WIDE SARGASSO SEA – BEHIND THE MASK OF BRONTË'S MRS. ROCHESTER

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Abstract.
Unul dintre cele mai importante proiecte post-coloniale presupune rescrierea marilor narațiuni ale literaturii europene din perspectiva "celuilalt", marginalizat în trecut dar capabil în cele din urmă să îşi exprime propriul punct de vedere şi să confere textului original o dimensiune cu totul nouă. Romanul lui Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, aparține în mod evident acestei categorii de texte şi constă într-o reconstituire a întregii istorii din spatele Doamnei Rochester, un personaj secundar în textul scris de Charlotte Brontë; departe de a fi în continuare condamnată la o perpetuă tăcere şi construită exclusiv prin prisma nebuniei şi bestialității, aceasta capătă în sfârşit o identitate autentică şi o voce proprie. Analiza acestui text are în vedere atât explorarea modalităților în care scrierile post-coloniale interacționează cu textele ce țin de canonul occidental cât şi punerea în evidență a relației complexe dintre sine şi alteritate şi a naturii contradictorii a identității umane.

The contemporary literary field is characterised both by the production of an impressive number of new texts, originating from a much wider area than the one witnessing the creation of the canonical master narratives, and by an increasingly insistent questioning of all the assumptions underlying the development of the literary canon. Current reading practices no longer involve the mere study of style, narrative techniques or character construction, but encourage the tendency to reread classical texts in the light of their true cultural implications and especially of their Western European point of origin, in a successful attempt to demonstrate that a canon is produced by the intersection of various readings and reading assumptions legitimised in the privileging hierarchy of a "patriarchal" or "metropolitan" concept of "literature."[1] This conclusion triggers the emergence of a new awareness of the literary text, providing the necessary background for a post-colonial reconstruction of the approach to various discourses and of the canon itself. It is however quite

[1] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Hellen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999) 176

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obvious that the subversion of a canon involves more than the mere replacement of a given set of discourses with others or the inversion of their inner balance of powers; the post-colonial intruder also needs to be able to resort to alternative reading practices in order to grasp the true scope of the mechanisms organising the particular canonical texts within the scope of his preoccupations.

It is important to take into account the fact that the complexity of the canon demands the use of an equally complex critical apparatus and the ability to apply a wide range of techniques to an impressive body of texts. The post-colonial project involves the rejection of the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Occidental literature and the attempt to prove the limitations of its outlook, above all its inability to surpass the boundaries imposed by cultural and ethnic difference. This end is achieved by means of a close examination of the strategies by means of which other cultures are represented in literature, highly revelatory of the ways in which such texts are often evasively and crucially silent on significant matters concerned with colonisation and imperialism. As far as the important issue of difference as a carrier of cultural value is concerned, the postcolonial critic needs to foreground questions of cultural difference and diversity and examine their treatment in relevant literary works. A crucial aspect consists in the celebration of hybridity and of the simultaneous integration of various individuals in more than one culture and in the development of a perspective, applicable to all literatures, whereby states of marginality, plurality and perceived "Otherness" are regarded as sources of energy and potential change.[2]

It follows that a truly lucid understanding of literary history depends to a large extent on the ability to reinterpret it in the light of texts whose place has been insufficiently linked to the expansion of Europe,[3] and on the constant appreciation not only of the role of literature in the production of cultural representation but also of the crucial part played by imperialism in the representation of Europe to the Europeans in general, of England to the English in particular. The concrete procedures presupposed by this critical practice entail first of all the reading of the canon as "a polyphonic accompaniment to the expansion of Europe"[4] and the inherent revaluation of the previously

[2] Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*. *An introduction to literary and cultural theory* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1995) 198
[3] Edward Said, "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories" in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*. *A* Reader. Ed. K.M. Newton (London: Macmillan, 1997) 292
[4] *Id.*

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neglected imperialist implications of various texts. It thus becomes increasingly clear that many English literary works promote beliefs and assumptions regarding other geographic regions and other ethnic groups that can reveal a surprising amount of details about the construction of identities in the course of the imperialist enterprise.

The realisation that the values and order of the dominant world are made visible and dominant precisely through the textual presentation of the Other entails the necessity of replacing traditional approaches to world literature with a study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of "otherness."[5] The most relevant result of the application of these reading practices consists in the emergence of a completely new perspective on various canonical texts and above all in their reconstruction in the shape of considerably different but at the same time equally convincing and often considerably more revealing versions. It is quite clear that these new versions need to reflect the position and point of view of the Other and it is no accident that the most appreciated post-colonial literary texts are those in which some of the master narratives of Europe are rewritten from the perspective of previously marginal and more or less silenced characters, usually representatives of an inferior race, as is the case of Caliban and Friday, or of an inferior sex, as is the case of Estella, to mention only some of the notable protagonists of these texts. However remarkable the production of texts in which these characters are finally granted the chance of a personal and arguably authentic voice, the projects involving the rewriting of their various stories seem to raise relatively few problems when compared with the attempt to reconstruct the evolution of a much more problematic figure.

Indeed, although invariably defined in terms of their inferiority in relationship with the white male protagonists of their texts of origin, these protagonists were not altogether deprived of a voice or authentic identity, especially when contrasted with a considerably more marginal character, whose deviation from the norm seems to be exclusively articulated in terms of mental sanity. The universality of madness is the main reason behind the apparent difficulty of placing the first Mrs. Rochester of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in the same category as the more notorious protagonists already mentioned. Confined to the limited space of an attic and to the even more limited dimension of madness, Mrs. Rochester is in fact simultaneously constructed in

[5] Homi Bhabha, "The Location of Culture" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden & Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 941

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terms of gender, sexuality, race and class and as such emerges as a much more revealing image of the Other than she might initially seem. The post-colonial narrative rewriting her complete story not only emphasizes the relevance of these profound differences, but actually succeeds in providing its readers with a new awareness of the true significance of Otherness in the construction of identity.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the result of the already familiar post-colonial practice stimulated by the desire to rewrite the master narratives of Western discourse from the perspective of a previously silenced and ignored Other. Taking into account literature's relevance among the recognised forms of cultural control, it becomes quite clear that the tendency of writers from the former colonies to rewrite the major texts of the colonial centre, far from stemming from a lack of original ideas or from parodic playfulness, can be perceived as an act of symbolic liberation. Although not actually setting the madwoman in the attic free, Rhys's rewriting of *Jane Eyre* reveals glimpses of its protagonist's true identity by removing the various masks imposed by others and by allowing Bertha's voice to be heard and understood for the first time. Far from simply amplifying a marginal figure, Jean Rhys's novel succeeds in re-inventing an identity for Rochester's mad wife, in reclaiming a voice and a subjectivity for a silenced character, and ultimately in subverting the authority of the original text by means of a complex reworking of historical data, cultural references and literary allusions and a subtle questioning of the meta-text of the dominant metropolitan discourse. In its attempt to follow the true evolution of Bertha's identity, the text raises significant issues related to colonisation, gender relations and racial conflict, explores the themes of miscegenation, Creolisation, displacement and alienation and above all deconstructs many familiar assumptions concerning the relationship between the ruler and the subaltern.

The telling of a story from a new point of view does not necessarily involve radical changes in the original text but can often appear as a deconstructive project aimed at exploring the various gaps and silences in a text rather than at modifying actual elements present in its structure. Such a project seems indeed to be the only viable solution in the case of a character such as Bertha Mason, whose presence in *Jane Eyre* is limited to several fugitive and violent apparitions and to the two instances in which Edward Rochester briefly presents his wife. The first such passage comprises in just a few sentences all the elements perceived as relevant by the male protagonist,

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including Bertha's family history of madness, the imprudent marriage and the true nature of the bride:

> Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard! As I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points.[6]

However unfavourable such an account might seem, any suspicion of its being the result of a strong bias on the part of the male subject is clearly undermined by the fact that all Bertha's intrusions in the text confirm her husband's story and contribute to shape the image of a despicable creature, whose numerous flaws seem to represent just as many inverted versions of Jane's virtues.

Bertha's presence in the text reinforces the post-colonial claim that the position of the central subject can be best defined in a dialectical relationship with the Other, usually differentiated by class, race or gender. It is interesting to note that in Bertha's case some differences are so radical that she is no longer recognizable as a human being. She is described from the very beginning in ambiguous terms, and even before acquiring a physical dimension her presence is revealed by a "curious, distinct, formal mirthless laugh," and "eccentric murmurs," that is by inarticulate sounds that fail to constitute proper speech: "I heard thence a snarling, snatching sound, almost like a dog quarrelling." (*JE*, 208) Moreover, when she finally becomes visible, her physical description is characterised by the profusion of references to the animal realm and by the same impossibility of classifying her as either human or bestial: "What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal." (*JE*, 291) This initial confusion is however replaced by the conviction that there is nothing human to the creature apart from its clothing and its madness, which justifies the terms employed in all further references: "the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind-feet," "the maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage and gazed wildly at her visitors," "the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek." (*JE*, 291)

Bertha's inability to produce a coherent discourse, even more than her repulsive and clearly sub-human aspect and her violent behaviour, seems to

[6] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin Books, 1994) 290. All further references are to this edition, hereafter cited as *JE*, followed by page number, and will be given parenthetically in the text.

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constitute an undisputable proof of her complete lack of human attributes. It could be argued however that the absence from the text of Bertha's own version of the story, although ostensibly due to her inability to formulate anything apart from the "fiercest yells," (*JE*, 292) can be alternatively interpreted as a proof of the other's inability (or unwillingness) to understand her words and acknowledge them as human. Whatever the reason for this absence of authentic communication, it is highly evocative of the coloniser's failure to understand and accept the particularities of the colonised and of his tendency to dismiss them as mere proofs of his bestiality and yet more arguments in favour of his own superior nature. It thus becomes increasingly clear that the main function of this perpetually silenced character is not simply to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal,[7] but above all to provide a background against which the protagonist's qualities acquire a new dimension. The fact that the first visual encounter between Jane and Bertha is mediated by a mirror further emphasizes the significance of their relationship: "At that moment I saw the reflection of the visage and features quite distinctly in the dark oblong glass." (*JE*, 281)

An equally salient textual proof of Bertha's role in the delineation of Jane's image consists of Rochester's emphatic presentation of the two completely opposed figures: "look at the difference! Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder – this face with that mask – this form with that bulk." (*JE*, 292) Once the initial feelings of horror and disgust are surpassed, this fragment displays striking resemblances to the narrative of savagery constructed by the colonizer, in which the masquerade of terror unveils the mask of the "savage" as the face of the colonizer himself.[8] However, if Bertha's savage state of being plays a crucial part in the protagonist's evolution, reinforcing the essentially civilized nature of Jane's self, it is only through her physical obliteration that Jane finds happiness. Indeed, apart from her obvious usefulness as a term of comparison, this particular novel clearly demands that Bertha is kept silent and ultimately annihilated, and it is only by becoming the protagonist of a completely different narrative that she can finally be understood.

[7] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Robyn R, Warhol and Diana Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991) 803

[8] Gareth Griffiths, "The myth of authenticity. Representation, discourse and social practice" in *De-scribing Empire. Post-colonialism and* textuality. Eds. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (London & New York: Routledge, 2001) 72

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The ambivalent word „mask," arguably the most significant element in Rochester's discourse, inevitably suggests that whatever is glimpsed in *Jane Eyre* may not be the real Bertha Mason and triggers the desire to discover the hidden truth, or at least to hear a different version of the story. Jean Rhys's rewriting translates Bertha's madness as the misery and oppression of a white Creole woman married for her wealth and then repudiated, dislocated from her island home in the Caribbean and imprisoned in an English manor.[9] It is quite interesting to note that *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not simply provide a new version of the story, but actually succeeds in blending together two apparently opposed points of view. Thus, if in *Jane Eyre* Bertha's narrative is only constructed from the perspective of Edward Rochester and depends on the suppression of any alternative voices, in the new novel the speaking voice is divided between husband and wife, emerging with equal strength and providing the reader with two different but ultimately compatible and equally significant versions of the story. Moreover, while preserving the marriage plot delineated in the Victorian novel, the post-colonial text succeeds in embedding it within a concrete colonial context and thus emphasizing the cultural dimension of Bertha Antoinette Mason, the white Jamaican Creole, and of her ostensibly anonymous husband. Indeed, Rhys's novel contains a complex presentation of a particular historical category, clearly based on an accurate knowledge of the mentally deranged Creole heiresses of the early nineteenth century, whose impressive dowries, far from ensuring their happiness, represented little more than an additional burden.

As far as the protagonists' spatial coordinates are concerned, there is no denying the fact that the complex cultural dimension of the Caribbean space, almost universally perceived as the ultimate union of the diverse,[10] plays a crucial part in the formation of her personality. The particular nature of Caribbean identities, products of numerous processes of migration, has led various theoreticians to the conclusion that the Caribbean is not so much a geographical location but a cultural construction based on a series of mixtures, languages and communities of people,[11] all of which contribute to the complexity of the various characters present in the text. The figure of Antoinette is moreover a strong argument in favour of the idea that personal identity retains only the appearance of intimacy and cannot avoid being

[9] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998) 82
[10] Antonio Benítez-Rojo, "The Repeating Island" in Rivkin and Ryan 979
[11] Carole Boyce Davies, "Migratory Subjectivities" in Rivkin and Ryan 1003

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determined by politics of imperialism[12] as well as by spatial location. As a white Creole whose childhood coincides with the period of slave emancipation in Jamaica, Antoinette is not only caught between the English imperialist and the black native but also experiences a double rejection, being accepted neither by the representatives of the colonial center nor by the marginalized Negro community. This lack of belonging is obvious from the very beginning of the novel, the first sentences containing a brief yet poignant reference to the exclusion of the Mason family from the protective circle of Jamaican elite: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks."[13]

The attitude of the white population is moreover mirrored by that of a less privileged community, and Antoinette's ability to understand and appreciate elements belonging to a different culture and mentality makes her perfectly aware of the similar feelings of most members of the black race: "I never looked at any strange Negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches." (*WSS*, 20) The first appearance in the text of the phrase "white cockroach," later to become a veritable leitmotif of the entire novel, indicates a clear reversal of the traditional relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Its subsequent reiterations play an even more significant part, revealing the true condition of the Creole and the fact that racial superiority is no guarantee of successful integration in the white world, not even with the combined help of wealth and marriage to an English gentleman:

> It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. 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 who I am and where is my country and where I belong and why was I ever born at all. (*WSS*, 85)

By no means a mere suggestion of economic inferiority or of racial impurity, the derogatory phrase employed by black people, mulattoes and Europeans alike perfectly delineates the drama of the white Jamaican Creole, a perfect repository of the obsessive desire of the members of decolonised communities

[12] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Robyn R, Warhol and Diana Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991) 803-4

[13] Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin Books, 1993) 15. All further references are to this edition, hereafter cited as *WSS*, followed by page number, and will be given parenthetically in the text.

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for an identity[14] and as such a symbol of post-colonialism. Caught between two different worlds and rejected by both, Antoinette experiences throughout the novel the impossibility of integrating in any of the cultures whose various elements blend in the formation of her identity and the increasing awareness of the inevitable failure of her marriage to a European.

The complexity of Antoinette's wedded life (just like her mother's before her) can in fact only be understood in the context of the encounter between the colonizing male and the colonized female and the failure of both marriages can be blamed on the irreconcilable differences between the cultural backgrounds of the spouses, being predetermined by the estranged and problematic nature of the colonial encounter. It could be argued that in Antoinette's case such an interpretation is rendered invalid by the similarities between husband and wife, both marked by their unsuccessful relationships with their families, one of them being constantly rejected by an increasingly alienated mother, the other being denied any financial support and expected to acquire a fortune in the colonies. However, their similar fate as dispossessed children does not guarantee any mutual understanding, since the ultimate object of Rochester's hatred is not the family that dispatches him to the colonies in order to acquire a fortune at the cost of a loveless marriage, but the woman whose wealth provides him with a new status.

Moreover, frustration is by no means their most significant common feature, as both protagonists share a profound identity crisis, alternatively expressed by means of the thematics of Narcissus and Oedipus.[15] Antoinette's evolution is marked by frequent references to various images of mirroring, one of the most suggestive reflecting her refusal to accept either the imminent changes brought about by the disappearance of the old order or the power of racial difference:

> I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other,

[14] Simon During, "Postmodernism or post-colonialism today" in *Postmodernism: A Reader*. Ed. Thomas Docherty (London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 458
[15] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *op.cit.*, 804

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> blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass. (*WSS*, 38)

The failure of Antoinette's attempt to join Tia and adopt a new identity represents a new confirmation of the complexity of racial tension, but the significance of this fragment also resides in the presentation of the role of the Other in the understanding of the Self and of the fragility of the boundary that separates them.

The Creole's impossibility to integrate emerges however both from Antoinette's confrontation with her black Other and from her revelatory contemplation of her "favourite picture, 'The Miller's Daughter', a lovely English girl with brown curls and blue eyes," (*WSS*, 30) an image of the idealized white self which, just like the black version, is ultimately incompatible with Creole identity. An equally significant if less spectacular detail consists in the presence in the text of the complex mechanisms by which the figures of mother and daughter mirror each other as equally disconnected and fragmented beings, deprived of any clear sense of identity. Indeed, the fact that they share two versions of the same name, their physical beauty, and the nature of their marriages reinforce the idea that their evolutions can be perceived as two version of the same story and that Annette's downfall clearly anticipates her daughter's similar fate.

One of the few tangible consequences of her marriage consists in the possibility of shifting the feelings of displacement and problems of identity onto an English gentleman forced to deal with the strange otherness of the West Indies and of his new wife. His first contact with the place closely mirrors the settler's arrival in new land, including the reluctance to acknowledge the presence of other people who might have a prior claim to a space he only now discovers and the frustration triggered by his own incapacity to reveal its secrets: "It was a beautiful place – wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, 'What I see is nothing – I want what it *hides* – that is not nothing.'" (*WSS*, 73)

His initial impressions of Antoinette consist of similar references to the strangeness of her obviously non-European self, first revealed by her large and disconcerting eyes: "Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either." (*WSS*, 56) Although apparently a trivial detail, it nevertheless anticipates her failure to fit in his European frame of reference and his subsequent tendency to subordinate the place and its inhabitants to his paradigm, to treat both as blank spaces on which

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the newcomer is free to inscribe his own expectations, modifying them according to the selfish logic of domination and desire and reconstructing the Others as creatures of European will.[16] The strategies he uses to dominate his wife can be perceived as the private manifestation of an ideological and political structure promoting imperialist domination.[17] An accurate reading of the text and above all of the nature of this marriage must take into account the crucial relationship between patriarchal and imperialist domination and the way in which they both contribute to Rochester's subjection of his wife.

Rochester's evolution is shaped from the very beginning by his inability to reconcile his own English identity with the nature of the colonies or at least to understand the place, which he refuses to assess in other terms than those of colonial stereotypes. The outcome of the marriage is itself predetermined by their different approaches to the very space in which they are to spend their honeymoon. The destructive racism which separates her socially from the black population and epistemologically from the white European elite deprives Antoinette of the possibility of any authentic sense of belonging to a community and encourages her to reassert the only connection left to her, the Caribbean landscape. However, it is precisely this reassuring landscape that marks the first instance of her alienation in relationship with her husband, for whom it represents the Otherness he feels obliged to repress in order to maintain his Eurocentric perspective intact. [18]

Unable to recognize himself in what he sees and threatened by the possibility of eventually becoming his own object of fear, he looks for another in the person of his wife, whom he sets out to assimilate to the place and the people who have frightened him into almost seeing himself.[19] The description of his first immersion into the new landscape contains a clear indication of his feelings for his wife and of the differences between the two of them: "Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me." (*WSS*, 59) The failure of their marriage emerges with even greater

[16] Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination. Reading and Writing the Creole* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 105

[17] Glyne A. Griffith, *Deconstruction, Imperialism and the West Indian Novel* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1996) 120

[18] *Ibid.*, 117

[19] Nancy Rebecca Harrison, *Jean Rhys and the Novel as Women's Text* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 197

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strength from the fact that the colours from which he recoils are the ones Antoinette chose in her childhood embroideries: "We can colour the roses as we choose and mine are green, blue and purple. Underneath, I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839." (*WSS*, 44) Rochester's hatred of the very elements used by Antoinette to emblematize her self and to represent her identity[20] thus anticipates his subsequent efforts to destroy them in an attempt to deal with his own displacement.

These initial intimations of an imminent disaster are apparently dispelled by the happiness characterizing the first stage of their married life, but the experience of similar situations already encountered in the text reveals the illusory nature of this harmony. One of the most interesting features this relationship shares with Antoinette's equally unsuccessful experience with Tia consists in its obviously colonial character, the only difference consisting in the change in Antoinette's status. Previously constructed as the white colonizer initiated into the native's way of life by her Negro companion Tia, she now emerges as the colonized woman the male colonizer tries to enlighten with his accounts of England and Europe. From his position as a repository of European culture, Rochester is tempted to resort to a familiar colonial device granting her the mental capacity of a child and reinforcing his own superiority by means of the same process both he and Antoinette's stepfather employed in the representation of members of an inferior race.

Although the apparent disparity between his wife's incomplete intellectual development and his superior understanding might be perceived as a drawback in their relationship, it soon becomes clear that while Antoinette's acceptance of her own ignorance and her receptiveness to his teachings would probably have saved their marriage, her refusal to adopt his point of view provides him with a new argument against her suitability as a wife: "If she was a child she was not a stupid child but an obstinate one. She often questioned me about England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made much difference. Her mind was already made up." (*WSS*, 78) Although the fixed ideas he accuses her of represent another version of his own equally distorted view of the Caribbean space and her reluctance to accept his perspective derives from her natural incapacity to think outside an already established system of reference, it is quite understandable that his ego is deeply affected by his own impossibility to influence her and that she is meant to

[20] Veronica Marie Gregg, *op.cit.*, 86

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remain nothing but a stranger who shares neither his thoughts nor his feelings: "she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did." (*WSS*, 78)

However, the true nature of their marriage can only be understood on the background of a particular historical context and of a complicated web of dependency, in which the economic aspect acquires a prominent dimension. Almost all the human relationships present in the text are marked by the idea of possession and dependence: Christophine, an apparently independent woman feared and respected by all the other characters, is initially nothing more than Annette's wedding present from her first husband, and Antoinette's own marriage is little more than one of the numerous contracts characteristic of patriarchal societies, whereby women, signs and commodities pass from one man to another.[21] In this particular situation, Antoinette, her mother's plantation and all the wealth provided by her stepfather pass from her closest male relative to her husband, in the classic scenario of the European gentleman dispatched to the colonies to acquire an heiress; indeed, the unwritten letter to his father clearly reveals his views on the true significance of the transaction: "The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. (…) I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain?" (*WSS*, 59) The first signs of tension emerge with the husband's tendency to attribute his own views to his wife, whom he accuses of producing this alternative interpretation of the marriage contract: "I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks." (*WSS*, 59) It could indeed be argued that it is not the mercenary nature of his marriage that nurtures his frustrations, but the fear, obviously triggered by the association of power and wealth, that his male superiority might be questioned.

It moreover seems that the passage of all financial and territorial possessions from his wife's family to him, marking the first stage of the development of the marriage into a colonial allegory, is not enough to counteract his frustrations, his inferiority complex and his feelings of displacement. Indeed, in order to overcome his own insecurity he needs to fully assume the role of the colonizer by renaming Antoinette Bertha, in a desperate attempt to change the impenetrable Creole Other he is incapable of understanding into a more familiar reality: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name." (*WSS*, 121) Although incapable of changing Antoinette into his own version of the perfect

[21] Luce Irigaray, "Commodities amongst Themselves" in Rivkin and Ryan 574

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wife, he succeeds in splitting her personality and depriving her of a significant part of her identity: "Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass." (*WSS*, 147) His act can be thus read as a new reflection of the imperial tendency to rename vast areas of the world such as India, America, Australia, and Antoinette's very home, the West Indies, whose inhabitants were consequently disinherited in order to be "placed" within colonial discourse[22] and as such practically severed from their true selves.

The colonial nature of their relationship is also emphasized by his tendency to project all his negative features on her, to accentuate her alienation by transferring to her his own sense of displacement, driving her further away from her fragile sense of identity. Taking into account the fact that the objective of the colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types in order to justify conquest,[23] it could be argued that he needs to construct her as mad and perverted for the purposes of justifying his appropriation of all her fortune and his attempts to change her according to his will. However, the true complexity of this process can only be grasped in reference to his own confusion and anxiety about his possible degeneration into a savage,[24] which he attempts to solve by gradually transforming her into a repository of his own flaws. Thus, after repeatedly rejecting Antoinette and eventually choosing to sleep with her mulatto maid, he not only repudiates his wife on grounds of her scandalous behaviour, but also condemns her to perpetual solitude: "She thirsts for *anyone* – not for me. (…) Vain, silly creature. Made for loving? Yes, but she'll have no lover, for I don't want her and she'll see no other." (*WSS*, 135-136)

In spite of the various pretexts he provides in order to justify his attitude, both this fragment and the presentation of the contradictory feelings he experiences at the time of their departure indicate that it is not her supposed madness or promiscuity that he resents but the fact that, far from being dependent on his power and superior knowledge, she continues to belong to a different world she alone understands and from which he feels excluded:

[22] Michael Parker and Roger Starkey, *Postcolonial literatures. Achebe, Ngugi, Desai, Walcott* (London: Macmillan, 1995) 3

[23] Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse" in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory. A Reader*. Ed. K.M. Newton (London: Macmillan, 1997) 295

[24] Bridget Orr, "'The only free people in the empire.' Gender difference in colonial discourse" in Tiffin and Lawson 155

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> I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it. (*WSS*, 141)

Although Rochester accuses Antoinette and "all the others who know the secret" (*WSS*, 141) of either refusing or failing to share their knowledge, the fact that their secret is kept from him is due to his own inability and unwillingness to pause and unravel their particular version of the story.[25] His willingness to love and forgive her at the price of "one human tear" (*WSS*, 136) further reinforces the fact that her only salvation lies in her acceptance of his own norms, in the adoption of an attitude ratified by his European outlook.

Her failure to act in accordance with these terms and give up the last traces of her identity promptly triggers his decision to dislocate her from her familiar surroundings and to deprive her of any connection with her own image: "She'll not laugh in the sun again. She'll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass. So pleased, so satisfied." (*WSS*, 136) After having successfully taken possession of her wealth, silencing her voice and denying her the right to her real name, Rochester accomplishes his role as colonizer by denying her access to her own self: "There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. (...) What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (*WSS*, 147) It thus becomes increasingly clear that the fulfillment of Rochester's desire to impose his point of view on both the narrative and Antoinette involves her transformation from a speaking subject into an object, an Other,[26] a locked-away madwoman completely lacking the narrative capability which would have represented an undeniable proof of her sanity.

Separated from all the elements of her previous life, the protagonist seems indeed to retain no traces of her own history and to fully assume the stance of the mad woman in the attic, the only detail invalidating such an assumption being the reference to the red dress as a symbol of the self. The fact that the garment chosen by Antoinette as the reflection of her true identity is the one worn during her last encounter with her mulatto lover and the act of admitting this illicit relationship can be read as a clear assertion of herself as

[25] Kathy Mezei, "And It Kept Its Secret: Narration, Memory, and Madness in Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea." *Critique*. Vol. 28, 1987, 197
[26] *Ibid.*, 195

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Caribbean. The very description of the dress constitutes an attempted recuperation of the only space the protagonist can identify with: "As soon as I turned the key I saw it hanging, the colour of fire and sunset. The colour of flamboyant flowers. (…)The smell of vetivert and frangipani, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain." (*WSS*, 151) The red dress moreover reinforces her potential resistance to both psychological colonization and physical imprisonment[27] and as such reveals the limitation of all critical approaches that invariably confine Rhys's heroines to the predestined role of victim,[28] a role that actually depends on their own adoption of a certain uniform.

The one element connecting the various hypostases of the victimized Creole woman present in the text eventually proves to have very little to do with social or racial status and consists in an apparently trivial detail, that is in their partiality for a certain colour. Indeed, the white clothes preferred by Annette, the muslin dress meant to replace the one stolen by Tia, the elegant garment admired by Rochester and the dresses worn by the helpless protagonists of Antoinette's dreams, apart from their symbolic reference to white as a marker of racial prestige, constitute themselves as indicators of the female characters' involvement in their own subjection. Indeed, however clear the distinction between the oppressor and the oppressed might initially seem, the novel demonstrates that the categorization of powerful and powerless involves a vast range of complexities[29] and that the same character can oscillate between the two extremes and even determined her own inclusion in one category or another. The juxtaposition of the assertive and self-assured woman in the red dress and the victimized wearer of the white dress clearly reinforces both the dual nature of Antoinette's personality and the ambiguity of her position in the discourse of power.

The intimation that her husband may not have performed "the last and worst thing" (*WSS*, 152) by replacing this particular dress with a different garment and thus truly depriving her of her identity suggests the possibility of Antoinette's survival behind Bertha's mask. The crucial moment of this last stage in Antoinette's transformation involves a final and decisive encounter with the Other, once again mediated by a mirror in which Rhys's Antoinette,

[27] Hilda van Neck-Yoder, "Colonial Desires, Silence, and Metonymy: 'All Things Considered' in Wide Sargasso Sea." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Vol. 40, 1998, 200
[28] Jan Curtis, "The Secret of Wide Sargasso Sea." *Critique*. Vol. 31, 1990, 185
[29] Glyne A. Griffith, *op.cit.*, 120

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far from merely identifying her own image, catches a glimpse of Brontë's mad Bertha, thus seeing her self as her Other: "It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her." (*WSS*, 154) To paraphrase an interesting idea in Gilbert and Gubar's essay, it seems that before Antoinette can journey through the looking-glass towards autonomy she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with the mythic masks Rochester and various other people have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her true individuality and to identify her with the eternal types they have themselves invented to possess her more thoroughly.[30] Read from the new perspective provided by *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Brontë's Bertha emerges as one possible representation of Antoinette, as simply one of the numerous masks of an extremely complex character, no longer silenced but granted the chance to present her own version of the story, no longer confined to the attic of a single canonical text but allowed to move between the two novels, using her newly acquired power and the voice provided by the more recent text to redeem the less privileged protagonist of the original Victorian novel.

An inevitable consequence of any reading of a postmodern or post-colonial sequel of a classical text consists in the impossibility of ever returning to the earlier texts without hearing revelatory "scraps of the stories they choose not to tell"[31] and which end up acquiring the value and authority of official versions, irremediably influencing the original and extending its possibilities. Although in this particular case the more recent text seems to completely distort the victim / victimizer relationship, transforming apparently sympathetic characters into ruthless imperialistic aggressors, it does not efface the credibility of the earlier novel. The experience of *Wide Sargasso Sea* actually provides readers with a new key to *Jane Eyre*, reinforcing the necessity of reading it against a previously ignored historical and cultural background, stimulating colonial and postcolonial interpretations of the text, or simply intimating the possibility of a different reception of a hauntingly marginal character. Indeed, apart from providing a silenced protagonist with a personal voice and an authentic identity, demonstrating the pervasiveness of the colonial encounter and exposing the limitations of all stereotypes, the novel also succeeds in proving the essentially unstable nature of human personality itself and the complex

[30] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The Madwoman in the Attic" in Rivkin and Ryan 596
[31] Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 186

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interplay of various factors involved in its articulation. The relationship between the Other and the self thus emerges as both the main mechanism of colonial intercourse and the very basis of individual identity, ultimately structured on a complex interplay of masks and mirrors and depending on the ability to distinguish the elements that truly define it from the ones more or less forcefully imposed either from outside or from within.

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