# COLONIZER AND COLONIST. (RE)DEFINING THE OTHER IN *JANE EYRE* AND *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

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*Abstract: The cultural canon was subject to significant transformations throughout the 20th century. The stranger/Other, as the representative individual of a culture under the colonial ruling of the British Empire, is seen through the values and expectations of the colonizer in Charlotte Brontë's novel. Dominican writer Jean Rhys sets a wider context for the Victorian characters by writing a prequel that empowers the silenced character of Antoinette Mason. The expansion of the omnipresent Victorian narrator into several first-person narratives mirrors the Eurocentric perspective dissipated into a multitude of centers outside the metropolis, each demanding its own voice in the global literary canon.*

*Keywords: postcolonialism, the Other, colonizer, colonist, Victorian*

The Western literary canon has never been submitted to such a strong current of redrafting as during the 20th century when postcolonial criticism in a wider postmodern frame attempted –and succeeded- in producing a demystification of great literature or high literature in anthropological terms, and also in revisitings of the said canonical texts through narratives that challenged them. Dominican born writer Jean Rhys is one such author who penetrated the Western canon through her literary work *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a prequel to Victorian novel *Jane Eyre* and whose ambition was to level the balance of powers in Charlotte Brontë's literary work by contextualizing and giving voice to a character portrayed in dark colours.

In a 1979 interview, Rhys commented on what inspired her to write her postmodern novel: *'What a shame to make Rochester's first wife, Bertha, the awful madwoman, and I immediately thought I'd write the story as it might have really been. She seemed to me such a poor ghost. I thought I'd try to write her a life.'*[1] Her statement is emblematic for postcolonial authors who consider it their moral duty to repudiate or simply revise the European canon, the multi-layered corpus of texts it consists of today. The interest in amending canonical texts is essentially connected with reshaping the concept of otherness generated by political, economic, cultural and social Western institutions transplanted into the colonies by England and France. Until the Cold War, London's status was that of a global metropolis which had built much of its wealth over three centuries of colonial expansion. The British Empire's drive was a syncretic construction that combined the belief in the British duty to civilize what R. Kipling calls "lesser breeds without the law"[2] and to help them advance. The colonist discourse typically considered the metropolis as an axis mundi, the place where civilization springs forth, bringing with it the necessity of enlightening other peoples. For this reason, newly discovered populations are seen as children who need the guidance of fully matured civilizations until they are able to govern themselves.



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In fact, as T. Metcalf observed, Western civilization did not exist as a concept because "there existed only civilization, a universal set of ideas, perspectives, values and judgments embodied in British culture but applicable to all"[3]. Paradoxically, as generous as the colonial discourse projected itself to be, it also promoted the existence of inextricable differences between colonizing and colonized culture seen as immature and for whom the goals of civilization were set so high that they seemed to always elude the potentiality of any kind of progress.

The process of decolonization which started as early as 1921 with the loss of the oldest British colony, Ireland, permeating up to 1971, was a long process that ended on the one hand in a victory for national liberation movements but, on the other, in a larger reformulation of Western hegemony. Set against 20th century discourses of national freedom and self-determinacy, the imperial ideology collapsed. However, England's dominance over what Said named the global south was integrated in the new US governing structures of power. The general postmodern cultural framework was a catalyst for postcolonial studies in its promotion of an apparently contradictory dual interpretative function: nostalgic and conservatory but also revolutionary and refreshing[4]. Postmodern fiction contemplates an object in its past glory, but in a perfectly lucid state also takes a step back from this meditative stance to undermine its idealized look through irony. By its nature, postmodernism is inquisitive of totalitarian systems and even looks to discredit them. J. Rhys unveils her compassion for the silenced character of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and sets out to write her story and set it in context. The Other, pertaining to a different culture than the British seen through the values and expectations of the colonizer in Charlotte Brontë's novel, is endowed with a perspective of its own by means of which it transforms into a misunderstood character rather than a blatantly damnable one. The expansion of the omnipresent Victorian narrator into several first-person narratives mirrors the Eurocentric perspective dissipated into a multitude of centers outside the metropolis each demanding its own voice in the global literary canon.

**The Postcolonial Discourse: Instances of Otherness**

It is a visible fact today that postcolonial theory was not produced in the colonies but was written by postcolonial intellectuals based in the West. Their sense of dislocation was even more pervading as they were neither entirely part of their colonies nor could they be assimilated by European society. The writer and psychiatrist Franz Fanon writes about his education in Martinique under French rule: "In Antilles, the black schoolboy who is constantly asked to recite *our ancestors the Gauls* identifies himself with the explorer, the civilizing colonizer, the white man who brings truth to the savage, a lily-white truth. (…) But this sense of identity is shattered once the child leaves that social world (Antilles) to enter the metropolitan center, which is at once the source of that identity, yet functions as a different regime of meaning"[5]. The crisis of identity springs from a set of constructs that the colonizer imposes, in this case through education, meant to help him tame the exoticism seen as different and menacing in the other, a threat to his sense of established norms. It comes as no surprise that J. Rhys wished to empower Bertha Mason, the first wife of Edward Rochester,



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presented in Jane Eyre as the mad woman roaming the attic of Thornfield, stripped of reason and language and who, like herself, was a stranger to Britain, come from the West Indies.

Drawing on postmodernism, postcolonial writing challenges the fixed prejudices and false constructs through which the Other is perceived. Bertha's status as the mad woman in the attic can be seen as the opposing figure of the angel in the house, a metaphor taken from Coventry Patmore's eponymous poem (1854-1862) which became the subject of a conference on the professions of women held by Virginia Woolf. The Victorian ideal of the perfect wife whose capital virtues were modesty, purity and fidelity[6] was set in a binary relation to what later feminist writers – starting with Gilbert and Grubar - called *the mad woman in the attic*, a metaphor of the anti-virtues of women condemned by Victorian society.

In this light, Jane Eyre represents the ideal wife whereas the mad wife is not a relevant character for the economy of the text unless she is considered the antipode of the heroine. The Other beheld by Mr. Rochester is faulty because, as we will develop in the following chapters, she lacks Victorian virtues and is set in a location geographically too lacking in sameness to be thought of as home.

**The Other as Person**

The dialogue *Wide Sargasso Sea* instates with *Jane Eyre* embroiders on the aura of uncertainty the Other, a stranger from the colonies, elicits in the mind of the colonist from the 19th century London metropolis.

Edward Rochester recounts how shortly after his arrival in the West Indies he ends up marrying Bertha Mason, a charming "tall, dark and majestic" (*JE* p.302) young woman who turns out soon after marriage to have come from a family with a history of mental problems. This detail is particularly important because up until the 20th century madness was considered hereditary and women were thought to be the direct inheritors of mental ailments. The differences arisen between Rochester's expectations of his wife and the real persona he therefore attributed to madness without the faintest hint of his ever doubting his judgment: '*I found her nature wholly alien to mine, her tastes obnoxious to me, her cast of mind common, low, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger (…) Bertha Mason, the true daughter of an infamous mother, dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste'*(*JE* p. 302) The reader is faced with a vague portrait of the first wife for he is not given any details as to why Rochester is so vehement in his allegations. The sense of otherness emanating from Bertha is filtered through the aforementioned Victorian virtues which we gather from Rochester were not only absent, but, in fact, replaced by their negative counterparts. Much of J. Rhys' narration plays on this vague description that she fills with situations that do not necessarily turn Bertha into a positive character, but give the reader a different side to her character.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* turns the third person narrative into several first person narratives to emphasize precisely this impossibility of one central omnipotent authoritarian perspective. More specifically, not the impossibility of its existence - literature had been set in an objective third person voice for centuries in the European tradition, but rather the impossibility of the



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omniscient voice to asses with regard to each character. The English side of the story is therefore counterbalanced with a Caribbean side: "The mad first wife in Jane Eyre has always interested me. I was convinced Charlotte Brontë had something against the West Indies and I was angry about it. Otherwise why did she take a West Indian for the horrible lunatic, for that really dreadful creature?"(*WSS* p. viii) Our point of interest is not, of course, whether C. Brontë was biased againstthe West Indies or how this opinion animated the creative energies of J. Rhys but rather the way in which these two works of fiction can be discussed in terms of postcolonial discourse within a postmodern frame.

The islands referred to in J. Rhys' novel are Jamaica and Dominica. Coulibri, the estate where Antoinette grows up is set in Jamaica under English government, one of the reasons why her mother, Annette Cosway is seen as an outsider by the native servants as she comes from Martinique, a French colony. The death of Mr. Cosway, Antoinette's father, doubled by the Emancipation Act passed in 1833 which gave slave owners until 1938 to free their slaves, slowly turn the estate into a ruin. Antoinette grows up in this deserted landscape in which she only receives hate from the local black and the colonial white populations alike as neither could respect creoles who had lost their fortunes. Annette marries again after five years, to Mr. Mason, a wealthy colonizer who, is, in a way similar to Mr. Rochester in his misreading of the local population:

*'You don't like them, or even recognize, the good in them', she said, 'and you won't believe in the other side'.*

*'They're too damn lazy to be dangerous,' said Mr. Mason, 'I know that.'*

*'They are more alive than you are, lazy or not, and they can be cruel for reasons you wouldn't understand.'*

*'No, I don't understand,' Mr. Mason always said. 'I don't understand at all.'(WSS* p. 14*)*

Her second husband's naïve understanding of their perilous situation among the local black people ('*Live here most of your life and know nothing about the people. It's astonishing. They are children – they wouldn't hurt a fly*') leads to a tragic outcome: Annette's handicapped son is killed in the black people's attempt to burn down Coulibri and Annette goes mad. By the time Antoinette turned seventeen, she was a rich heiress left in the care of her step-brother Richard because, though we are not clearly told as Antoinette herself is unsure, her mother died a madwoman and Mr. Mason died as well having left her a large inheritance. This first part of the novel is narrated in Antoinette's voice and gives the reader a glimpse into a world completely unlike England, with a different social order and different customs.

The second part of the novel is told mostly in the voice of Mr. Rochester though his name is never mentioned and takes place at Granbois, an estate on the island of Dominica. Antoinette's transformation into Bertha is a consequence of Rochester's wish to tame his overly passionate wife. The process starts with their marriage and ends with her confinement in London where she is deposed of her ability to speak. The first step towards the effacement of her identity is Rochester's renaming her Bertha, followed by her losing all her fortune – which was his primary drive in marrying her as we are told subtly even in *Jane Eyre* – and finally his acting upon the absolute power over her through love. In a strange land that he



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could never come to call home, Rochester falls prey to Daniel Cosway's, possibly her stepbrother, allegations: that Antoinette came from a family of madmen, that she was unchaste and all of Spanish Town knew it. In a revengeful fit, he has an affair with one of the maids in the room adjoining his wife's, which gives Antoinette even a more forceful shove down the path of madness. Cristophine, her only devoted servant who had reared her since she was young seems to be the voice of reason in this passage:

'*It's she won't be satisfy. She is Creole girl, and she have the sun in her. Tell the truth now. She don't come to your house in this place England they tell me about, she don't come to your beautiful house to beg you to marry with her. No, it's you come all the long way to her house – it's you beg her to marry. And she love you and she give you all she have. Now you say you don't love her and you break her up*.' Cristophine is, in fact, summarizing the reason why Antoinette was different from what he had expected to find in a woman: she had the sun in her, which we might understand as being full of passion, and she was Creole, she came from a long generation of Carribean families who had had very little contact with the English metropolis. The final action that ended Antoinette's metamorphosis into Bertha was her removal to Thornfield in England and confined into a small room in the attic under the permanent surveillance of Grace Pool.

J. Rhys noticed that this female character was little more than a ghost in Brontë's novel, a specter unable to speak. The only instance in *Jane Eyre* when she speaks is given to us through the mouth of her step-brother Richard whom she attacked: "(…) she said she'd drain my heart." Even before leaving Dominica, Antoinette is a pale resemblance of the person she had once been. The two main characters are complete strangers who share only brief conversations and fail to register within the same cultural code as one can infer from Rochester's incessant wishes to change his wife, unaware of the consequences of being stripped of one's otherness: '*She said she loved this place. This is the last she'll see of it. I'll watch for one tear, one human tear. Not that blank hating moonstruck face. I'll listen… If she says good-bye perhaps adieu. (…) If she says it, or weeps, I'll take her in my arms, my lunatic. She's mad but mine, mine. What will I care for gods or devils or for Fate itself. If she smiles or weeps or both. For me*.' (*WSS* p.108)He is waiting for a sign that she is more than a specter, wishing her to retort to her old self, but Antoinette remains mute to his call. His suspicions of her and ultimate betrayal, coupled with clashing standards of "the good life" which each character represents, lead Antoinette to a state of despair and mental frailty and mark her descend into speechlessness.

While in Brontë's novel the Other is only Bertha, the counterpart to good-natured Jane, the former changes place in *Wide Sargasso Sea* with Rochester who becomes the unknown Other. However, her voice is heard very little in the second part of the novel only as she narrates her last rational attempt to make her husband love her once more by asking Cristophine to make her a love potion. After Rochester unwittingly drinks the potion and they spend the night together, all doubt regarding the truth of the stories heard about her disappears as he concludes she must have tried to poison him as a consequence of her deteriorating mental faculties. The troubling Other appears for Antoinette in the third part in the guise of a place as we shall see in the following part. She has now regained anew her voice but not her reason. Antoinette doesn't question her husband because she seems not to have pre-patterned



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expectations of him and endows him with absolute power over her life. The kind of romantic self-renouncement requested by Antoinette meant a transgression against Mr. Rochester's Victorian values, and with the realization that her demands are unrealistic, she allows him to act upon his power in a metaphorical sense:

*'If I could die. Now, when I am happy. Would you do that? You wouldn't have to kill me. Say die and I will die. You don't believe me? Then try, try, say die and watch me die.' 'Die then! Die'.* (*WSS* p. 55)The language-endowed empowerment associate the categories beloved/lover with those of colonizer/colonist, widening the gap between Antoinette and Mr. Rochester.

**The Other as Place**

If distinguishing the instances of otherness in terms of characters proved a complicated task, tracing the other to geographic spaces will prove less difficult. The two opposing centers are England and Dominica and both Rochester and Antoinette openly reveal their uneasiness when each relates the Other place to home. They both describe each other's home as having a dream like quality: Rochester feels that Dominica is "unreal and like a dream", Antoinette sees England as "a cold dark dream sometimes". In *Jane Eyre*, London is more blatantly the only clean soil that can breed good character. In talking about his protégé Adele, Rochester says that he brought the girl from *'the mud and slime of Paris, and transplanted it here, to grow up clean in the wholesome soil of an English country garden.'* Even within Europe, London is never rivaled in Rochester's perspective, not even by the other great colonial power's metropolis, Paris. In the third and last part of J. Rhys' novel the reader can hear Bertha's voice for the last time. She is now in the cold dark place that she feared before, but which she doesn't recognize as England. Her world is the house she is trapped in emanating the same unreal characteristic that her Caribbean island had for Rochester.

If nature's beauty and mystery was what disquieted Rochester in Granbois to the extent that it ultimately destroyed his ability to trust a person dissimilar to himself ('*I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. (...) I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret that 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 the loveliness.'*(*WSS* p. 11) it was the unreal materiality around her that disconcerted Bertha. Everything seemed to her made of cardboard ready to catch fire at anytime. The comparison between the new world imprisoning her and cardboard offers a motivation for Bertha's final act of setting fire to the house.

The overwhelming sensuality confessed to by Rochester in *Jane Eyre* "I was dazzled, stimulated: my senses were excited" when recounting his story to Jane becomes a key characteristic of the Caribbean islands he visits. Everything around Granbois from the strongly scented flowers to the tropical foods and drinks composed a panorama that inflamed the senses with its overabundance. As Rochester turned steadily from concern to paranoia in this otherworldly island, so did Bertha when removed from her house under the tropical sun to a darker Other place. Even in her undoubtedly altered condition, she still remembered and



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pined for her native land. Her only possession that she held on to more than she held on to time – as that no longer mattered - was a red dress which kept '*The smell of vetiver and frangipani, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain.'* Both novels illustrate the impossibility to inhabit a land imagined in such strong opposition to a character's homeland. The commonplace in their homelands suffered such alterations in the Other place that the two characters fought to regain a firm hold of it.

**Conclusions**

The multiplication of cultural centers in the 20th century as movements of national liberation from decades long colonial tradition dissipated the Western claim to centrality. The literary canon expanded its corpus by letting in writings that revised or even repudiated high literature. J. Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a reply to Victorian Novel *Jane Eyre* that deals with the problem of otherness seen through two characters: Antoinette Mason and Edwards Rochester. The problem of the Other set throughout the novel postulates the existence of an imbalance of power introduced through the dual complex relationship between lover/colonist and beloved/colonizer. The marked difference in sameness between the characters as well as the places they represent and of which they are extensions –England and Dominica- results in a disastrous marriage that finds its ending in Charlotte Brontë's novel

[1] Gott Patricia, LISA e-journal, "There Is Always the Other Side"
[2] MacPhee Graham, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, p. 12
[3] MacPhee Graham, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, p. 11
[4] Hutceaon Linda, *Poetica Postmodernismului*, p. 328-330
[5] MacPhee Graham, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, p. 89
[6] Le Magazine littéraire, "Écrire le féminin : de l'ange à Antigone". Dossier / Virginia Woolf- 31/03/2012 par Frédéric Regard dans Mensuel n°518, p. 70

**Abbreviations**

**JE –** *Jane Eyre*
**WSS –** *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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