



Postcolonial Issues in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract

The gradual demise of the colonial empires in the twentieth century paved ways for writers in the decolonized societies to pen experiences of the colonized for the world. This paper will discuss on the poignant issues highlighted by Jean Rhys in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* and will also confer the writer's intentions on stressing these issues in her novel.

Key words: Post-colonialism, colonized, decolonized, slavery, displacement, dominance.

Postcolonial era is prudently the period when the wrath of colonialism came to an end in most of the colonised countries. It was during that time when many works started getting published by decolonized writers, stating the bittersweet memories of their experiences from the colonial regime. Those pieces of literature published after the colonial rule is referred to as postcolonial literature. However, in the world of postcolonial literature, the name of a British woman writer Jean Rhys is printed in gold. She has written novels for at least two crucial periods in the literary history.

Published in the year 1966, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is considered as Rhys' masterpiece contribution to the era of postcolonial literature. The novel is regarded as the prequel of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and is regarded as the most intensively studied and insistently explored English novels. It has captured the world's attention and aroused a heated discussion among the literature circle. *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be categorized under myriad perspectives namely, a feminist criticism, post-colonial criticism or a perspective of a double decolonization. This paper intends to shed light on three major issues; slavery, male dominance and

displacement as highlighted by Rhys in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It will also discuss the writer's intentions on stressing these issues in her novel.

Slavery tends to be a pertinent issue for many countries around the globe. It had been there for centuries but was at a higher degree during the time of colonialism. People of inferior race were deemed as slaves and were beaten up for issues that were not necessarily of concern at many a times. In the novel, there is a constant rift between the Creoles and the Jamaicans. The black people continue to serve the Creoles even after the passing of Emancipation Act in 1833 (Şenel). Part one of the novel shed light on the ex-slaves who had worked on the sugarcane plantations of the rich Creoles. Although the Emancipation Act had freed the slaves when Antoinette was still a child, the compensation of the black workers on the island was overdue and the servants were still ill-treated by their white employers.

Moreover, it all boils down at the beginning of the novel where the Jamaican slaves are portrayed as enraged beings, upset for many reasons. This is evident in the lines "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people

did. But we were not in their ranks" (pg. 3). Also, there are traits of hybridity linking to slavery in the novel as well. For example, Christophine tends to stand apart from the other Jamaican servants because she is initially from the French Caribbean island of Martinique. Therefore, there is a large population who belong to the mixed race because white slave owners in the Caribbean and other parts of the colonised countries were infamous for sexually abusing and impregnating female slaves (Şenel). Sandi and Daniel Cosway, two of Alexander Cosway's illegitimate children are also examples of hybridity in the colonised communities.

In the colonial era, it was common for white rulers to sexually abuse the female slaves as there was little to no say for the enslaved. White people looked at the slaves as objects of pleasure, entertainment and as beings who were only born to serve them and their plantations. The whites exploited their slaves in every possible way before and even after the Emancipation Act was passed. In the early nineteenth century when colonialism was intact, along with slavery and other issues, gender issues including women oppression was nothing new. Rhys also explores on the theme of women's subjugation to male authority in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In the novel, female characters are introduced as feeble beings who are dependent on men around them for legal, sexual and financial securities. When Antoinette's father passes away, her mother relies on her second marriage to bring back her status in the society. She wants to escape from Coulibri and regain status amongst her friends.

The men in the novel can be categorized as ultimate opportunists who use their wives as a key to access wealth. Both Annette and Antoinette are dependent on men near to them like children depending on their parents for things. Antoinette, for example, is unable to free herself from Rochester's brutality because she has no financial independence; when she married him all of the money in her dowry was given to him without condition or stipulation. Rochester tries to be in control and oppress Antoinette by changing her identity. This is evident in the lines "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name" (31). It is apparent that

Rochester's dominance and power comes from patriarchal and colonial ideology, thus making him a double colonizer (Fann). Rochester has control of Antoinette's assets, oppresses her by changing her identity, and labels her mad. Therefore, with the possible exception of Christophine, men deprive all of the female characters in the text of their agency, something Rhys clearly finds deplorable (Gilchrist). The mother-daughter duo get married to Englishmen in hopes of appeasing their fears but the men betray and abandon them. It is the dependency and childlike reliance on men that leads to Annette and Antoinette's madness followed by death.

In her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys presents the idea of a lack of belonging in the character of Antoinette; although she was born and raised in the Caribbean, she never felt like she belonged there. This was due to the fact that she grew up in a society that treated her poorly, and this drove her to become a loner. The main characters experience displacement and are deeply affected by it, such that it influences their behaviour and daily life. For Antoinette, although she was born and raised in the Caribbean, she never felt like she belonged as she was Creole; and as for her husband, he felt displaced as he had travelled hundreds of miles from the comforts of his home country to a foreign one which was a strange new world to him, with neither relatives nor close friends.

Furthermore, Antoinette's husband Rochester, had no one that he could relate to regarding his emotions, and as a person deemed a powerful Western man, he had to keep his emotions in check and not reveal them to the public gaze. He felt like a stranger in his wife's country and threatened in a foreign land. This is evident in the lines "I feel very much a stranger here," I said. 'I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side (p. 82). The aforesaid dialogue displays evidence of Rochester's feelings of discomfort in an alien country. A person experiencing a sense of not belonging characterizes the concept of displacement, which comes under the theory of post-colonialism (Jamal, Singh and Mani). Thus, the novel revolves around the issue of displacement of many characters just like a plant being uprooted and replanted on a foreign land away from its locale.

Hence, the European colonizers felt displaced when they were in a foreign land, and especially when their sense of superiority was decreasing. Also, it can be stated that people were deeply affected by colonization and had started to feel alienated in their own country, because of the emerging cultures and lifestyles of their colonizers, which threatened to oust theirs. However, it can also be said that the colonizers also felt displaced in the colonies that seemed completely foreign to them, and no matter how long they lived there, the feeling of displacement would linger on.

Wide Sargasso Sea is the magnum opus of the prolific writer Jean Rhys which gave her recognition as well as garnered praises for her contribution to the world of post-colonial literature. Like her other novels, *Wide Sargasso Sea* also introduces us with Rhys' yet another female character who is intertwined in the themes of oppression, male dominance and victimization. The novel also deals with many poignant issues that were pertinent in the post-emancipation era. These issues are related to Rhys' personal experiences to some extent (Barber-Williams). For example, her great-grandfather was a slave owner and she experienced backlash at times for being a Creole. She denied the fact that she was a white and identified herself as a black most of the times.

However, Rhys also depicted the female dependence on men around them as one of the issues in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Similarly, this trend can be linked with Rhys' personal life, whereby in her lifetime, Rhys constantly moved on and remarried three times after separating from her spouses either legally or due to death. Hence, one can easily say that her novels are a depiction of her experiences. All these issues were pertinent in the postcolonial era and Rhys belonging to that era, made it even easier for her to step into the shoes of the characters from her novels and pen the details with accuracy.

Rhys, with the help of her colonial Caribbean background, paved her way into the world of literature with an idea of sharing her modernist styles and themes via her literary works. She managed to link her texts with the readers by introducing modern themes like destitution,

marginalized identities, alienation, oppression and quest for freedom. Disruptions of empires and colonial migration were constant subtexts in most of her works. Rhys herself felt displaced when she first reached to England. This constituent is seen in her first novel *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), where the main character Anna is depicted as a young girl from the West Indies being alienated in England. The colonial era has ended but the misfortune of that period remains fresh in our minds due to the various postcolonial texts that depicted apt details and issues in an ingenious way for the readers. The postcolonial writers have brilliantly kept that era alive via their texts and other literary contributions. Jean Rhys is no different. Her text *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicts many postcolonial yet modern issues that many can relate to. She has penned the novel by reconciling the plot with her own experiences. Issues such as slavery, male dominance and displacement are still part of our world but at different levels. The novel is widely studied across colleges and universities due to its depth and relevancy to the era till date.

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