



IDENTITY OF THE FEMININE CREOLE IN JEAN RHYS'S NOVEL-WIDE SARGASSO SEA

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ABSTRACT

The current article briefly discusses the identity of the feminine Creole in Jean Rhys's novel Wide Sargasso Sea. The article begins with a brief introduction that presents the novel as a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's novel Jane Eyre. The focus is on the voice of women who suffers patriarchy by such colonialist husbands as Rochester. The article then analyzes the identity of Antionette as a creole woman. Her husband's consistent attempts at changing her identity from a Creole into an English woman ultimately lead her to madness and then death. Finally, the article ends with the conclusion which sums up the fact that the voice of the creole Antionette overcomes both madness and death.

KEY WORDS

Feminine, identity, Creole, patriarchy, colonialism.

Introduction

The feminine identity is one of the crucial issues to the postcolonial discourse. Many literary works follow the formation of women's identity and the construction of their subjectivity in colonizing patriarchal societies. Such works adopt appropriation to subvert the prioritization of the male point of view that categorizes women as inferiors. Among many narratives, Jean Rhys's novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, centers around unfolding the struggle between the feminine identity and patriarchy under the influence of colonialism. This novel is a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre and the female character Antionette simulates Bronte's female Bertha Mason. Jane is the heroine who must be placed in an opposite post to Mr. Rochester's insane wife Bertha Mason. In fact, Jane's placement in such a position will include Rhys's reworked female heroine Antoinette too. Rhys focuses on a feminist voice that should be given to "the mad woman in the attic" and which must be carefully listened to. One should ask about this Creole woman and why she has gone mad and ended with death. This seems a fair question to the individual and collective mind as far as the social domain is concerned.

The Creole Woman Antoinette

A complete piece of narrative has been given to Bronte's Bertha through the characterization of Rhys's Antoinette as she lives in an experimental and cultural dilemma of being a white Creole woman of the West Indies. She finds herself entrapped in a prison which resembles a patriarchal society, emancipation reversed actions and reactions, and racial hatred to her Creole identity. The door of the prison, symbolically, is strongly locked by her husband Rochester to whom Rhys does not give a name.

However, his identity has been discovered in relation to Charlotte Bronte's male character Rochester. The unnamed man appears as such on purpose because Rhys's goal is after releasing her heroine's muted voice otherwise truth will be hidden forever. Mr. Rochester's mad wife, in both novels, has the right to be visible and heard simultaneously. It is time, for the other side, to be revealed and carefully examined by all of those who merely knew Bertha as a crazy wife locked in the attic.

The Creole in Charlotte Bronte's novel is a lay figure-repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive which does. She is necessary to the plot, but always shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry – off stage. For me (and for you I hope) she should be right on stage. She must be at least plausible with a past, the reason why Mr. Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, even the reason why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad. (Rhys, Letters, p. 156).

Rhys's female character, namely, Antoinette narrates the other side of the story, "There is always the other side, always!" (Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, p. 101). No matter how this other side is dark, there should be an eye to observe what is going on in this darkness. The first part of the novel authorizes Antoinette to show her childhood as it really is on both the individual level and the social one. Isolation is the only thing she knows about her life. The post Emancipation period has left many plantations and estates owners to poverty as the case is with Coulibri the estate of Antoinette's late father. Her mother Annette is negatively influenced by poverty and the sickness of her mentally disabled brother Pierre. No chance is available for Antoinette to be a part of her mother's care and attention since the latter devotes herself to take care of her brother. No man runs the family and so the mother takes the responsibility for playing the double role of father and mother. The absence of the masculine supporter in their family may lead Annette to focus on her son along with his pitiful condition. It is probably the reason why Antoinette feels the gap between herself and her mother. The idea of depending on the father to be the provider of the family is something different from the patriarchal perspective of a society that is dominated by man's authority where woman cannot find her own self, on the contrary, women are found to be lost in such society just like Antoinette. Actually, men themselves may also fall to their patriarchal perspectives. Besides the collapse of Antoinette's dead father, their neighbor Mr. Luttrell commits suicide for losing his wealth after Emancipation which has already promised to compensate him later but it failed.

The heroine states that she is very familiar to alienation but strange to the others, "I got used to a solitary life," (Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, p. 2). This personal isolation seems to have another kind of isolation that is the cultural one. Her turbulent cultural identity always shakes and her mother realizes this problematic fact. The first violation Antoinette the child witnesses is the poisoning of her mother's horse, which is a dangerous sign for excluding them from society, "Now we are marooned.", her mother said (Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, p. 2). She also uses the racial word "nigger" and then she hears such racial words as "white nigger" from her black skin friend Tia who has just stolen her money, and "white cockroach" from other children. All of these linguistic racial uses are imposed by the nature of their multicultural society which used to be run by Colonialism. Nature and animals are central to the Caribbean life due to the natural environment of the land geography. So, they usually represent themselves or others by nature in which (the word nature) feminine references can be concluded. Antoinette describes their garden or as an archaic orchard, "There was grass on each side of the path and trees and shadows of trees and sometimes a bright bush of flowers."(Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, p. 48). Yet, that orchard which is similar to Antoinette no longer exists. Sometimes, she looks at the

octopus-like tree which remains lonely and no one approaches it. She resembles her loneliness to the nature solitude.

Antoinette experiences the most vicious dilemma, not only as a woman, but as a white Creole as well. She has to confront hegemony against the Creole. She is torn apart by the ideologies of the colonizers and the colonized respectively. To both, she is “the colored” woman; neither white nor black, neither African nor European (Roy-Fequiere, p.136). She represents a whole society which has to deal with the same threats that her body and soul face by patriarchy (Ruiz, p.13). Setting her family house on fire, her brother’s death, and her mother’s consequent insanity are constantly painful memories that she cannot overcome so far. The crisis, indeed, develops when she gets married to the English man Rochester who is originally unnamed and given this name later on. Antoinette’s feminist identity sinks gradually in her husband’s ideology. Antony Trollope gives an overwhelming feature to English men that no matter a huge success they can achieve in Jamaica, no matter how long they stay there, they regard England their only home unlike the Frenchman who regards the spot on which he fixes as his home (The Routledge Research Companion to Anthony Trollope, p. 97). The third generation Jamaicans who never left the Caribbean always refer to England as home regardless how much success they achieved in the Caribbean. Rochester’s hatred to the place turns to be parallel to his hatred for Antoinette, “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” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 141). He admits that he does not look at her as a wife, but as a stranger “I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love.... she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did.” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 69). The English masculinity and Creole femininity go against harmony at the expense of Antoinette’s identity and life. However, she still seeks stability in her marriage as she objects to Christophe’s suggestion to abandon him “But I cannot go. He is my husband after all.” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.84).

The creole woman is to be faced with the patriarchal domination to its largest extent. For Rochester, Antoinette is just a means through which money can be secured. He is thirsty to her as an heiress not as a woman. According the England’s law, Antoinette’s property, her inheritance from Mr. Mason, should submit to her husband’s authority. Even law is unjust to her as the English law authorizes the husband to have control over his wife’s property. This is the case with Antoinette’s and Rochester’s marriage. Her hesitant reaction on the wedding day foreshadows her future crisis throughout a marriage which is settled to serve the husband’s profit.

Rhys tells that “The Creole is of course the important one. I’m fighting mad to tell her story” (Rhys, *Letters*, p.157). The Creole voice must finally be released. Although madness is used as the carrier of this feminist voice, the echo of this voice proves its significance and weight publicly. Rhys portrays the dilemma of being the self while otherness occupies a large space in Antoinette’s life. She is a part of a decaying colonial aristocracy on one hand and threatened by the colonized along with the enslaved on the other. She is falling apart before the repressive marginalization and patriarchy altogether. Rochester refuses to admit Antoinette’s difference. According to the English husband, the creole wife has “long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent may be, but they are not English or European either.” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 44). By renaming Antoinette Bertha, Rochester ignores his wife’s Creole identity and attempts to impose his Englishness upon her for ‘Bertha’ is an English woman’s name. Antoinette, in return, refuses the English name by saying “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me someone else, calling me by another name.” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 118).

He manipulates Antoinette in order to lose her individual self and imposes a compulsory resignation of her identity.

Antoinette's Creole nature makes her difficult to be understood by other characters too. Even Christophine finds Antoinette's identity hard to be identifiable when trying to attract Rochester's attention towards his wife. She tells Rochester that "[Antoinette] is not béké [a white colonist] like you, but she is béké, and not like us either" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.125). Nevertheless, such a Creole rebels against all expectations and barriers. The creole's dilemma increases due to a society in which classification is crucial. Therefore, her refusal to be categorized in this society causes her rejection and isolation. So, Rochester takes upon himself to classify and categorize his wife through suppressing her rebellious rejection of the barrier between being normal and being insane. Imprisonment inevitably restrains Antoinette's feminine voice against Rochester but it becomes a global voice at the end.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rhys provides a realistic view of the Creole woman's identity in relation to the male-female relationship which seems to undergo hybrid and multicultural conflicts. Women like Antoinette have to go through various kinds of identity detraction. The otherness of the heroine causes collision with the male power which comes to make both man and woman incapable of reconciling their perspectives. As a result, Antoinette's identity is led to destruction and death as the open end of the novel suggests. However, her death releases the voice of the Creole woman that defeats the patriarchal colonial power at the end.

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