

## Double Colonization in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: A Postcolonial Feminist Critique

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### Abstract:

*The English colonial rule of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was undoubtedly based on an unequal power relationship and oppression of a great majority of the people and their lands in the world. The Carribean was one of the countries where the British colonists ruled with all might and sway, badly affecting the lives of its colonized people. Of these colonized people, it was the female colonized who suffered even more due to the additional patriarchal structure imposed on them as well. In this regard, Jean Rhys's novel Wide Sargasso Sea (WSS) presents a faithful and comprehensive critique. For this purpose, first of all, the related literature was reviewed on the concept of double colonization with reference to WSS in light of the relevant views. Next, for the purpose of analysis, the study was delimited to the plight of the main character Antoinette and her mother Annette in light of the various events and discourses from WSS as to how double colonization affected the lives of the aforementioned female characters. On the basis of the analysis, it was found out that double colonization affected Antoinette and Annette by a number of its main aspects and factors, such as, economic exploitation, marriages, otherness, cultural hybridity, and patriarchy, by bringing about their alienation not only from the colonial and patriarchal culture around but also from their own self and life, thus suffering from identity crisis, madness, and finally death.*

**Key words:** alienation, alterity, Black, colonialism, colonization, colonizer, Creole, double colonization, feminist, identity crisis, patriarchy, postcolonial, White

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the Caribbean was a British colony in the late 1830s when *WSS* was set. In fact, it was one of the countries which were severely affected by the British colonialism during the Victorian Age. Slavery remained in practice there along with other British colonies for a long time till it was abolished by the British Parliament in 1833.

The Slavery Abolition Act, however, as Rhys (1982) narrated, worsened the situation for the Creoles, especially the weaker or more vulnerable ones from them, like the maleless and rich families of the female colonized members, due to the newly freed, vengeful, and violent Blacks. As a result, the Creole female colonized suffered the most at the hands of both the White male colonizers from patriarchal Victorian English culture as well as the Black-dominated patriarchal culture around. This sort of blend of colonialism and patriarchy oppressing the women was termed as double colonization by Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford. Against this background, it was observed that *WSS* was perhaps the best postcolonial feminist critique in the sense that it exposed more logically, convincingly, and mesmerizingly than any other novel the worst effects of double colonization on the Creole colonized female characters, particularly the main Antoinette and her mother Annette, including their tragic deaths.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term *Patriarchy* means “the rule of the father” (Wolfreys, Robbins, & Womack, 2006, p. 76). In a broader sense, patriarchy refers to the male supremacy and dominance.

Referring to Rhys's novels, Abel (1979) remarked, "Power is distributed unevenly in Rhys's world. The significant men in her novels have jobs, money, and consequently the power to appropriate women and discard them" (p. 170).

Likewise, *colonialism* also refers to a power relationship that Butt (2013) characterizes as based on "domination, cultural imposition, and exploitation . . . a form of domination which involves the subjugation of one people by another" (p. 2). In similar terms, Wolfreys, Robbins, and Womack (2002) define it as "the manner in which one culture appropriates the land, people and resources of another to further its *imperialist* ends" (p. 22). More specifically, however, it refers to "a lucrative commercial operation, bringing wealth and riches to Western nations through the economic exploitation of others. It was purely for economic profit, reward and riches" (McLeod, 2007, p. 7). To Nayar (2008), colonialism "destroyed native cultures, or altered them significantly" (p. 3).

Historically, the British colonial rule was in full sway and swing in the Victorian era. The British Empire held its sway over a considerable number of colonies and the British nation grew in prosperity. In this connection, Boehmer (1995) observed that "in the late Victorian age the projection of British authority abroad was particularly powerful and far-reaching" (p. 2). While throwing light on the source of the British domination, she further argued that "the English did not establish their power only through military force, but also by imposing British culture" (p. 13).

Both colonialism and patriarchy, in a general sense, are based on an unequal power relationship and oppression. While colonialism is the main concern of the postcolonial thinkers and writers, patriarchy is what the feminists focus on. According to Lundin (2008), feminists focus on the power balance between men and women", while "Postcolonialism focuses on the marginalisation and oppression of women in colonial contexts" (p.2). In collective terms, as McLeod (2000) remarked,

“feminism and postcolonialism share the mutual goal of challenging forms of oppression”(p. 174).

Sometimes, it happens that colonialism co-exists with patriarchy as one oppressor, thus creating a very ruthless exploitation of the female colonized. While the male colonized are oppressed and marginalized by the foreign colonizers, the female ones are even doubly marginalized and doubly oppressed, thus doubly colonized. According to McLeod (2000), “Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford used the phrase ‘Double Colonization’ to refer to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy” (p. 175). Spivak (1989) called these women as female subalterns. She was of the view that “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (pp. 82-83).

In view of the above-mentioned theme, *WSS* is a remarkable postcolonial and feminist text, unveiling the colonial and the patriarchal power structures, otherwise glorified by Charlotte Bronte in her novel *Jane Eyre*. In the words of Lundin (2008):

Wide Sargasso Sea is a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, where Antoinette/Bertha is known as the ‘madwoman in the attic’. *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicts an explanation for Antoinette/Bertha’s troublesome situation and it ends up tragically with the female protagonist’s total deprivation of her freedom. (p. 1)

Viewing the relationship of Antoinette and her husband Mr. Rochester broadly in both patriarchal as well as colonial terms, Lundin further remarked that “the relationship between these two spouses is not only a gender mixed relationship, but also a mixture of different cultures and traditions” (p. 5). Elaborating in a bit more comprehensive terms, O’Connor (1986) observed that “in Rhys’s novel [*WSS*] it [the *Sargasso Sea*] symbolizes the division between whites and blacks, the English and the

West Indian Creoles, hate and love, power and submissiveness, men and women, devils and innocents, and the possessors and the possessed (p. 145).

Overall, *WSS* stands unique in terms of exposing the cause of the suppressed, the repressed and the under-represented, which is fixed by postcolonial, feminist and postmodern critics in their own spheres. It illustrates the worst example of double Colonization perhaps in the whole history of the Caribbean literature in terms of the alienation, identity crisis and the subsequent madness and tragic death of a colonized wife under the colonial and patriarchal rule of a colonizer husband. This dilemma of the loss of identity, which is quite common to every Creole woman in the Caribbean literature, is discussed by O'Callaghan (1993) as:

With neither blackness, nor 'Englishness, nor economic independence to sustain her, [the white Creole woman] is excluded from all groups that matter to her and subjected to cruel paradoxes: having privilege without power; sharing oppression with the solidarity and support of fellow victims . . . the product of two cultures, she is denied and despised by both. (pp. 33-34).

### 3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

*WSS* shows the double colonization of the female Creoles Antoinette and her mother in very elaborate terms by representing a number of factors in this regard. Firstly, all the miseries, plights, and problems of Antoinette and her mother Annette are, by one way or the other, the result of their affiliations to the Whites. Antoinette, the protagonist, is a Creole descended from the colonial plantation owners, and her father has had many children by Negro women. But she is accepted neither by the Negro community nor by the representatives of the colonial centre. As a White Creole, she is nothing. In fact, the very first sentence of the novel hails the arrival of the whites as a bad omen: "They say when the trouble

comes close ranks and so the white people did” (p. 17). Christophine, Antoinette’s surrogate mother, is quite right when she talks about the arrival of the white Luttrells in their neighbourhood by saying: “Trouble walk[s] into the house this day. Trouble walk[s] in” (p. 26). As a matter of fact, all subsequent troubles in the lives of Antoinette and her mother are due to their marriages to the White colonizers.

Secondly, as Antoinette and Annette are Creoles, or lightskinned European descendants born in the Caribbean with mixed racial heritage are the racial “Others” not only for the White colonizers but also for the native black Caribbeans, as expressed by Antoinette: “The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, because she pretty like pretty self Christophane said” (p. 17). In *WSS*, to be a Creole (i.e., a hybrid) is an evil. Antoinette is frequently called a “white cockroach” (pp. 23, 100, 102) by the Blacks on the one hand and “white nigger” (pp. 24, 102) by the Whites on the other hand.. The only friend she has is Tia and we can observe that their friendship is very dubious. One day at the river where Tia and Antoinette go swimming, Tia gets away with the pennies, but also the pretty, clean dress of Antoinette. Antoinette is thereby forced to take Tia’s dirty dress, which can be interpreted as a symbol for her status. In putting on the dirty dress of a black girl, Antoinette is putting on her status. Antoinette has become a “white nigger . . . and black nigger better than white nigger” (p. 24). The suggestion here is that White people, when stripped of money and power, are the social inferiors of the indigenous population.

Thirdly, one of the tactics and the tools used by the colonizers to subjugate the colonizers was the marriage to the wealthy colonized ladies. Even behind such marriages, there were selfish motives of the colonizers. The joy of the innocent Annette just near marriage to Mr. Mason is portrayed by her daughter Antoinette as: “The Luttrells lent her a horse. . . . She was gay and laughing – younger than I had ever seen her” (p.

27). It is, however, revealed later in the novel that Mason married a widow as Annette just for money because his elder brother, according to English law, was entitled to all the property of his father. Besides, the marriage with Mr. Mason creates another kind of fear in Annette regarding the family's new wealth. She starts feeling even more insecure from the antagonistic Black lot living all around. She expresses this fear to Mason as: "The people here hate us. They certainly hate me" (p. 32). Again, in reply to Mr. Mason's advice to think reasonably instead of getting apprehensive of future, she argues with him about the imminent danger from the native, newly-freed vengeful blacks as:

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 every day. (p. 32)

Fourthly, as a Creole woman, Antoinette ironically identifies herself with a different racial group, who rather subjects her and her family to mockery and violence. In fact, Antoinette's relationship to the black population combines hatred and pity, wants of acceptance and desires for separation. As such, we see that when the Blacks set fire to Coulibri and her family is escaping from their burning mansion, Antoinette runs towards Tia. In fact, she is unable to hate the Blacks despite their violent reactions to her presence. Her stubborn remarks are a testimony to it: "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" (p. 45). Pathetically, her anticipation that she could in fact live and thrive among a different race shatters when in response to her struggle to escape and reach Tia, Tia throws a rock that pierces Antoinette's face, causing her to bleed:

When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but 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 if I saw myself like in a looking glass. (p. 45)

This act confirms that Antoinette is not wanted by the black population; she must remain separate and isolated from them, despite her intense desire to gain safety and security among them.

Fifthly, economic factor is also responsible for the existing tensions between the Black and White Creole women of WSS. When Annette marries the rich Mr. Mason, rumours abound that Mr. Mason simply wishes to make money off the Coulibri Estate. There is no sympathy among the Black women, however, and Antoinette is correct in stating: "The black people did not hate us quite so much when we were poor. We were white but we had not escaped and soon we would be dead for we had no money left. What was there to hate" (p. 29)? Likewise, we are told late in WSS that Mr. Rochester marries Antoinette just for money because his elder brother, according to the English Victorian law, is the sole entitled heir to all the property of his father. By thus marrying Antoinette, he not only grabs her wealth but also makes her dependent on him, just like a typical, clever, patriarchal husband. In a letter to his father, Mr. Rochester triumphs over his success in earning money out of his marriage with Antoinette as:

The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her (that must be seen too). I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love. No begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son. (p. 70)

Sixthly, not only Antoinette's Creole heritage but also her sex makes her oppressed, rather doubly oppressed. Right from the start of the novel, Antoinette spends her days in isolation. Her mother spends little time with her, mostly choosing to pace



listlessly on the house's glaciis or paying attention to her son Pierre, who is younger than Antoinette and is ill, but he is looked for more by the suffering mother more likely due to his being the only male in the family. Antoinette narrates: "My mother never asked me where I had been or what I had done" (p. 23). However, it gets worse, rather worst, after her marriage to Mr. Rochester. Being an English man cum cruel husband to Antoinette, Mr. Rochester serves as a double oppressor. Thus, Antoinette always remains an outcast even within her family before as well as after the marriage. The question of Antoinette's cultural heritage is further muddled when her mother marries another Englishman, Mr. Mason. Although Mr. Mason has never owned slaves, and thus is "without a doubt English" (p. 21), yet in rescuing the Cosways, he displaces them further. As a model of English manhood, he alienates the Caribbean-born, ex-slaveholding female Cosways from the land on which they have made their home. Annette, therefore, accuses Mr. Mason of not understanding Black people, of not "recognize[ing] the good in them or the danger" (p. 19). He "[does not] understand at all" (p. 19). In his lack of comprehension, there is a denial of the experiences that have shaped both Antoinette and her mother. Antoinette recognizes this and addressing the English Mason and his race, she proclaims: "none of you understand about us" (p. 18). That is to say, the thoroughly British Mr. Mason cannot possibly understand the hybrid Cosway family.

Seventhly, cultural appropriation imposed on the Creole female colonized badly affects their identity, creating a feeling of estrangement in them. When Mr. Mason arrives, bringing his English way of life, complete with his own servants and "English food . . . beef and mutton, pies and puddings," he forces Antoinette into the mold of "an English girl"— a role so alien that she wonders if it "was better before he came though he'd rescued us from poverty and misery" (pp. 20-21). Likewise, after Antoinette leaves Coulibri and recovers from her illness

and injury, Mr. Mason places her in a convent school. Though Antoinette enjoys her time at the convent school, it is never meant to be a home – only a holding place between childhood and adulthood. Antoinette learns proper European virtues and to “[dress] with modesty”, although her stepfather encourages her learn dancing and embody the gaiety of her West Indian landscape (pp. 34-35). Mr. Mason visits her at the convent, and makes clear his plans for Antoinette – he has “asked some English friends to spend next winter here. . . . One of them will [come]” (p. 35). After that, Antoinette dreams for the second time of wandering through a forest, following a nameless man, and describes it to one of the nuns as taking place “in hell” (p. 36). In the dream, she walks from Coulibri, to the forest, and is unable to “go any further” (p. 36). She is immobile because she has not yet found a place to go. She stumbles on her dress, which can be read as the superimposition of patriarchal ideas of femininity. Thus, “she cannot getup” (p. 36), suggesting that she is paralyzed by the woman she must be.

Eighthly, Mr. Rochester’s role as a colonizer makes Antoinette oppressed by eliminating Antoinette’s identity and turning her into a Victorian English woman – subservient and subjugated. He explains to Antoinette why he calls her Bertha: “it is a name I’m particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha” (p. 86). By calling her Bertha, he alienates her from her West Indian identity and forces a British identity upon her instead. He tries to create a woman whom he can control, dominate and possess. Antoinette resents at this, and wants her husband to stop calling her Bertha: “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name” (pp. 94-95).

Ninthly, Annette’s family, which enjoyed great prestige in the past, is struck by poverty very badly after the death of Mr. Cosway, Annette’s husband. Over this, as Antoinette remarks, “The black people stood about in groups to jeer at her, especially after her riding clothes grew shabby” (p. 18).

Therefore, Annette has to marry Mr. Mason for her survival in the patriarchal social set up prevailing all around. According to Olausson (1992), she represents the gender-ideology in the patriarchal economic system and that the only weapon in her hand by which she can get security is her unrivalled beauty.

Finally, as one of the “reigning technique” (Berit As, as cited in Lundin, 2008, p. 8), Mr. Rochester complains that his wife Antoinette/Bertha has left him thirsty, showing annoyance with her wherewith to pressurize her to completely submit herself to him. Rather, he expresses profound resentment that he was tricked into marriage with her:

They bought me, me with your paltry money. You helped them do it. You deceived me, betrayed me, and you'll do worse if you get the chance. . . . If I was bound for hell let it be hell. No more false heavens. No more damned magic. You hate me and I hate you. . . . I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness. (p. 111)

Ultimately, the destruction and alienation of Antoinette's identity leads to her “madness”. Being turned into someone else and losing the only place where she has felt happiness and safety, gives her nothing to identify with. She turns inward and goes “mad”.

## CONCLUSION

From the above analysis of *WSS*, it becomes evident that double colonization affects Antoinette and Annette in the worst manner so that not only their identities keep on changing, that is, from Annette Cosway to Annette Mason, and Antoinette Cosway to Antoinette Mason to Antoinette Rochester to Bertha, but they ultimately lose self and life so tragically, all resulting from ten main emanating factors associated to the colonialism and patriarchy casting a double effect on these powerless Creole female colonized, such as, their Creole/hybrid identity, their

treatment as racial Others by both the Whites as well as the Blacks, their marriages to White colonizers, their misidentification with a different racial group (i.e. the Blacks), their inherited money, their female gender, cultural imposition on them by the colonizer husbands, elimination of their West Indian identity by the colonizer husbands, their beauty, and annoyance with them by the colonizer husbands used as a reigning technique.

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