# *RE-PRESENTING THE POSTCOLONIAL CREOLE IDENTITY FROM THE BRITISH BORDERLANDS: JEAN RHYS'S* WIDE SARGASSO SEA

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***Abstract.*** *Accepting the model of creolisation as being relevant to my study, I aim to explore the hybrid identity of Caribbean whites and to show that a shared geopolitical and cultural history can thus shape identity beyond the confines of the assumed racial / racist determinants in established Western theory. Using the broader yet intersecting frameworks of postcolonial discourse, I am also mapping a methodological practice starting from Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea, that draws on both black and third world feminisms and postcolonial studies to construct a theoretical space for the white Creole woman. By tracing how gender relations in the Caribbean have been constructed and experienced through colonialism by Creole women, I aim to negotiate an (alter)native overlapping cultural space for the former "colonizing female subject" within a discourse which I shall propose as a "(white) postcolonial Creole feminism." In this context, I am reclaiming the historical / colonial use of the term "Creole" and inserting it into postcolonial discourse as a cultural term that more succinctly defines (white) identity in the contemporary Caribbean. In doing so, I aim to complexify this identity as being distinct from, yet related to, (white) Western identity through its intertwined historical bond with black identity.*

***Key words***: *Creole identity, cultural difference, in-between space.*

The term "creole"[1] is used in this text to refer to someone born in the Caribbean. This term originated in the seventeenth century to differentiate *whites* born in the newly settled colonies from those of European birth. Despite their similar British ancestry, such a distinction was found necessary in order to assert the *cultural difference* between Caribbean-born whites and those from the British Isles. In *The White Minority in the Caribbean* (1998), Karl Watson notes that "creolisation involved the identification of people, whatever their place of origin or racial composition, with the island societies in which they lived." Further on, he notes that this "protonationalism" became evident in acts of open hostility by local whites towards Englishmen. Since the nineteenth century, the term "Creole" has been used to describe *all* people born in the West Indies, regardless of race.iv Currently, it is often used in the West to denote the interracial body (particularly of French and African descent), or to refer to Caribbean languages. As Bocquet suggests, the term[2] has "the unique advantage of distinguishing *mestizaje* in the Caribbean from *mestizaje* elsewhere" (BOCQUET, 1996: 118) and consequently serves to "unite" the Caribbean community. A fundamental characteristic of Caribbean culture, it has been defined by some theorists as the *blending* of Amerindian, European, and African cultures that occurred as a result of colonization and plantation slavery. In the essay "Creolisation and Creole Societies",[3] Nigel Bolland cites Kamau Brathwaite's study, "The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820" (1971), as being the source of the Creole-society model. Rather than a process of "blending", this model stresses "intercultural creolisation" between "Afro-Creoles" and "Euro-Creoles" as "a twoway process" with the "coloured population" as a "bridge, a kind of social cement" between the two cultures (24). It proposes that "the Europeans and Africans who settled in the Americas contributed to the development of a



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distinctive society and culture that was neither European nor African, but 'Creole'" (23).

The history and concerns of (black and third world) feminist theories have in many ways paralleled those of postcolonial discourse, since it is recognized that women and colonized subjects have shared similar experiences of the politics of oppression and repression. Both feminist and postcolonial discourses share a political motivation to articulate the voices of the silenced, marginalized, and oppressed. Why does one need to theorize gender from yet another margin? Why is it that the white Creole female body cannot fit within the existing "white" Feminist discourse? Feminism, in the widest sense, has not celebrated *difference* and has failed to recognize "otherness". Early Feminist discourse viewed women as a monolithic group of white middle- and upper-class, educated married Westerners whose major interest was seeking equal rights in terms of gender. Given the previous discussion of creolisations, the white Creole woman does not recognize herself within this relatively homogeneous Feminist theoretical framework. Though "white" and sharing a "female" history of oppression by institutionalized patriarchal structures, the white Creole woman occupies an "in-between" space (BHABHA, 1995: 209). She finds more in common with black / Third World / postcolonial feminisms because of their concern with race, class, culture, and geopolitical history, and ultimately, the *lived* experience of women within particular geographical and cultural spaces. As a former colonizing subject, the white Creole woman *appears* to share a common history with the (white) Western woman. However, as a product of cross-cultural *creolisation*, the postcolonial white Creole woman consciously embraces difference and intuitively understands *her* own difference from (white) Western women. I am arguing here that, for her, the adjective "white" remains a descriptive term rather than a noun. She is, above all, a *Creole* who paradigmatically claims her Caribbean heritage with pride.

In the proceeding paper, I intend to situate the white Creole woman's experience away from the margins of historical discourse and to map the historical construction of her identity as Other by navigating between existing theoretical (feminist and postcolonial) methodologies. The construction of the white Creole woman's *Otherness* becomes evident when colonial texts written by visitors to the "Indies" are examined. According to Hilary Beckles, these women " 'insensibly adopted' the dress, speech, and manners of blacks, which rendered them further removed from European culture than the colour of their skin suggests." (BECKLES, 2000: 668). Here, the white woman's body is visually conflated with blackness. Culture and race are collapsed through a system of bodily signs. The white body is seen to perform blackness through its dress and behavior. The imperial project seemed to necessitate the "othering" of *all* members of "native" populations outside of the "mother country" (a process that ultimately served as a warning against racial mingling and miscegenation). As Ania Loomba notes in *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (1998), the central contradiction within colonialism was its need to both "'civilise' its 'others', and to fix them into perpetual 'otherness'." In the eyes of the European white, the white Creole woman had become a colonial subject in need of "civilizing", as a result of her Creole culture. The European writer was employing an "objective" gaze to map her visual signs of difference and to "fix" her identity as culturally inferior.

In her well-known novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Rhys counters the canonical text by reinventing the "mad" inbred Creole woman from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (the first Mrs. Rochester) as the heroine of her tale. The white Creole daughter of a former slave owner in Jamaica, Antoinette Cosway, tries to navigate her way through



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the in-between space of being neither black (like the rest of her community) nor English (like her husband).

> "I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you and I, I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all". (*WSS*, 102)

Antoinette finally achieves liberation from this impossible situation when she burns down her husband's English mansion and jumps into a pool (in her dream) where she is able to "merge the colonial blackness and Creole whiteness that have torn her apart and driven her to madness." This colonial text offers a site of resistance to the dominant colonial narrative of imperial "othering" and clearly articulates a syncretic relationship between black and white Creole identity. It is therefore useful to try to understand (white) Creole identity through the lens of black feminist theory. Black feminism is fundamentally engaged with intersectionality in its insistence that race / colour and sex / gender be simultaneously considered, and as such contests the homogeneity of "white" Feminism. Grounded in the theorization of black experience / identity, black feminism has challenged the assumptions of white Euro-feminism by legitimizing the black female voice as an essential element of Western history. Recognizing the shared experience of patriarchal subordination, black feminism suggests that black women have been doubly victimized and rendered invisible because of "scholarly neglect and racist assumptions."

Following over three centuries of existence as an empowered racial minority, the postcolonial white Creole is now culturally marginalized within a region where the contemporary black Creole majority has increasingly claimed "native" legitimacy. This shift in power dynamics has sharpened the white Creole's sensitivity to racial "othering" in a manner that allows the white Creole woman to empathize with the marginality experienced by black women in the West. This conception, though formed from a position of privilege, is nevertheless a more sensitized understanding than that of the Western white who presumes the "normality" of her whiteness and may never need to consider the problems of a marginalized identity.

In recent years, black historians such as Hilary Beckles have re-examined historical texts in order to uncover a voice for the black slave woman. These texts have been mined to unearth the "truth" about Creole society during the colonial period. His essay, "White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean" (2000), seeks to address this lack by opening up a reading of white female Creole identity using a black feminist methodology. The relative lack of texts by (white) Creole women is symptomatic of unequal colonial power relations between (white) European women and women native to the colonies. Without this documentation, it is difficult to formulate a "true" picture of white Creole womanhood. And as Beckles admits, (though his meaning is different) "this research" into the role of women in (white) Creole society "should then be informed by the culturally embracing process of social creolisation in which European immigrants are transformed at the frontier into natives who possessed an increasingly distinct value system and sensibility." With just such critical interest now developing around the Creole woman's identity, it is necessary to look at how the (white) postcolonial Creole woman has functioned in response to such a heightened awareness of her historically inscribed "colonizing" identity. Gayatri Spivak argues that the combined workings of colonialism and patriarchy make it extremely difficult for the subaltern to articulate her point of view. Thus, it is relatively impossible for the white



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Creole woman to articulate a presence within or outside of the present-day Caribbean. However, contemporary fictional literary texts by (white) female Creole authors have attempted to subvert colonial stereotypes by creating complex, multifaceted subjects who embrace a Creole ethos. What also emerges is that, unlike the (white) Western woman, the white Creole woman is more willing to acknowledge her "whiteness" as a site of privilege within the historical colonial hierarchy of racist plantation economies and to share shame and culpability for the sins of former colonizers. An understanding of white female Creole identity is clearly not possible within the narrow tenets of "white" Feminist theory. One must look to black and third world feminisms and their intersection with postcolonial studies to articulate an identity for the white Creole woman. Although, previously, white colonial subjectivity has not been considered by postcolonial studies, it is now possible to produce a (white) postcolonial Creole feminism by situating the white Creole woman's voice with those of silenced black and racially "othered" voices. The white Creole woman became at once a colonial subject with a colonizing role who was also subject to patriarchal rule. Europeans portrayed her as an unacceptable example of moral and cultural corruption / mutation owing to her proximity to the black body and to her consumption of and participation within the violence of slavery. She was the privileged slaveholder who wielded power over her slaves and, the dutiful wife who remained subject to her husband's wishes and tolerant of both his sexual indiscretions with slave women and of the mulatto progeny that resulted from these illicit unions.

Now aware of the in-between space in which her ancestors have been trapped by black feminist and postcolonial theories, the postcolonial white Creole woman must consequently negotiate the historical attempts to "fix" her ancestral identity as Other as well as demonstrate her historical difference from (white) Western women. Homi Bhabha argues that the "fixed identities" that colonialism seeks to impose on the masters and the slaves are rendered unstable because there can be no "binary opposition between the coloniser and the colonised (…) both are caught up in a complex reciprocity and colonial subjects can negotiate the cracks of dominant discourses in a variety of ways." (BHABHA, 1995: 232) The Creole can therefore only be understood as part of a hybrid culture that resists fixity and categorization. The insertion of Jean Rhys's story of the Creole body and its subjectivity into a "crack" in white Western Feminism can function to realign the entire narrative ground of feminist discourse in such a way as to actively shift all other stories. In this sense, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has undertaken to map out the historical construction of Creole identity in order to unmask just such a story. According to Anderson, in Spanish America, creole communities, "produced creoles who consciously redefined the [mixed] populations as fellow nationals" (ANDERSON, 1983: 52). He also notes that the widespread global movement to "achieve solidarities on an essentially imagined basis" (ANDERSON, 1983: 74). In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys struggles with the canons of English literature. Using an impressionistic narrative mode which has its roots in the *stream of consciousness* favoured by *modernism*, she relocates her heroine in the Caribbean of her childhood and early womanhood, explaining the causes of her alleged madness while also giving expression to Rochester's view of the ill-fated marriage. The novel retells Jane Eyre from the perspective of Rochester's "mad" wife. This character, portrayed in Bronte's novel through the lens of her English husband's cultural superiority, becomes Antoinette and gains her own voice. Antoinette's story, and the experiences of Rhys's other heroines, echo the author's circumstances, including her cultural dislocation, alcoholism and itinerant lifestyle. Rhys counterpoints the voices of Bertha and



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Rochester to present two contrasting world-views: male and female, imperial and colonial, Northern and Southern. This double process of decolonization and recolonization places Rhys's mature Caribbean work at the centre of post-colonial 'English' literary politics.

In writing this novel it was the ambition of the writer to create a history and understanding of Bertha Rochester. In order to do so, Rhys set herself up to appropriate Bronte's story, the consciousness of a woman who goes insane (Bertha), and the perspective of an English gentleman (Rochester). Born into an oppressive, colonialist society, Creole heiress Antoinette Cosway meets a young Englishman who is drawn to her innocent sensuality and beauty. After their marriage the rumours begin, poisoning her husband against her. Caught between his demands and her own precarious sense of belonging, Antoinette is driven towards madness. Rhys herself lived in Dominica until she was sixteen and in England for the remainder of her life. Rhys' mother was Creole, like Bertha Rochester, and her father was Welsh. With this ancestry, Rhys lived in a multicultural setting and was likely sensitive to the differences of people of various cultures. Furthermore, the symbolism of the title suggests the barriers, such as bodies of water, that separate people. Rochester and Bertha's conversations comment on their difficulty of understanding one another due to their opposing upbringing and culture:

> 'Is it true,' she said, 'that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place like London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up.'
>
> 'Well,' I answered annoyed, 'that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream.'
>
> 'But how can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?'
> 'And how can millions of people, their houses and their streets be unreal?'
> 'More easily,' she said, 'much more easily. Yes a big city must be like a dream.'
> 'No, this is unreal and like a dream,' I thought. (*WSS*, 67)

It is Rochester's inability to feel comfortable in Jamaica, and Bertha's inability to understand England that forms a barrier between them. Rochester admits that Bertha is a stranger and that he cannot empathize with her:

> "I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did." (*WSS*, 78).

Rhys writes here of the near impossibility of understanding another culture. As a white creole, Rhys felt alienated from both world, the Caribbean and England. Her story is divided into three parts with three settings. In Part I (Martinique, Jamaica: Coulibri estate, near Spanish Town), Antoinette describes her early life at Coulibri, a former slave-estate in Jamaica, where she spent a childhood of fear and loneliness. Like Rhys herself, Antoinette belongs to a family of white creoles, impoverished after the emancipation of the slaves and trying to survive in a racially divided society. Their financial situation improves when her mother Annette marries a second time, but the hostility of the natives only increases, and Annette eventually goes mad when the blacks burn down the estate house and her son is killed in the fire. Part 2 (Granbois, Dominica)



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is Rochester's account of his marriage to Antoinette and their honeymoon on one of the Windward Islands (Rhys's native Dominica). After a brief period of sexual passion, the two grow more and more estranged from each other and their love turns into hatred. In Part 3 ('Great House' England) Antoinette recounts her last days in the attic of Thornfield Hall, where Rochester has kept her imprisoned since they left, where Rochester has kept her imprisoned since they left the West Indies. The book finishes with Antoinette leaving her room to set fire to Thornfield Hall in a final act of defiance and revenge.

Imperialism, like patriarchy, is after all a phallocentric, supremacist ideology that subjugates and dominates its subjects. The oppressed woman is in this sense akin to the colonized subject. Both women and 'natives' are minority groups who are unfairly defined by the intrusive 'male gaze', which is a characteristic of both patriarchy and colonialism. Both peoples have been reduced to stereotypes and denied an identity by the system that entraps them. Colonialism is the greater evil, because it automatically entails the threat of misogynistic, patriarchal beliefs, given the fact that imperialism was unequivocally male-centered and euro-centric, thus immediately labeling all foreign women alien subalterns. The obvious fact that colonial oppression affects the lives of women, both socially and economically, has forced us to adopt a keener awareness of gender roles when discussing imperialist exploits. The undeniable fact that colonial oppression affected men and women in different ways should be recognized, as females were often subjected to what has been called a 'double colonization', whereby they were discriminated against not only for their position as colonized people but also as women. According to Gayatri Spivak, this differentiation is essential for an exhaustive examination of colonial domination.

Jean Rhys' complex text, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, came about as an attempt to re-invent an identity for Rochester's mad wife, Bertha Mason, in *Jane Eyre*, as Rhys felt that Bronte had totally misrepresented Creole women and the West Indies: 'why should she think Creole women are lunatics and all that? What a shame to make Rochester's wife, Bertha, the awful madwoman, and I immediately thought I'd write a story as it might really have been.' (O'CONNOR, 1986: 144). It is clear that Rhys wanted to reclaim a voice and a subjectivity for Bertha, the silenced Creole, and to subvert the assumptions made by the Victorian text. In her quest to re-instate Bertha's identity, Rhys raises issues such as the problems of colonisation, gender relations and racial issues. She explores the themes of displacement, creolisation and miscegenation, forcing us to recognise that female identity is a historical and cultural construction. The marriage contract, for Rhys, is ultimately cast as a colonial encounter in the novel. However, the problem of displacement and a shaky sense of one's own identity are already well established in the first part of the text, long before the marriage takes place. It seems that Rhys wants to bring the problems of the Creole existence to the fore at the very beginning of the novel, and lay emphasis on Antoinette's feelings of alienation: the white Creoles are neither part of the black slave community or accepted as European either (a lack of belonging that Rhys knew all too well):

> 'they say when trouble comes, close ranks. And so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks' (WSS 5).
> 'White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you' (WSS 9).

Though this is a childish taunt in the novel, the truth of it is that nobody does want Antoinette; as Teresa O'Connor points out, not even her own mother: 'Antoinette



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is also alienated from the meager remains of her family itself, and, most specifically, from her mother's love' (O'CONNOR, 1986: 172).

The second part of the novel marks the beginning of the marriage between Antoinette and the English gentleman (normally identified as Rochester from *Jane Eyre*). The Marriage contract itself, interestingly, is negotiated and put into action by a series of men: Rochester's father and brother, Antoinette's stepfather and, subsequently, her step-brother, Richard Mason. When Antoinette herself puts up a half-hearted resistance to the marriage, both Rochester and Richard Mason step in to push the contract along. Already, Rhys, within the marriage, establishes action as a male characteristic and inertia as female. As the narrative moves, Rochester takes over from Antoinette as narrator. Also, the feelings of displacement and problems of identity are shifted onto him. Rochester, at Granbois, experiences a complete lack of power normally exercised by the English gentleman, at once having to deal with the strange otherness of the West Indies and cope with the rejection by his father and brother. According to O'Connor 'he experiences what it is like to be a woman'. The marriage has placed him in the position of the female: without power, without knowledge and without a sense of an English or metropolitan identity:

> 'everything is too much, I felt, as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green...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*, 54).

He is the dispossessed colonizer unable to reconcile his English identity with the strangeness of the periphery, frustrated with his inability to know and control the place. Antoinette, on the other hand, appears to have gained a sense of belonging at Granbois from the onset of the marriage. She says of the place: 'this is my place' (*WSS*, 45) and 'here, I can do as I like' (*WSS*, 57). Rhys, here, links knowledge and power: as Antoinette has knowledge of the island, she is in the position of power, a situation that embitters Rochester as time goes on: 'Her [Antoinette's] pleading expression annoys me. I have not bought her, she has bought me' (*WSS*, 42). Of course, as this is all told from Rochester's view-point, we can never actually know if this is how Antoinette really feels. To Rochester, she seems to be simply another aspect of the West Indies' otherness that he cannot connect with:

> 'she never blinks at all, it seems to me. Long, dark, alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either' (*WSS*, 40).

Indeed, Antoinette's otherness begins to plague Rochester to the point where (particularly after Daniel Cosway's letter) he begins to conflate her as racially other, convincing himself that there is a resemblance between her and the black maid, Amelie. Rhys takes care to portray Rochester's crisis of identity in the West Indies as she does the Creoles. The development of the marriage into a colonial allegory takes place as Rochester begins to try and deal with the problems of displacement. Rhys writes him directly into the roles of coloniser at the point where he changes Antoinette's name to Bertha, attempting to change the Creole other he imagines in her into something 'knowable'. He then demonstrates his sexual power over her by denying her



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a physical relationship with him, yet sleeping with Amelie within her hearing, driving her further away from her new-found sense of identity and back into the sense of placelessness she felt in the novel's first part. Finally, Rochester, assuming 'the traditional stance of male imperialist authority...silencing the woman's voice' (Jean Rhys 109) physically displaces her, splitting her from the West Indies and any connection with a self image: '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*, 117). Thus, in the novel, Rochester's role as coloniser and Antoinette's as colonised within the marriage are fully realised. Rochester, in the position of power, has successfully taken possession of Antoinette's wealth, property and identity.

In conclusion, elegant, hard as nails, without a shred of sentimentality, Rhys writes, usually in the first person, of women as lost ingenues, lonely commodities floating from man to man; the man uses the woman and pays her off when he is tired of her; with each man, the woman's value lessens, she becomes more used, more tattered, more shopworn. These books are about how men use women: not how society punishes women for having sex but how men punish women with whom they want to have sex, with whom they have had sex. The feminist maxim, *Every woman is one man away from welfare*, is true but banal up against Rhys's portrait of the woman alone; there is no welfare; only poverty, homelessness, desperation, and the eventual and inevitable need to find another man.

[1]For further details about the Caribbean cultural identity, see Bocquet, Pierre E. "The Visual Arts and Créolité." *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*. ed. Gerardo Mosquera. Cambridge, Mas.: MIT, 1996.

[2]Bocquet defines *mestizaje* as "cultural hybridism".

[3]A rich discussion of definitions and models of creolisation is found in Shepherd, Verene A. and Glen L. Richards, eds. *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002. Here, Carolyn Allen's essay "Creole: The Problem of Definition" also examines the etymology of the term "Creole" and highlights its varying uses through history by "insiders" (Caribbean people) and "outsiders" (Westerners).

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