harmed. {The Blacks} are curious. It's natural.*"²² His haughtiness and paternalism appear through his ironic complacency. Here he does not in the least mean to side with the blacks or justify their resentment. He just shows that he has absolute knowledge of everything because he is the centre.

Rochester is another example of haughtiness. He is English and has just arrived on the island. The setting and its inhabitants do not appeal to him. He looks at them with hostility from a domineering standpoint. He cannot like them because they are pitifully different from the civilized island and people he is used to. He can only see *'sombre people in a sombre place.*'²³ He looks at his physical and social environment through a Eurocentric filter which makes him realize contemptuously that: "Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me."²⁴

Until the day of his departure for England, he has displayed arrogance and paternalism which show that the abolition of slavery has far from eradicated the set of attitudes on which the concepts of Englishness depends. Disdainfully he confesses:

"I was tired of these people. I disliked their laughter and their tears, their flattery and envy, conceit and deceit. And I hated the place.

²¹ Ibid., p. 10

²² I.R., WSS p. 15 23 Ibid. p. 41

²⁴ Ibid. p. 42

²⁵ Ibid. p.111

I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour. I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know.²⁵

The white Creoles also are haughtily complicit in the use of gross generalizations. They too have a hegemonic discourse characterized by a denial of the eternal constraints which construct the black Creole. The Whites purposefully silence some parts of history and distort the impact of occurrences so that they fit their own perspectives. In the scene of the burning of Coulibri, they refrain from taking into account the legitimate resentment of the black Creoles after they have heard of a future importing of indentured labourers, importing they liken with a resuming of slavery. The white Creoles cannot see that what they label an angry mob assaulting innocent white victims is just a group of people who react to the evil plans of the planters and who take their destiny in their own hands.

The excision of the historical external constraints appears again in the scene when Antoinette explains to Rochester the meaning of the insult "*white cockroach*" derisively thrown at her by Amélie: "It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders."²⁶

Here, Antoinette tries to deny the white man's involvement in the history of slavery. By doing so, she means to reject all the blame on Amélie and on people of her race.

Annette, Antoinette's mother, offers another example in the same vein. Like all the other members of the planters' class, she displays a total amnesia when it comes to their contribution in the history of slavery. This amnesia is a deep-rooted propensity to register only the impact of actions and not the causes, and interpret it their own way. When the book opens, she is described as a woman harassed and laughed at by her black neighbours. After her horse is killed, she feels marooned, forsaken in a social environment where she is helpless, hated and lied about. She is resentful and feels she is but an innocent victim. Amnesia appears here through the fact that there is not a single moment when she relates her aching predicament to the historical circumstances of slavery. She only sees the reactions of the Blacks but she does not say anything about her partaking in the existence of slavery. In this respect, Carine Mardorossian declares that: "*it is ironically Mr. Mason, her self-satisfied British husband, who brings up this constantly erased past by mentioning her complicity with the repression of the natives.*" Mason says: "*Annette, be reasonable. You were the widow of a slave-owner, the daughter of a slave-owner.*"²⁷

In a nutshell, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the black race, as well as the white one, each has their own distinctive peculiarities. Since the nineteenth century essentialist and nativist Eurocentric perspective, races have been described by referring to physical and other overt qualities. Biological factors underpin explanations of racial differences. In this respect, Michael C. Thornton says that "*Physical qualities, the belief goes, reflect biological influences, which seem tied to attitudinal, life-style, and socioeconomic factors.*"²⁸

²⁶ I.R., WSS, p. 64

²⁷ Ibid. p. 15

²⁸ Michael C. Thornton in: *Is Multiracial Status Unique? The Personal and Social Experience*, an article in *Race, Class, and Gender*, an Anthology, edited by Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, Wadsworth Publishing Company, New York, 1995, p. 96

Next to the elements supporting the assumption of an inherent connection between nature and a state of essential predispositions, there are other ones which show that race is just a construction. And as such there cannot be any homogeneity in a racial group. The white community in Jean Rhys's novel is a perfect illustration of such a view.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the white race is not one cohesive and homogeneous whole. On the contrary, it is characterized by a deep fracture which divides the group into two separate entities: the British who were born in England, on the one hand, and the British who were born on the island, on the other hand. The second group is called the white Creoles. The two entities do not have the same approach to life and consequently their mutual social relationships are not constructed on an egalitarian basis. On the contrary, they are based on power and a sense of superiority endowed to those who were born in England. As a matter of consequence, the relationships are also tinted with disdain, particularly when they go from the first group to the second one.

The first entity gathers Mason and Rochester. Their way of thinking is deeply influenced by geography and displacement which portray their social construction of Englishness and Creoleness. This perspective is in direct line with the essentialist approach to races. The two white characters' attitudes reflect their strong belief that Creoleness links a person's birthplace to his or her identity regardless of race. They feel themselves English and at the same time, they deny the other white people in the West Indies such an attribute. To them, being English means being able to claim Britain as one's birthplace. If one was born to English parents but outside England, one is automatically disqualified to pretend to Englishness. Such views stem from history. Following the standards of the British Empire, Englishness is not an inheritable or transferable quality. Vivian Nun Halloran confirms by saying that: "*The mere accident of a character's birth in the West Indies instantly renders the infant Creole, not English, despite the national purity of his or her lineage.*"²⁹

All through the novel, Mason and Rochester never lose their Englishness. They maintain it pure and stainless despite the fact that the former marries a Creole woman from Martinique, and the latter cannot claim any property or wealth since he is the second child of an aristocratic father who does not like him very much. The reason why they enjoy such a privilege is that "*a character's birth in England proper imbues the (white, male) subject with an indelible Englishness that is incorruptible, not affected even by a protracted stay in the tropic.*"³⁰

From the two characters' relationships with the other white people, it appears clearly that being English goes naturally with an unquestionable superiority on the others. Mason expresses that superiority through disdain and paternalism when talking to Annette, his white Creole wife. Pretentious as he is, he thinks he knows better than her and all the others. What he says is to be considered as gospel truth. This is best illustrated the day Annette pleads for them all to quit Coulibri because she no longer feels secure there. Looking down his nose at her, he declares:

²⁹ Vivian Nun Halloran, *Race, Creole, and National Identities in Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea and Phillips's Cambridge*, published in *A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, Indiana University Press, October 2006

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ J.R., WSS, p. 15

“Annette, be reasonable [.....] Things were at their worst then. But you were never molested, never harmed. [.....] You have lived alone far too long, Annette. You imagine enmity which doesn't exist. Always one extreme or the other....”³¹

Annette's violent reaction when the house starts burning testifies that she has registered her husband's haughtiness, which arouses resentment in her. “I told you [.....] I told you what would happen again and again.... You would not listen, you sneer at me, you grinning hypocrite, you ought not to live either, you know so much, don't you....”³²

As for Rochester, throughout the novel, he displays condescension when talking to all other characters including Antoinette, his wife. A wife he cannot love because she is not English. When he looks at her, he cannot see but a white person who is anything except English or even European. Describing her, he says, full of disdain: “At least it shadowed her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either.”³³

The denial of Englishness to the white Jamaicans is taken to its furthest point when Rochester changes Antoinette's name to Bertha, her mother's name which he identifies as Creole. He has the power to do so as he is a member of the dominant group. Naming is an exercise of appropriation. Only those whose Englishness is whole and pure can do it. As Deborah A. Kimney says: “Those who guard the realm of the symbolic or the dominant discourse impose meaning on (and construct meaning for) those at the borders of the discursive community. They who are relegated to the margins are refused direct access to self-definition.”³⁴

The naming of others is a means of appropriating their qualities for one's own purposes. This rhetorical change may be superficial in the sense that, in the novel, it does not alter the female protagonist's mind frame or physical appearance but, undoubtedly, it discloses Edward's own purpose: his strong desire to keep his wife at a distance. It also conveys his disgust in her Creoleness.

So, in the novel, the Whites do not make up a homogeneous group. The repartition and the belonging to one group or another are determined by one's position regarding the centre which is England and which allocates power and privileges. The closer one is related to the centre by birth, the more powerful one is. Mason and Rochester are all the more powerful as they are males in a society founded on imperial and patriarchal ideologies.

If males have a hegemonic position in this Jamaican community, how do women react to oppression and phallogentrism? Do they conform to the dominant order or have they invented any strategy whether overt or implicit to resist their relegation to the periphery of the society? In order to find out women's reactions to the prevailing social structure, we

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. p. 40

³⁴ Deborah A. Kimney, ‘Women, Fire, And Dangerous Things: Metatextuality and the Politics of Reading in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*’, an article published in *Women's Studies*, New York, Routledge, 1988

are going to address the issue of gender in *Wide Sargasso Sea* foregrounding the lives of Antoinette and Christophine.

Gender

The two characters have at least one thing in common: they live in a world under the yoke of imperialism and patriarchy. Patriarchy is often seen as a form of oppression carried out through male dominance and female subjugation. It gives more power to men than to women. Power here means: “The ability to influence important decisions – political decisions of government on every level, economic decisions (jobs, access to money, choice of priorities), and a wide variety of other life areas down to the most personal concerns, such as whether two people are going to make love on a given night or not.”³⁵ Patriarchy is not just a power structure “out there”. It is widely held that:

It is mainly enforced by our acceptance of its character ideals for our lives. The character ideal which is held up for men to reach toward is ‘masculinity’. A masculine man is supposed to be tough, good at abstract reasoning, hard-working, unfeeling except for anger and sexual desire, and habitually taking the initiative. Masculinity exists only in contrast to femininity, the model for women. Feminine characteristics include cooperativeness, emotionality, patience, passivity, nurturance, and sexual appeal.³⁶

So, the word “patriarchy” is used to refer to the power structure built around men’s domination of women. Obviously not everybody accepts such a social division. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* for example, Antoinette and Christophine do not react the same way to such a structure.

In the community where she lives, Antoinette seems unable to resist all the pressure put upon her by the oppressive demands of the dominant ideology. Torn between two racial groups and a personal aspiration to happiness, she finds it difficult to find a way out. As a white Creole woman, she is at a loss in her conflicting position vis-à-vis the Europeans and the Dominicans. Debased and rejected by both racial communities, she feels marooned in a wide Sargasso sea where the mass of seaweed renders the water motionless. To be lost in such a sea means that one is doomed to everlasting shipwreck since the chances of being cast ashore are almost nonexistent. It is her contradictory status which prompts her despairing utterance to her husband: “*I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why I was ever born at all.*”³⁷

Lost as she is, Antoinette appears insecure, fragmented and disoriented. According to Elizabeth Abel, she manifests several specific symptoms of schizophrenia: “*unbalanced*

³⁵ Peter Blood, Allan Tuttle, and George Lakey: *Understanding And Fighting Sexism: A Call to Men*, published in *Race, Class, and Gender*; by Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, Wadsworth Publishing Company, USA, 1995, pp. 154, 155.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 155.

³⁷ J.R., WSS, p. 64

³⁸ Elizabeth Abel in *Women and Schizophrenia: The Fiction of Jean Rhys*, an article published in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 20, NO.2 (Spring, 1979), p.156

affect, obsessive thought and behaviour associated with an inability to take initiative, a sense of detachment of the self from the world."³⁸ Another consequence of her schizophrenia is that she experiences the world as a hostile environment, and lives a life of isolation, unable to establish real and permanent contact with others. Until she is taken to England in an attic, Antoinette is not insane. She just shows a divided self and consequently suffers from a lack of "ontological security" which leads her to wondering ceaselessly whether her identity is acceptable to others or not. By saying that she does not know where she belongs and why she was born, she acknowledges mental anxiety and a profound desire to be accepted by the others. Because she is denied this basic security, she becomes a persona that sticks to conforming to the norms of the society instead of questioning and opposing the social structure shaped and imposed by a patriarchal ideology. She needs an identity and thinks that the best way to get it is to live in accordance with the social order. Her conformism is put in practise in many ways.

The first complying appears in the form of copying her mother. She takes her as her model and thus internalises her language and values. Very young, she uses the same stereotypes as Annette when referring to the black Creoles. Commonalities appear also through her use of the same generalisations as her mother like: "They hate us", or: "they can smell money". In addition to that, she replicates her mother's racist observations in such a way that one might think she shares the same beliefs. Talking about her mother riding past the black people she says "they notice clothes, they know about money." On the literary level, one can say that as though she wanted to herald the identification of the daughter to the mother, Rhys creates an interchange of names between the two characters. This is the reason why, in substance, Veronica Gregg astutely observes that Annette and Antoinette are the English and French versions of the same name. 'Annette' is a mere condensation of 'Antoinette' (with the French informal 'you' giving the latter her surplus characters)³⁹

Another form of conformism is expressed by her wish to look like the English girl she has seen on a picture which they have proudly hung on a wall at home. Her tastes must be identical to those of the English girls; she would like to have the same hair and the same eyes or at least the same look. These physical appearances are those any English girl must have, so she wants to replicate them to abide by the esthetical canons set by the phallogocentric order.

To complete her attempts at identifying herself to Englishness, she displays a strong desire to please her mother and her step-father. Since Mason married her mother, they have been living on the model of English people. Now they eat English food, including beef and mutton, pies and puddings. Here also, she adheres to the rules of the patriarchal order which organises the norms and conventions that way. She confesses: "*I was glad to be like an English girl.*"⁴⁰

Later, Mason gets her out of the convent where she had been placed after the

³⁹ For more information about names and naming in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, refer to Deborah A. Kimmey's article the references of which are above-mentioned.

⁴⁰ J.R., WSS, p. 17

⁴¹ Mary Lou Emery, *The Politics of Form: Jean Rhys's Social Vision in Voyage in the Dark and Wide Sargasso Sea*, an article published in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 28, and NO. 4 (winter, 1982), p. 427.

destruction of Coulibri, to exchange her in marriage to another Englishman, Rochester. After a few vacillations, she agrees to become his wife because she thinks that by marrying as recommended by her society, she will fulfil her quest for an identity. Here again, her choice is similar to that of her mother a few years before. Talking about the similarities between the two, Mary Lou Emery says: “Both Annette and Antoinette submit to exploitative marriages, exchanging themselves and their property for the social identity they desperately need.”⁴¹ Antoinette’s wedding does not fulfil her expectations. Once married, she is not legally recognised. ‘I am not rich now. I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him....That is English law’⁴² she says to Christophine. Within wedlock ties, not only does she lose her property, her name, but she is also silenced; she has no right to speak in the name of her husband. Subservience cannot buy security or identity. Marriage reduces her to a child for whom dependence is an obstacle to self-assertion. It also sets up a master/slave relation in which husband and wife enact the rites of possession and revolt.

The diegesis of *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals that Antoinette’s reaction to patriarchal order is to yield and submit herself to the standards imposed by phallocracy. But, all her attempts at behaving like an English girl or finding an identity fail. The people from whom she seeks recognition find that because of her proximity with the black Creoles, she is more in tune with them than with the white English.

The one who revolts against the patriarchal order is Christophine.

Although she is said to be “*tangential to a narrative written in the interest of the white Creole protagonist*”,⁴³ Christophine can be seen as a defiant character in the role of a self-determining agent in an imperial and phallocentric society. Unlike Antoinette, she is well aware of the workings of the dominant ideology, yet she does not choose to model her life on the requirements of her male-dominated society. The Emancipation Act is enforced, but to her, that has not brought meaningful changes. The ex-slaves are not really free and cannot organise their lives the way they want. They are still oppressed. This excerpt from the novel is very illustrative of how she sees the new community: “No more slavery! She had to laugh! ‘These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people’s feet. New ones worse than old ones – more cunning, that’s all.’”⁴⁴

To resist this phallocratic society with its huge repressive machine, she knows she needs to be courageous. ‘*Women must have spunks (guts) to live in this wicked world*’⁴⁵, she declares. Any form of transgression of the social order will lead to retribution, particularly if it is performed by a woman. Yet Christophine is not going to recede and her determination explodes when she urges Antoinette to stand up and fight in these words: “*Stand up, girl, and dress yourself*.”⁴⁶ Putting a dress here is similar to wearing armour or a bullet-proof jacket as part of a weaponry in a world particularly hostile to women. Christophine’s revolt

⁴² J.R., WSS, p. 69.

⁴³ Spivak, quoted by Carine Mardorossian in her article: Shutting up the Subaltern, ...referred to above.

⁴⁴ I.R. WSS, p. 11

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 63

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.,p.?

takes many forms.

Her first act of resistance against the hegemonic ideology is her absolute refusal to speak like the white oppressors. Christophine speaks the local patois not because she is ignorant and does not master correct English, but because she has chosen to. "*Though she could speak good English if she wanted to, and French as well as patois, she took care to talk as they [the black creoles] talked.*"⁴⁷ By making her speech patterns sound like that of the other coloured people, Christophine does not simply seek to avoid ostracism from the black Jamaicans. She mainly aims at performing a strategic instance of revolt on the linguistic level. Her use of patois sets out to perform a counter-discourse designed to subvert one of the main pillars which sustain the dominant order. Her objective is referred to by Deborah A. Kimmey who says: "*Patois is a counter-language that works in-between language; it privileges informal language over formal grammar. It subverts symbolic systems to create space for new meanings*".

Christophine's resistance is also overtly expressed through her status as an Obeah woman. By showing publicly that she has kept to her negro traditions, she chooses to confront the social order which prohibits such a practice. The prohibition is substantiated by the fact that obeah is identified with poison, with criminality. Christophine's status as an Obeah woman is reinforced by the fact that she speaks a strange language added to her food and clothes which are Martinican, not Jamaican.

Christophine's practice can be accounted for as a source of fear or awe among the Blacks as well as the Whites. Concerning the coloured people, Rhys exemplifies their fright in these words: "*the girls from the bayside who sometimes helped with the washing and the cleaning were terrified of her.*"⁴⁸ As for the other Blacks, out of fear and/or awe, they would have nothing to do with her.

Antoinette and Rochester are undoubtedly deeply influenced by her practice. After their second estrangement, Antoinette seeks the black woman's help to drug her husband and make him come back to her bed. The following day, when Rochester starts feeling nauseous, he assumes that it is Christophine who tries to turn him into a zombi, and as a consequence, he rushes to the priest's ruined house in the forest to stop the effects of the poison his wife administered to him the night before.

Another situation which illustrates the impact of the black nurse's obeah on Rochester is during the verbal confrontation between the two the last time they meet. During their talk, Rochester echoes all Christophine's words as if he were hypnotized. His internalising her interpretation can mean that he is absorbing everything the woman says because he is momentarily invaded by her culture.

Christophine is a defiant character. Her resistance to and subversion of the oppressor's order are more visible in her attitude toward marriage, the institution in which men express best their dominance over women. She is totally against any kind of permanent tie with a male partner as recommended by society. To her, wedlock is a trap and no woman should fall in. The mere fact of hearing Christophine say 'he is my husband' makes her spit over her shoulder to express her revulsion. She has a bad opinion of men; she considers them as domineering, untrustworthy, unreliable and lazy parasites. Here she discloses her mind:

⁴⁸ LR, WSS, p. 7

⁴⁹ Ibid.

*"All women, all colours, nothing but fools. Three children I have. One living in this world, each one has a different father, but no husband, I thank my God. I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man."*⁴⁹ In that statement she appears as a model of female independence and self-reliance who expresses her hostility toward that English patriarchal law which dispossesses women of all their properties to the advantage of men once they are married. She recognises the economic basis of women's independence in society and is very sceptical about the legal system for having lived most of her life as a slave under British law. In her eyes, such a law has been designed to enforce females' dependence on men, and women of any race should combat it because women's oppression by men goes beyond colour lines.

Another form of rebellion against phallocentrism is observable in her attitude toward the Whites' tendency to silence the subaltern. In the book, black characters are so subjugated that they do not voice their minds. They are described in such a way that they seem deprived of the ability to act normally or to formulate any idea. They are just mere shadows, without any identity. Such a representation of the coloured people derives from the fact that on the textual level, the narrative is told by two white people and the external events which are at the origin of black people's ongoing predicament are excised. The narration tends to sympathise with the white Creole at the expense of the coloured people. It obliterates the white Creoles' responsibilities in the history of slavery and overlooks all the actions undertaken by the Blacks to face oppression. The text favours the former white planter's class and does not allow the implied victors to be articulated as victors. Yet an analysis of the subtext inevitably reveals that Christophine is one of the victors. Her battle not to be silenced is brought to the foreground when Anna asks her to find a new dress for the young Antoinette, the one she is wearing being for Tia. This scene reports on Christophine quarrelling with Anna and reveals at the same time the former's strong personality.

When the older Antoinette confesses her problems with her husband, her free will and resiliency explode and she immediately enjoins her to quit him while supporting her suggestion with arguments which, she knows, may hurt the helpless woman. As she later realises that, so subjugated as she is, Antoinette will not undertake any meaningful action to free herself, Christophine decides to talk to Edward. Looking at him straight into the eyes, she voices with words full of contempt and disgust all the grievances she has against him, substantiating each of her arguments with sound evidence. The outcome of her verbal revolt has not been what she expected, but at least, Rochester is forced to identify her as a strong opponent with a distinctive and visible identity.

Through her verbal revolt, Christophine deconstructs the opposition between silence and voice and in so doing, she undermines the way speech is "genderised" while questioning the European phallocratic assumption that the speaker must always be the one in power.

In a nutshell, in the perspective of gender, Antoinette and Christophine do not have the same views. The former adopts a conciliatory attitude and complies with the structure designed by a phallocentric system, while the latter refuses to be subdued. In her own way, she confronts the dominant order. Considering the circumstances from which her resiliency stems, Christophine can be articulated as one of the victors in the battle of the subalterns to regain their dignity.

Conclusion

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* foregrounds a West Indian community in which the social relationships between the characters are entirely determined by race and gender. These two social axes are the sources which foster and nurture the controlling process which attributes power to the White group and silences the Blacks considered as subaltern. England and nineteenth-century racial assumptions are the main referential of the narrative. Consequently races are addressed from an essentialist and nativist perspective. The colonialist discourse at work in the narrative is reinforced by a patriarchal ideology which confers supremacy to men over women. Such a social structure cannot but breed tensions and frustrations which impede mutual understanding and harmony in the community. In the face of this colonialist and phallogocentric system, some characters choose to comply with the prevailing order and conventions, whereas others display defiance and resiliency. In this confrontation, what must be retained is not the outcome, but the intention.

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