

The Symbolic Meaning of Antoinette's Death in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract: This paper explores the symbolic meaning of Antoinette's death in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*[1], situating it within the broader contexts of colonialism, gender oppression, and identity fragmentation. Drawing on Rhys's own Creole background, the analysis demonstrates how Antoinette embodies the cultural margins of white Creoles who are rejected by both European and Caribbean societies. Antoinette's tragic fate not only represents the silencing of marginalized women under patriarchal and imperial power, but also dramatizes the destructive consequences of cultural hybridity and displacement. By deconstructing imperial discourse and giving voice to the colonized female subject, Rhys critiques the oppressive structures of empire while reclaiming the silenced narrative of Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. "That Bertha Mason becomes the narrative subject implicitly sets Jean Rhys and her text in opposition to her nineteenth-century literary predecessor Charlotte Brontë, and her text." [2] Ultimately, Antoinette's death functions as a symbolic act of resistance and self-assertion, highlighting her contribution to postcolonial feminist literature and her challenge to dominant narratives of race, gender, and identity.

Keywords: Post-Colonialism; Feminism; Identity; Symbolism

1. Introduction

Jane Rhys (1890-1979), one of the prominent female novelists of the 20th century in England, was born in Dominica, a Caribbean region. Her father was a Welsh doctor, and her mother was a third-generation Dominican Creole with Scottish ancestry. From birth, Jane Rhys was marked by their cultural heritage as a white Creole born in a colony. On the one hand, she faced rejection from mainstream European white society, and on

the other hand, she couldn't gain recognition from the black population in the Caribbean. Based on this complex dual identity, Jane Rhys expresses not only concern for marginalized women but also raises a voice against imperialism and colonialism in her works.

Based on her own experience as a Creole, Jane Rhys reshapes the internal journey of white Creole individuals seeking self-identity in "*Wide Sargasso Sea*" and satirizes and deconstructs the imperial authority constructed through central discourse. "Oppositions-such as those between self and other, feminine and masculine, black and white, fiction and history-abound in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*" [3] It highlight Antoinette's fragmented identity and reinforce her symbolic role as a figure of postcolonial displacement and feminist resistance. These elements are central to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and directly resonate with this paper's focus on Antoinette's death symbolic meaning she embodies: as a Creole woman situated between colonizer and colonized, and as a female figure caught between patriarchal control and her own desire for agency. By foregrounding such oppositions, the novel exposes the cultural, racial, and gendered tensions that shape Antoinette's fate, thereby underscoring the significance of her character as a symbol of postcolonial displacement and feminist resistance. Critics of colonial discourse argue that when Europeans arrived in colonies, they "looted and plundered everything they could carry back and described and recorded the world according to their understanding." Jane Rhys aims to break the monopoly of central discourse and the distortion of the colonies, rewriting the erased history and advocating for the marginalized people to reclaim their voices. This novel, referred to as a prequel to "*Jane Eyre*", transforms the marginalized character of Bertha Mason, who was confined to the attic in the original work, into the central figure of Rhys's narrative under the new name of Antoinette. It

depicts the lonely childhood and tragic marriage of the protagonist Antoinette, providing a re-imagined and extended story of “Jane Eyre.”

2. Colonialism, Gender Oppression, and Patriarchal Domination Antoinette Suffered

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is divided into three parts. the first part centers on Antoinette's childhood in Jamaica, portraying her isolation as a Creole girl after the emancipation of slaves, her mother's mental instability, and the decline of her family's social standing. the second part focuses on Antoinette's arranged marriage to an unnamed English man. It depicts cultural misunderstandings, power struggles, and growing alienation, ultimately leading to Antoinette's betrayal and mental disintegration. the third part, set in England, presents Antoinette as a confined figure in Thornfield Hall's attic. This section is crucial, as it transforms her into the “madwoman” of Jane Eyre, but Rhys re-imagines her not as a mere Gothic stereotype but as a tragic symbol of colonial displacement and silenced female subjectivity. Her final act of setting fire to the house becomes both a gesture of destruction and a reclaiming of agency, underscoring the novel's feminist and postcolonial critiques. In this part, Antoinette, in her dream, sets the entire house on fire with a candle. “Thus, when Antoinette dreams her dream for the third and last time, in Thornfield Hall, she cries out to Christophine for help and sees that she has ‘been helped’ by ‘a wall of fire’-and we know from Jane Eyre that Rochester loses exactly what he ‘chose’ to lose.” [4] The question arises as to why Antoinette must choose death. Antoinette's death in *Wide Sargasso Sea* holds multiple layers of symbolic meaning. It represents her struggle with identity and feelings of isolation, highlights the oppression embedded in gender roles and power dynamics, and explores themes of environment and madness. “Rhys's Antoinette Cosway must navigate her way through these treacherous landscapes of Creole and English identity.” [5] Firstly, Antoinette's death is linked to her identity and sense of isolation. As a mixed-race individual in the Caribbean region, she occupies a marginalized position in society. She is neither fully accepted as white nor embraced as black, leading to confusion and conflict regarding her identity; secondly, Antoinette's death is intertwined with gender roles and power. In the novel, she is oppressed and controlled by male

characters, particularly her husband, Rochester. Her marriage is built on inequality and the deprivation of her autonomy, with her emotional needs disregarded and suppressed. Her death can be interpreted as a resistance against these restrictions and oppressions, also symbolizing the limitations and injustices faced by women in that society; lastly, Antoinette's death is connected to themes of environment and madness. the novel depicts the harsh and desolate conditions of the Caribbean where Antoinette resides. This environment symbolizes disorder, chaos, and madness. Her death can be seen as a result of her inability to adapt to this environment and resist its influence.

3. The Symbolism of Antoinette's Death

At the moment of her death, Antoinette cries out the name “Tia” instead of “Rochester,” indicating that Jane Rhys, in her re-imagining, is more concerned with the identity crisis faced by Antoinette as a white Creole. Identity, both in literature and philosophy, is always the most important factor as it forms the basis of one's existence and survival. the weakening of the collective identity of the Creole community is the result of the suppression by two towering forces: colonialism and patriarchy. the absence of this collective sense of identity is the primary cause behind the death of the character Antoinette in Rhys's portrayal, as the long-term absence of collective recognition from the external world often triggers an internal struggle to achieve self-identity. Another significant symbolic meaning lies in Antoinette's portrayal as the “Other.” Her appearance and cultural background set her apart from the British colonizers. She is seen as an outsider and labeled as “mad.” Her death can be seen as the complete elimination of her otherness and heterogeneity. the demise of the third character implies that those who do not conform to the dominant cultural standards within the framework of colonialism are marginalized, oppressed, or even destroyed.

This novel criticizes imperialism and colonialism, carrying profound postcolonial implications, and thus, the oppression of women by a patriarchal society takes a secondary role. Therefore, Antoinette's choice of death in Jane Rhys's portrayal is not only to uphold the spirit of the character Jane Eyre but also to seek liberation from the multiple oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy. It symbolizes a

ruthless critique of imperialism, revealing the harmful effects of colonialism, and feudalistic societal hierarchies, and holds deeper social significance. Antoinette setting the estate on fire and perishing in the flames represents a form of resolute pursuit without compromise. It can be said that Antoinette's death can also be seen as a response to colonialism, where 19th century Jamaica was under the influence of British colonial rule. Antoinette's family was once part of the island's aristocracy, but they lost their status and wealth as colonialism declined. Her death can be interpreted as a protest and resistance against destructive colonialism. She becomes a victim of colonialism, oppressed and deprived of power and freedom, ultimately leading to a tragic outcome.

The protagonist, Antoinette, experiences a rebirth after the fire, finding a reason for her existence and a sense of belonging, and reconstructing her identity. The ending reveals the imprints of society and the era on the protagonist, expressing a sense of mystery, and a profound connection to destiny. In conclusion, the death of Antoinette carries multiple layers of symbolic meaning. It represents resistance against colonialism, reveals the fate of being an "Other," and reflects the loss of self-identity and psychological disintegration. The tragic outcome of this character prompts readers to deeply reflect on the impact of colonialism and the realities of injustice.

4. Conclusion

Antoinette is not only a female figure disciplined by colonial discourse and patriarchal structure, but also a complex symbol of the interweaving of colonial history and gender oppression. Her silence and madness are not only the collapse of her individual identity, but also a silent accusation against the dual violence of colonialism and patriarchy. Through the image of Antoinette, Jean Rhys reveals the power logic behind the binary oppositions such as "self" and "other", "reason" and "madness", "colonizer" and "colonized", thereby deconstructing the traditional Western literary narrative of the "mad woman". This point makes Antoinette no longer

merely a prehistory figure of the "mad woman in the attic" in Charlotte Brontë's novel, but a subject endowed with a brand-new right to speak. Her symbolic significance lies in demonstrating the predicament of marginal identity, while also pointing to the resistance against a single narrative. Antoinette's ultimate downfall is not simply destruction, but symbolizes that the suppressed voice has gained a deafening sense of existence through an extreme way. Therefore, the value of this novel lies not only in providing supplementary narratives to classic texts, but also in revealing the complexity of female identity in the postcolonial context, reflecting how literature becomes a field of power and resistance. Antoinette's tragic ending ultimately elevates into a call for diverse voices, reminding us that we must re-examine the relationship between center and periphery, discourse and silence in history and literature.

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