



## For the Drifting Sargasso Finds Its Way: Loss and Reconstruction of Antoinette's Identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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### Abstract

Adopting the applied techniques and methods of comparative literature, the postcolonial, the feminist and the psychosocial theories, this paper comes in contact with two literary works through spotlighting the external forces that can be supportive and encouraging on the one hand but undermining and discouraging the two protagonists' long and arduous search for an identity and an independent self on the other. The paper investigates the similarities and differences in these two literary works to discover how the two writers correspond to the search of identity of the two protagonists' in the two different novels. In addition, this paper also scrutinizes the way of the struggles that these female protagonists display to achieve their respective goals. Upon penetrating into the novels, each protagonist alights on herself in a distinctive manner depending on the state of affairs and the external forces that thoroughly determines the construction or destruction of her identity in full measure. In fact, they have picked what they want. They care to have a world of their own where there shall be their own choices of life style, terms and decisions.

**Key words:** *Wide Sargasso Sea*; *Jane Eyre*; Jean Rhys; Patriarchy; Crisis of Identity; Reconstruction of Identity

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### INTRODUCTION

*Wide Sargasso Sea*, first published in 1966, is the most successful novel of Jean Rhys. As the so-called prequel of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, Rhys takes Rochester's mad wife Bertha Rochester, namely Antoinette as she was once called, to be the main female character in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette is born in Jamaica, but she is not a black Jamaican, she is white Creole who shares white descent with the Europeans. This novel traces the whole life of Antoinette, from her childhood in Jamaica to her unhappy marriage to Edward Rochester, an English imposter who marries her only for her fortune. Rochester's unfaithfulness and cheating bring Antoinette great pain in their later marriage, which, finally results in Antoinette's insanity. Rochester takes Antoinette back to England with the excuse of offering treatment for her illness. However, as soon as they arrive in Rochester's mansion, Antoinette loses her freedom and is trapped by Rochester in the attic room. Since then, she becomes the so-called madwoman who we can also meet in *Jane Eyre*.

The novel depicts Antoinette's tragic life, and her experience of losing and struggling for the reconstruction of her identity. Clara Thomas vividly describes Antoinette's loss and reconstruction in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when she cites the OED, and she points out that "there is in each ocean a Sargasso into which all drift matter finds its way" (qtd. in Curtis 187). Antoinette's fragmented identity is the result of her being excluded by black Jamaicans from Jamaican society. Then, tragically, she also fails to establish any sense of belonging to the European society. To be a woman without any stable identity, she lives her life in a state of insecurity and becomes rootless and helpless. When she finally establishes some degree of her own identity, accordingly, she completes her epiphany. At the end of this novel, Antoinette wakes up from her last dream and she is outside holding a candle in the dark passage, thinking about set a fire to light her in the darkness. The author

leaves an open ending in this novel, however, it can be seen that Antoinette actually knows who she is and what to do already. Hence, she accomplishes the epiphany.

By using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this paper will focus on Antoinette's action to establish her identity in different period of her life, and analyze her struggle from the feminist approach. As one of the most famous feminist critics, Butler adopts the constructivist position and argues that gender is performative. She insists identity is actually not an interior essence, but something "performative", which is to say, the strategy of identity construction constitutes various performative acts. She claims that "the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler, 173). The construction of gendered identity cannot fall apart from social environment, and those certain social norms greatly limit women's behaviors and shape their identity. For Antoinette in the novel, she at first follows those social norms, which in general, women in her society are not allowed to break. Nevertheless, Antoinette gradually realizes her oppressed position in that society, and she tries to fight back against those unequal rules and the society powered by male.

The analysis will focus on two main themes: the loss and reconstruction of Antoinette's identity. The first part of my study will deal with the causes which lead to Antoinette's loss of wholeness. Three main factors are suggested as being responsible for this loss, her family, the Jamaican community and world of white people-England. Antoinette's childhood is negatively affected by her mother's mental instability, her brother's death, and the incompleteness of the family. Even when she grows up, the terror from insecure feeling still exists deep in her mind, and never vanishes. Her hybrid identity as a white nigger brings her trouble too. Since she is neither black nor white, she is doomed to be marginalized by both communities. Antoinette suffers from her fragmented, marginalized existence, and she has little opportunity in shaping a stable identity.

In the second part of my study, the reconstruction of Antoinette's identity will be discussed. The society she lives in causes her great harm, both physically and psychologically, yet some people offer her help and motives her development too. Jan Curtis argues that "Rhys heroine overcomes the Sargasso and discovers her strength in a fallen world of fractured consciousness and failed relationships" (Curtis 187) by overcoming what Wilson Harris describes as the "need in the world to provide a material nexus to bind the spirit of the universe" (qtd. Curtis 187). Antoinette receives help and the sense of security mostly from black females, but not any family member or people from the more civilized white country. When the male dominated world imposes oppression on her, or cheats on her, only black females

step up to help her out. Although this help is not enough to be the powerful solidarity she needs to rescue her from the oppression, she is inspired by their struggle, and she finally takes action to fight back. Hence, the reconstruction of her identity which has been mentioned before is finally carrying out.

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## PREVIOUS STUDIES

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Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been subject to studies mostly from postcolonial and feminism approach. From a feminist perspective, the whole life of Antoinette, as described in the novel, can be considered as a narration of her struggle against male power, and Antoinette becomes a "heroine" to scholars. According to previous studies from feminism standpoints, more scholars focus on comparative analysis between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*, while some of the rest are more interested in Antoinette's life experiences and her struggle for a stable identity. Furthermore, connection between Antoinette's fragmented identity and the West Indian circumstance she lives in is discussed by some scholars as well.

Antoinette, the main female character in the novel, is always interpreted as a heroine who struggles against "oppressive patriarchal forces" (Mardorossian 81). Elaine Showalter argues that "Rhys vividly portrays a young woman's struggle against male dominance (as well as her personal confrontation with British imperialism)" (Mills 95). Caroline Rody highlights Antoinette's last scene in the fire as "doomed but triumphant, torch in hand" and "advances in furious opposition to her pre-scripted fate" (Rody 217). In these studies, Antoinette is interpreted as a heroine who defeats male domination by her sacrifice.

However, Carine Melkom Mardorossian then states that "the interpretation of feminist novels as the struggle of a heroine against oppressive patriarchal forces was soon scrutinized and criticized for positing a distinctive and essential female condition and ignoring the varied circumstances of women's oppression" (Mardorossian 81). In her article, she relates *Wide Sargasso Sea* with feminist criticism since the second wave, in order to explore "the interrelations of sex and nationalities in Rhys's writing" (Mardorossian 81). According to Mardorossian, "A new paradigm examining the articulation of gender along the axes of race, class, and nationality emerged and effectively displaced previous interpretations of the Antoinette/Rochester dyad in *Wide Sargasso Sea*" (Mardorossian 81).

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## THE LOSS OF ANTOINETTE'S IDENTITY AND WHOLENESS

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Antoinette's story in *Wide Sargasso Sea* begins against an unstable historical background which takes place, approximately after the emancipation of the slaves succeeds in Jamaica which was once British-owned

Jamaica. During that period, with the abolishment of slavery, West Indian plantations fell into a temporary state of ruin (Burrows 28). After that, the empire gradually collapses, with the old colonial order disappearing as a following consequence. White people are not the only who hold power, for those former Jamaican slaves recapture Jamaica into their control again. As Antoinette lives in such an unstable social and political condition, she is not able to establish her identity in the normal way within Jamaican community.

In accordance with Jacques Lacan's theory of "the other", the establishment of self-identification is the foundation of people's existence in the world. Children's primary psychology activities appear in the way which is similar to the way staring themselves in the mirror, they can only see reflections of themselves as wholeness. During the mirror-stage, one person gradually starts establishing his/her self-identification. Then after the person goes through the mirror-stage, the reflection of his/her self-identification comes not only from the reflection in the mirror, but also from other people, from the whole images of their languages and behaviors. Thus, people establish their own identities and seek for wholeness by watching their own reflections in other people's eyes.

In the novel, the establishment of Antoinette's identity is greatly affected by her fragmented family structure and the unstable social circumstance. Antoinette is born and grows up in an environment without either political or social stability. At the opening part of the novel, she simply narrates the circumstances they live under, as expressed as follows: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (Rhys 9). Long-term oppression accumulates the anger of post-slaves, so even when they are free, they cannot let go the trauma caused by colonization. The black Jamaicans cannot include the Creole, because they inherit white descent from their cruel colonizing ancestors. On the other hand, as Mardorossian suggests, "The white Creoles' lack of co-operation with and degrading of the black labor-force defeated the possibility of an alliance between the two as well as the completion of the creative process of Creolization" (Mardorossian 88). Living in such a complex society, Antoinette's self-identity cannot be well-shaped, at least not in a normal way.

## ANTOINETTE'S SENSE OF INSECURITY

Antoinette's family plays an important role in shaping her identity in her early age, while it also takes her sense of security away. Antoinette takes her mother and the fragmented family as a mirror, from which she can watch her own reflection and know how she should act. Antoinette's family is fragmented even since the beginning of the novel, and her childhood is covered with negative influence from this family. She lives with her

mother and a disabled brother, especially when her mother is not a woman with a strong personality, their life can only be even harder. The tough situation in Antoinette's family evokes her sense of insecurity which impacts her life a lot.

Antoinette's mother is the one who provides her great influence through all her life, even since her childhood, but she is not a good role model for Antoinette because she also lacks a stable identity. At the very beginning of the novel, the first thing Antoinette mentions about her mother is "she was my father's second wife, far too young for him they thought, and, worse still, a Martinique girl" (Rhys 9). From this short introduction about Antoinette's mother, her image as a poor, repressed woman is depicted. Name is of great importance for one person, because it is the basic element of one's identity. However, the mother's name is not mentioned at all. Her identity which can be recognized here is only a wife, a young mother, or a Martinique girl. She has only one friend, a woman called Maillotte, who is also not a Jamaican. In addition to Maillotte, she has little contact with people outside of their house. After her son Pierre becomes sick, her loneliness even increases, since "at last she refused to leave the house at all" (Rhys 10). She is poor, she is lonely, she is even not confident at all, yet the most important thing is that she lacks a real identity. Antoinette describes her mother as follows, "my mother still planned and hope- perhaps she had to hope everytime she passed a looking glass" (Rhys 10). She fails to establish her identity, even she always hopes to.

After Antoinette's father dies, her mother loses the person she can depend on, and their life becomes worse. She could have chosen to be a strong woman and be brave enough to support the whole family, however, she takes the option of doing nothing but passively waiting for a turn in her life. She keeps silence like her voice is repressed. Three different languages, French, English and patois, can be spoken by her, but she always has "a quiet voice and a quiet laugh", and she "took care to talk as they talked" (Rhys 12). Since Antoinette is a young girl, she lives in the same solitary life with this silent mother, which offers her the sense of isolation and teaches her how to compromise to the reality. She is the first one which young Antoinette adopts as the role model, thus her lack of a stable identity impacts the process of Antoinette's negotiation when she grows up. Her second marriage is with the purpose of seeking for protection from the man she marries to, and her attitude more or less influences Antoinette's marriage to Rochester too. It leads Antoinette's passive attitude of waiting for Rochester's protection and comfort at the beginning of their marriage, while this marriage cannot really fulfill her expectation of living peacefully with a stable identity.

Antoinette's sense of insecurity, mostly, comes from the neglect and isolation that her family imposes on her.

As a young girl, she longs for her mother's love and protection, while she actually gets none of them. Once she tries to smooth the frown between her mother's eyebrows, but her mother pushes her away as soon as she touches her forehead. Antoinette describes her mother's reaction like "not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she has decided once and for all that I was useless to her" (Rhys 11). She prefers to sit with Pierre, rather than Antoinette. She would only say "let me alone" in a loud voice to Antoinette which makes her afraid. She acts differently, in the way which is opposite to other mothers. Instead of carrying love and bringing protection to Antoinette, she rejects her daughter. Antoinette needs concern which normally a mother should offer to the children, but her wish can hardly be fulfilled, except when her mother falls asleep, and she is able to get closer to her as she describes in the novel: "Once I made excuse to be near her when she brushes her hair, a soft black cloak to cover me, hide me, keep me safe" (Rhys 13). Antoinette's sense of security appears in some brief moments, and then disappears in her life, as she says, "But not any longer. Not any more" (Rhys 13). Eventually, her sense of insecurity does not vanish yet.

### ANTOINETTE'S IDENTITY DILEMMA

Antoinette's identity dilemma comes from conflicts which exist between white people and black people, between former colonizer and former colonized slaves in the novel. Having been impacted by these sharp conflicts, Antoinette's family and she are both not welcomed by local Jamaicans and they appear as weak ones in that society. On the one hand, Jamaicans consider people like Antoinette as descendants of white colonizers, and they are not welcomed. On the other hands, white people exclude white niggers, since they keep the sense of superiority and look down upon people born with dark skins. Hence, Antoinette cannot achieve her identity under the unstable cultural background from either Jamaican or the white people's community, which leads her to identity dilemma.

Antoinette's cultural identity is hybrid, thus, she cannot fit in the cultural background which she grows up in. In the novel, Antoinette's awkward position in Jamaican community is described, as follows, "I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches" (Rhys 13). The metaphor of white cockroach is an important one in the novel, and it actually shows up more than one time. Once Antoinette is followed by a little girl who is singing "Go away white cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you. Go away" (Rhys 13). Moreover, after Antoinette marries Rochester, the servant Amelie also sings a song of white cockroach, which is:

"The white cockroach she marry

The white cockroach she marry  
The white cockroach she buy young man  
The white cockroach she marry." (Rhys 60)

Antoinette is even laughed by a little girl and the servant, thus she totally loses her superiority among Jamaican people. Her position in this community is the same as a "white cockroach", which owns white skin but has no power, just a poor cockroach lives in-between and everybody can totally despise.

Antoinette shares the white descent with those white Europeans, but they never really admit her as one of their community, which results in her unhappy marriage with Rochester. At the beginning of the novel, Antoinette distinguishes her difference to people from the white group, by claiming that "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (Rhys 9). By saying those words, Antoinette draws a line between white Creole and those Europeans. She considers Europeans as "the other", while she stands for "the self". "The self" and "the other" exist at the same time, while they stand on opposite sides and are not able to include each other.

The marriage between Antoinette and Rochester does not help Antoinette to find her a stable identity and provide her the sense of security, but destroys the fragmented identity she once had and finally drives her insane. The same as how Antoinette distinguishes her and the Jamaican community, Antoinette sets a boundary between her and Rochester, a boundary between the Creole and the white European. For Antoinette, Rochester is a white man who may provide her protection and a sense of security, especially after the horrible fire which sends her brother to death and turns her mother a mad woman. However, on the other hand, Rochester considers Antoinette as nothing more than a shortcut for him to get the fortune and be a successful rich man in colony. Rochester does not care about Antoinette, at least not in the normal way of treating the wife. According to Rochester, Antoinette is one of the European descendants who lose both fortune and status, and become pathetic in the colony. He sees the image of white loser on Antoinette, thus, he cannot really treat her equally as a family member. He claims in the second part of the novel, "I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did" (Rhys 55). Thus, the marriage between Antoinette and Rochester does not take her any positive effect to help Antoinette construct her identity in the social circumstance she lives in.

Rochester terribly corners Antoinette in her identity dilemma, on both psychological and physical perspectives. Rochester takes her money, which actually reflects the unfair treatment to woman in the marriage. According to the social norm which is believed by people at that time, after one woman marries a man, her wealth no longer



belongs to her, but belongs to her husband. Once the woman loses her control over the fortune, she actually becomes the one under her husband's rule without any financial backup. In the novel, after Antoinette marries Rochester and loses her fortune, she can no longer control her own life. Rochester divests her freedom by trapping her in the attic, cheats on her by having sexual relationship with another woman, and silences her by calling her mad woman and rejecting the credence of what she says.

In addition, Rochester divests her name, one of the most essential elements of her identity, and turns her into another person. Antoinette cannot help keeping her real name, which is actually a symbol represents her divested identity after she moves to England with Rochester. After they get married, Rochester does not call her Antoinette any more, but Bertha, a new name created by him. Since Antoinette is one of "the other" which is out of Rochester's control, he has to rename her with a new name that he feels more familiar with. The name "Antoinette" has the pronunciation of Creole language, while "Bertha" is absolutely a British name. With this change, Rochester intends to change Antoinette to an obedient wife and imposes oppression on her by using men's power. As the consequence, once Antoinette shows her acquiesce, she loses her control over her own life and can only be ruled. At the end, she is not even Bertha, but only a mad woman in the attic. Because of Rochester, Antoinette finally loses her mind, as well as her fragmented identity.

## ANTOINETTE'S STRUGGLE FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HER IDENTITY

Antoinette makes effort to find out the real identity of her own for all her life, although she does not really get a stable identity and complete her reconstruction of identity until the end of the novel. On the one hand, she questions the existence of herself, and tries to find a definition for her identity. On the other hand, she receives help from other females in her life. Both of her own effort and help which is due to the female solidarity, support Antoinette's explore for the reconstruction of her identity.

Since the reflection about her image from other people's angles cannot provide her the answer when she questions who she really is, she tries to figure her identity out from reflection in the real mirrors. After her house is burnt down like a terrible disaster, her family is destroyed by that, and she is been sending to the convent. She can hardly find a mirror in the convent, which in fact hints her loss after she loses the only shelter she used to have, her fragmented family. Before this disaster, she at least has a brother and a mother, although they do not care about her. After this disaster happens, she has no identity, even the unstable identity she owns before, and that is why she cannot find a mirror and see her own reflection. In the third part of the novel, when she is already trapped in the

attic, she talks with herself like this: "There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now" (Rhys 107). At this moment, she already realizes that her identity is devised and she knows nothing about herself. Take the mirror as an important metaphor of Antoinette's self-consciousness, she gradually wakes up and realizes her suffering from the oppression that her husband and people around her have given her.

Antoinette is not obedient to Rochester completely, and she struggles through questioning her identity directly. She asks Rochester like this:

"That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder how I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all." (Rhys 61)

When she says these words to Rochester, she actually knows clearly about her awkward position between white people and Jamaicans, and she shows a strong wish to find a place that she really belongs to. However, the reality is that she is trapped by Rochester in England, the place she has no real relation with. They take everything she has, her money, her freedom, her fragmented identity, and also her name. Until the end of the novel, she finally knows that she has to stop being oppressed and do something to fight back. She tells herself "Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I" (Rhys 107). Moreover, she also realizes the reason why she becomes nobody, "They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them. We lost our way to England" (Rhys 107). She has always been seeking for her identity, and now, she knows why she cannot get one since she lost the connection between her and her motherland, Jamaica. In her last dream at the end of the novel, she goes back to Jamaica, the place she was born and grew up in. At that time, she knows which group she really belongs to and where she can gain her real identity.

During the time Antoinette struggles for her identity, she receives help from other female characters in the novel, especially from the black girl Tia who grows up with her. It cannot be said that Tia treats Antoinette as a real friend, since Tia actually sees her as a white nigger and looks down upon her. But Tia to Antoinette is always a shelter or someone who makes her feel safer. After their house is burnt down, she escapes with her family and sees Tia standing beside the road. The first thing she wants to do is running to Tia and stay with her. It can be seen that Tia exists as someone who can make her feel safe when she encounters disasters. At the end of the novel, she sees Tia in her last dream. It is a symbol that she longs for the sense of security from other female characters, and this help makes her brave and get the decision of fighting back.

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## CONCLUSION

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In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the story ends up with an open ending, the moment before Antoinette sets the fire in Rochester's house. Although Antoinette can either be setting up the fire as revenge to the society which oppresses her or failing to do so, she gets her search for the lost identity done and knows what to do. The whole life of Antoinette is changeable and without any senses of security. She is born and grows up in the unstable political and social circumstance, which makes her like a drifting Sargasso being far away from the homeland. Even until the end of the novel, there is no clear answer for the question if she accomplishes the reconstruction of her identity or not. However, she already clearly knows which community she has to belong, the Jamaican community. In that way, Antoinette finishes her drifting and finds the direction which she should take. Just as what she claims at the end of the novel, "There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage" (Rhys 112). Antoinette finally completes her epiphany and finds a way escaping from all the oppressions she suffers, through the fire which will send her to death. She refuses to be trapped by social norms and to repeat those performative gender acts. In that way, her struggle is ended up with her fight back against the men's power and social norm once shaped her and turned her nobody.

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