

# The Origin of Antoinette's Tragedy in Wild Sargasso Sea: Oppression from Colonialism and Patriarchy

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**Abstract:** Wild Sargasso Sea is a classical work that deconstructs and rewrites the antagonist, the madwoman in the attic, in Jane Eyre. Jane Rhys describes Bertha's whole life misfortune from her childhood, marriage, to final miserable death through her vocal representation of her silence, criticizes female's oppression and devastation under colonialism and patriarchal society, reveals the process in which female gradually lose themselves and their marginalized female consciousness. This paper attempts to analyze Wild Sargasso Sea through the perspectives of postcolonialism and feminism, to explore that colonialism and patriarchy are the real roots of heroine's tragedy.

**Keywords:** Wild Sargasso Sea; Colonialism; Patriarchy; Feminism

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## 1. Introduction

As a creole writer, Jane Rhys wanders in colony, the West Indies, in her whole life though she left Dominica to pursue her education in England in 1907. She spent most of her life in small, remote village, she never considered herself to be English and reminded throughout her life an incisive and bitter critic of what she perceived to be English values. In this marginalized area, she keeps a clear mind that creole women suffer a lot from the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. Jane Rhys subverts traditional narrative mode of fiction focused on male, pays more attention on female's inner feeling and thoughts, affirms existence of female subjective consciousness, rereads traditional classics from female's perspective, oversets female's image with male prejudice, makes women say their words by writing their life experience. Based on her rich experience of the colonial culture of the West Indies, Jane Rhys represents Bertha's own life, identity and words in Wild Sargasso Sea, and gives her own name---Antoinette who speaks and tells her own story to explore creole women's miserable life under colonialism and patriarchal society which deprive their right of speech and obliterate their subjective existence.

## 2. The oppression from colonialism

Antoinette was born in a colonial era, in which colonialism was declining with the disintegration of slavery in 19th century. But the dissolution of slavery didn't mitigate strained relationships between the black and the white. Colonialism had been embedded in everyone's heart, includes white and black. Just like Edward W. Said have said in Culture and Imperialism, "imperialism did not end, did not suddenly become 'past', once decolonization had set in motion the dismantling of the classical empires"<sup>[1]</sup>. So colonialism did. The black's hatred for the white was like tropical scene in the West Indies, which developed gradually brightly and glaringly. Colonial consciousness did not only exist in white, but also existed in black for their hatred for colonialism. They called creole who struggled in colony white cockroach and begun to revenge, vented their hatred against the descendants of farmers who were troubled a lot in colony like Antoinette. They burnt Antoinette's home, which took away her little brother's life and caused her mother lose her mind. All these made Antoinette lack of a sense of security in her childhood. As a creole woman, she was detested by local black and scorned by white from Europe. Thus she became a woman in colony, the West Indie, beside the center of the Europe.

She was regarded as evil colonist by the local black meanwhile uncultivated "the other" by the white from Europe. She did not know where she belonged to and her real identity for her existence was meaningless. She lost in her way to find her female identity. Traditional colonial crime was undertaken by this vulnerable creole woman. She lived between black's detest and white's disdain, struggled in creaks repelled by society<sup>[2]</sup>. Tia threw stones to attack her when she wanted to make friends with her. Rochester imprisoned her when she hoped to become a real noble English gentlewoman. Colonialism mercilessly strangled her in her imagined rosy castle. Even she also became a ruthless murder to kill herself for she once imagined England as the center of the colonial world and heaven of smothery happiness. In fact Antoinette was abandoned by her cognate, who regarded creole as "the other". Rochester's indifference and hostility to her were ultimately

the results of relentless colonialism. His control and possession of Antoinette is essentially a symbol of British colonists' colonial rule of the West Indies. He thought that Antoinette was unreasonable as much flamboyant and fiery island, an alien without sense, a white nigger. When he finished Daniel Cosway's letter, he was not surprised about what Daniel Cosway had said in letter and doubtless believed that Antoinette was a madwoman for she wasn't a pure noble white European but a savage creole. He found an excellent but indecent excuse to desolate Antoinette, thus that accelerated the process of Antoinette's tragedy. In Rochester's eye, she was like a virgin land, which could bring great wealth to him. So his occupation of her was like colonists' occupation of colony.

### 3. The oppression from patriarchy

Brutal colonialism is social origin that brings Antoinette miserable fate and patriarchy is one of the main causes of her failed marriage with Rochester. Her stepfather married her to Rochester---a British aristocrat with a dream about making money, paying thirty thousand pounds as dowry. It proves that this marriage is a complete pecuniary exchange. "Dear Father. The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her(that must be seen to). I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love. No begging letters, no mean request....."<sup>[3]</sup> Rochester benefits a lot from this marriage. She is like goods sold by her stepfather and bought by Rochester by selling his soul. Rochester married her only for her wealth and carnal desire, but not for love. In the second part of *Wild Sargasso Sea*, Rochester described a scene when they were spending their honeymoon, "a great many moths and beetles found their way into the room, flew into the candles and fell dead on the tablecloth. Amelie swept them up with a crumb brush. Uselessly. More moths and beetles came."□(Wild: 47) Actually these moths symbolize Antoinette's and Rochester's fate in patriarchal society. Flying into candles involuntarily indicates that both Rochester and Antoinette can't get rid of the trick of fate. For Rochester, he has to accept this creole woman as his wife for her money and his own benefit though he doesn't like her, he would like to watch her flying into candles and destroy herself. For Antoinette, moths represent her spirit to pursue light though she knows that she will be destroyed devastatingly. As time goes by, Rochester gradually reveals his grim face so that the relationship between them and their marriage fall apart. As a disadvantaged individual, Antoinette wants to resist and change the whole social ideology, but she fails because of the deep-seated patriarchy. She uses her death to make the world hear her hoarse voice rather than to escape from the world<sup>[4]</sup>.

Jane Rhys describes conflict between Rochester and Antoinette several times to reveal hypocrisy and despicable essence of the patriarchy. In the beginning of *Wild Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's desire to live a peaceful and happy life is represented by Jane Rhys. Her mother's misfortune reflects creole women are bitterly suppressed in a subordinative place in colonial patriarchal society, makes her live in a miserable shadow. They are under control and arranged by man, play a domestic role expected by man. In order to get rid of the control and decide her own future independently, Antoinette doesn't lower her head before her husband, which annoys Rochester and fortifies his dissatisfaction towards her. He regards her as an stranger and hates her buying his soul.

Antoinette hopes that she would jump out of the patriarchal society after meeting Rochester. But the oppression from patriarchy dose not disappear after marrying Rochester, Antoinette is still a marginalized figure under the shadow of patriarchy, suffering a lot. One of the most sufferings is that Rochester names her Bertha. In the development of history, one's name is given by father. So it proves that Rochester--her husband represents patriarchy continuously oppresses and torments Antoinette. He attempts to make her a compliant English wife and a domestic angle. He gives her a life that she dislikes and resists ,which foreshadows Bertha's misfortune and results in her ten years' imprison. But she doesn't give up, she persistently declares that Bertha is not my name, you want to make me become another person by giving me this name. She glows like a wild animal in the midnight so that she is regarded as a ghost in Thornfield Manor. In patriarchal society, hysteria is regarded as female disease. But from feminism's point of view, hysteria is a special method to resist patriarchal society in which female are treated as sexual objects whose desire are suppressed, try to fight against oppression through their hysteria and body. She sets fire to burn down the attic that imprisons her and Thornfield Manor which symbolizes colonial rule and patriarchy, like local black burned her home on island, indicates her intransigence towards patriarchy and declares Rochester's failure to control Antoinette<sup>[5]</sup>. His failure symbolizes the great British Empire's failure to conquer the West Indies where they lose their face.

The victims in traditional patriarchal marriage are not only female but also male. Under traditional patriarchy, female are required to be

obedience meanwhile male are required to be strong and dominate female. But Rochester, a pure noble British man, has to bow before a creole woman for her money and shamefully begs her to marry him. Antoinette clearly has the commanding power over Rochester that makes him anxious and shakes his strong, white and arrogant image. In this embarrassing situation, he tries to knock her down to enhance his male position of power. He regains his upper class status by relying on a creole woman's property but hates her in return for she takes away his marriage freedom and deprives his supreme status before female. The oppression from patriarchy upon Rochester leads Antoinette's tragic fate indirectly.

#### 4. Conclusion

Women's literature has been interweaved with western feminism and racial discrimination for a long time. In patriarchal society, the voice of female's expression of idea is actually oppressed and restricted by narrative form formulated by male, female's narrative voice is not only an issue about technique, but also about conflict among social ideology<sup>[6]</sup>.

Jane Rhys portrays the madwoman in the attic as a real and flesh figure. She gives her name---Antoinette, uses first-person narrative perspective to challenge male narrative perspective and tells her own story in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She reveals the whole process in which a marginalized creole woman who lives between suzerain culture and colonized culture loses her right of speech and is murdered consciously, that makes people sympathize with this kind, sensitive and passionate woman. In her last dream, she dreams Tia and that man who calls her Bertha, she chooses Tia and jumps towards her. Her reaction in this dream shows that she gives up Rochester who symbolizes colonialism and patriarchal society, but select Tia who symbolizes black culture for she is heavily beaten down by colonialism and patriarchal society. That rosy magic England falls apart piece by piece in her dream as well as in real life. Antoinette is imprisoned from identity, marriage, love, and finally to body and soul. Every imprisonment is strongly associated with social environment at that time. Sometimes female want to resist, but because of that deep-rooted ideological imprisonment, they fail obviously. Thus female identity is their fatal injury at that time. So she sacrifices her life to shake off this kind of imprisonment and to express her own female words.

Antoinette's tragic life is rooted in the traditional powerful patriarchy and colonialism. But at the same time, she represents her resistance against patriarchal marriage and European-centered status in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It not only jumps out of the traditional mode of thinking, but also subverts the colonial context in *Jane Eyre*. It re-examined the colonialist discourse centered on patriarchy through the voice and perspective of Antoinette and colonial people so that deconstructs the authority constructed by central discourse and breaks down the monopoly of the central discourse on the colonial people and women, let the story behind the madwoman in the attic become public. Just like Thomas F. Staley have said, "Wide Sargasso Sea not only enhances our thinking about character forming in *Jane Eyre*, but also enlarges our aesthetic consciousness so that we will have a better understanding of Bertha and Rochester when we read *Jane Eyre* after we finish *Wide Sargasso Sea*."

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