

Rhetoric of Post-Colonial Mindset in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*¹

Rajiv Niroula

Abstract

This paper examines the rhetoric of post-colonial mentality, mindset and attitude in Jean Rhys's novel Wide Sargasso Sea and looks at how the writer is not aloof from the colonial mindset. Drawing on insights and postulations from Gayatri Spivak's post-colonialism and Lee Erwin's new-historicism, this article analyzes the imperial discourse in the novel. Although the writer shows her narrator being close to black people as a Creole woman, the writer's closeness to the imperial mindset is evident throughout the novel. This paper concludes that by creating a certain distance from the ex-slaves, the writer is not able to fully liberate herself from her imperial mindset. Although the writer tries to affiliate herself with the ex-slaves, she however remains within her own culture, that is, culture of Creole.

Keywords: Colonial discourse, Imperialism, Representation, Slaves, Colonial mindset

Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* published in 1966, takes place in colonized Jamaica and mainly deals with the issues such as identity and inequality as the product of French and British colonization in the Caribbean. Rhys completed and published this novel during an era of widespread decolonization. The 1960s was the era when many formerly colonized countries in the Caribbean got political independence from British Colonialism. Jamaica, Trinidad, and Tobago got independence from Britain in 1962, and Barbados in 1966, the year *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published. Rhys is mainly concerned with the issues such as identity and alienation that the newly independent countries were facing just after their emancipation from the British colonialism. She also wrote during

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Rajiv Niroula, Lecturer, KIST College, Kamalpokhari Kathmandu, Nepal

Email: rajeev.niroula@gmail.com

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the time when there was the influence of “first-wave” feminism in the United States and Europe. Therefore, one can notice the undercurrents of feminism in her writing. Many of the reasons for Annette’s and then Antoinette’s unhappiness in the novel are the product of the inequalities between male and female. Among many other issues, second-wave feminism brought into the spotlight de facto, or unofficial, inequalities, such as domestic gender roles and standards of beauty, which are also thematic subjects of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

This novel carries a typical narrative style that she employs Antoinette, her husband (presumably Mr. Rochester) and again Antoinette in the first, second and the third part respectively. In the first part, Antoinette’s life is described. She lives with her mother, Annette, her friend Tia, her servants Christophine, Saas and others. Antoinette’s life is described as being in a destitute of wealth. Similarly, this first part consists of Antoinette’s living with her step- father Mr. Mason; her teaching in a convent house; her mother’s disappearance from her home; her childhood memories playing with her friend Tia. Second part entails the arrival of Mr. Rochester (although his name is not given but inferred from *Jane Eyre*) and his marriage with Antoinette. Mr. Rochester comes to know about the madness that the family members of Antoinette suffer from through the letter sent by Denial Cosway, Antoinette’s step brother. Similarly, in the third part, Antoinette narrates her story in England where she is taken in by Mr. Rochester in order to heal her so called madness. The novel comes to an end when Antoinette comes to realize that England is not a place of emancipation as claimed by her husband Mr. Rochester rather it is a 'cold and dark' place.

Although the novelist’s position seems to critique the imperialism as poised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the novel is filled with racist discourse. What is the politics behind the use of the rhetoric of racist discourse? Why does the writer even if being a Creole favors the slaves in Jamaica that it seems to produce her position ambivalent? The answer of such questions is not easy to infer.

The novel has been interpreted with various perspectives such as critique of imperialism by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; exchange of the two native voices of Creole and black servant by Banita Parry; historical perspective by Lee Erwin; race and Caribbean culture as thematic of liberation by Sandra Drake and others. The novel as

seen by Spivak (1996) is a critique of imperialism as she comments in article entitled “*Wide Sargasso Sea* and A Critique of Imperialism”:

I suggested that, in contradiction to reopen the epistemic fracture of imperialism without succumbing to a nostalgia for lost origins, the critic must turn to the archives of imperialist governance ... I would hope that an informed critique of imperialism, granted some attention of readers in the First world, will at least expand the frontiers of the politics of reading. (p. 246)

The aforementioned paragraph tells us that Spivak is very much critical of archives of imperialist governance. She urges for begetting knowledge on the part of the First World readers regarding the Indian women's widow sacrifice system. She connects "the most powerful suggestion in *Wide Sargasso Sea* that *Jane Eyre* can be read as the orchestration and the staging of the self-immolation of Bertha Mason as good wife" (p. 2) with the Hindu Sati system and therefore posits that the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the most powerfully a critique of imperialism.

The literary text is the production of socio-historical event of the particular society and people. At this juncture, *Wide Sargasso Sea* can also be critiqued from the view point of location of historicity. However, Sandra Drake (1996) sees the novel as having inter-textual referentiality of *Jane Eyre* as she remarks:

The novel stands on its own. I could have been written without the relationship of inter-textual referentiality of *Jane Eyre*. But this level of literary inter-textual referentiality invokes and is paralleled by the extra textual referentiality to Europe's historical narrative ... So too does *Wide Sargasso Sea* have a European origin reference point *Jane Eyre*. (p. 194)

Moreover, Drake posits that even if the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be written bereft of inter-textual referentiality of *Jane Eyre*. Such extra-textual referentiality to Europe has always the influence over the literacy and historiographical representation of the colonized country. Thus, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is closely connected with the inter-textual referentiality to *Jane Eyre*.

I differ from the two above mentioned criticism on *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I will look into the text from a different perspective. I will rely on critical discourse analysis method

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of Paul Gee. Similarly, I will draw on the theoretical aspects of political rhetoric espoused by Martin Reisigl. The aspect of female agency in the novel is so prominent that it is intricately embedded in imperial rhetorical representation of female agency. Alessandra Duranti's concept of agency in language is crucial thus will be taken into consideration while analyzing the novel.

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* bears the imperial overtones in its use of language. Although Rhys presents Antoinette as being close to newly emancipated slaves, being a Creole girl, she cannot be fully detached from her imperial mindset. She uses such a language that reflects her hangover with the colonial discourse to manipulate and subjugate the freed slaves— Christophine, Sass, Tia and others. The novel deserves a lot of attention in its use of racist discourse, rhetoric of politics, analytical categories of language. Antoinette cleverly presents her mother ' a Martinique girl' with 'worse' attribute. Annette as 'Martinique girl' is considered as a rival to English Colonialism since Martinique was a French colony in 1839 and Jamaica was an English colony. This shows that outside the English colonial influence if anyone (here Annette) hails from he/she is negatively represented.

Further, in the novel, Antoinette shows the atrocity of English law that Mr. Luttrell was "gone for always" (p. 9) due to the false promise of the compensation of the English rulers. Similarly, the writer presents Antoinette compare her familial situation when she says, "no one came near us" (p. 10). She locates her space within and among the black people and creates a distance with the black people. This is further aggravated when the black people "jeer at her" (p. 10) mother implying her mother who is 'marooned' among the black people.

Antoinette's projection of her mother among the black people might have, to a large extent causes her create a kind of negative mindset. It is reflected in her addressing Christophine, her black servant as having 'quite voice' and 'quite laugh.' She further shows her imperial rhetoric when she abhors the 'Patois songs' of Christophine. 'Patois' the term is derogative in its content. Christophine's affiliation with such songs renders her a negative nomination and Antoinette calls her 'negro.' This negative stereotypical construction of Christophine is further evidenced due to her existence as a 'wedding present' to Annette. This negative representation of Christophine as being 'negro' and 'wedding present' is a negative nomination as argued by Martin Reisigl. It is sheer loss of

her individual identity. Antoinette is called as 'white cockroaches' by the black people. This description shows the conflict-ridden relationship between Antoinette and her black servants.

Antoinette's superiority as being a Creole is further highlighted when he feels indignant towards Godfrey and calls him 'rascal' because he simply does not know how to be kind to the old people. Antoinette's vanity is reflected here because of her imperial mindset to get bowed by the slaves. Tia, a black ex-slave girl in the novel, is ascribed with black stereotypical discourse since Tia endures fire and "sharp stones didn't hurt her bare feet" (p. 13) as if she is not a human being at all. She is represented as not being influenced by fire and sharp stones. Further ahead, Antoinette represents her mother's negative attitude towards the clothes of Tia when she says, "Throw away that thing. Burn it" (p. 15). This attitude reflects the negative attitude of Annette.

Similarly, the writer represents Christophine as being a woman who performs obeah- a system of belief and practices, African in origin, through which a practitioner works to gain for her/his client's success, money, love, cures for illness, and protection as well as cause trouble for the client's enemies. Similarly, Mr. Manson, Antoinette's step father grapples with his wife taking into consideration negative discourse addressed to black people. He says, "didn't you fly at me like a little wild cat when I said nigger. Not nigger, nor even negro. Black people I must say" (p. 19). He ascribes the feature black cat to the black people denuding the black people of their real identity to be called black people. The ambivalent mindset is evident in the remarks of Antoinette when she longs for both her own culture and get hold of black way of life. She says, "I was glad to be like an English girl but I missed the task of Christophine's cooking" (p. 21). The politics of Antoinette is clear here since she desires to make Christophine forever her servant but Christophine is now a free woman when she readies to leave Antoinette's home. Christophine asserts:

I see enough trouble,' she said.' I have right to my rest. I have my house that your mother give me so long ago and I have my garden and my son to work for me. A lazy boy but I make him work. Too besides the young master don't like me, and perhaps I don't like him work. If I stay here, I bring trouble and bone of contention in your house. (p. 60)

Here, Christophine shows her free will to do away with Antoinette's monopoly and she asserts her identity. Her black female agency is revealed through her remarks. Similarly, Antoinette's husband Mr. Rochester is depicted as an emperor of the colonial Empire which subtly hints at the writer's congenial approach towards the British Empire. Mr. Rochester is described "like a king, an emperor" (p. 43). This shows the positive predication on the part of Mr. Rochester, proposed by Martin Reisigl. Similarly, the writer presents the arrival of Mr. Rochester embedded in politics of colonial mission. His imperial rhetoric assumes his arrival not for genuine mission to civilize the colonized as disseminated in colonial discourses; it is rather to earn property and power. Emphasizing the intention and desire of Rochester's earning property and power by marrying Antonette, he states:

It was all very brightly coloured, very strange, but it meant nothing to me. Nor did she, the girl I was to marry. When at last I met her I bowed, smiled, kissed her hand, danced with her. I played the part I was expected to play. She never had anything to do with me at all... But I must have given a faultless performance. (p. 45)

Thus, Mr. Rochester played the entire role that he had to play in order to win property and power; it is done through marrying Antoinette. Mr. Rochester has such a positive value towards the slave owners that he calls them 'benevolent.' Further, when he is rejected by Antoinette to marry, his colonial vanity erupts and he goes after finding the reason behind her refusal, "I did not relish going to back o England in the role of rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl. I must certainly know why?" (p. 146). His remark shows how arrogant he is that he is determined to know the reason behind her refusal to pacify his colonial arrogance. Later, when Mr. Rochester marries Antoinette and knows about the so-called madness she is endowed with, he again inferiorizes her addressing her as 'Bertha.' This addressing suggests the madness that Berth suffers from in *Jane Eyre*. Antoinette is contextualized in relation to this Berth character derived from *Jane Eyre* of Charlotte Bronte. Bertha is a mad woman in *Jane Eyre* and Mr. Rochester calls Antoinette as Bertha referring her as a mad woman. This is a negative nomination as categorized by Reisigl.

Alessandro Duranti (2006), when talking about agency, asserts that "by speaking we establish a reality that has at least the potential for affecting whoever happens to be

listening to us"(p. 451). In line with this view, Antoinette asserts her agency when she converses with her husband Mr. Rochester. However, Antonitte argues 'You have no right,' she said fiercely. "You have no right to ask questions about my mother and then refuse to listen to my answer. Of course I will listen; of course we can talk now, if that is what you wish" (p. 78). Such remark suggests that Antoinette is strongly showing her agency as a powerful woman who can make Mr. Rochester listen her voice. Similarly, the writer's imperial motives are ripe when she represents Mr. Rochester as being possessive of Antoinette and carries her to Britain. He takes her as her possession: "she is mad but mine, mine" (p. 99). Towards the end of the novel Antoinette presents herself as losing her identity as a woman from Jamaica and identifies herself as woman in England. At the same time, her identity drifts towards a woman from England where the writer really inhabits as she mentions in the following way:

I remember watching myself brush my hair and how many eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago, when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us- hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I? (p. 107)

Consequently, Antoinette's real identity shifts towards an English woman, which is the real identity of the writer. Such episode suggests that she ultimately locates herself within imperial England. Her colonial English identity is further consolidated by her lascivious behavior with Sande. At this background, Antonitte also agrees:

Sandi often came to see me when that man was away and when that man was away and when I went out driving I would meet him. I could go out driving then. The servants knew, but none of them told. Now there was no time left so we kissed each other in that stupid room...once to say good bye. (p. 110)

The paragraph suggests Antoinette that she shows a kind of immoral relationship with Sandy that can be her typical nefarious behavior towards Sandy. This kind of behavior is reflective of typical lascivious western culture that is hardly the culture of the Caribbean.

To sum up, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* when interpreted using James Paul Gee's critical discourse analysis method along with Martin Reisigl's political rhetoric

and Alessandro Duranti's agency in language implies that the writer is in complicity with the rhetoric of Empire. The Imperial discourse, use of language all render validity that the novel is the writer's close affinity with the imperial mission to subjugate the black people. Similarly, the writer uses the language that carries the discourse which reflects the agency of female subjectivity. The writer however uses such a language in order to bring the subjectivity of her female characters within the control of Antoinette her female narrator. Although the writer shows her narrator being close to black people as a Creole woman, the writer shows her closeness to the imperial mindset. This is clearly evident from the use of language that Antoinette uses while treating her black servant and friend Christophine and Tia. Similarly, Antoinette's marriage with an Englishman Mr. Rochester and her subsequent stay in Britain hint her slant for the colonial culture that the writer inhabits.

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