THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPACE IN JEAN RHYS'S "WIDE SARGASSO SEA"[1]

***Abstract**: This paper attempts to show the exotic island of Jamaica, due to sketches of its environment and thus creating a realistic mental image for its reader. It also tries to show in what way the locations in* "Wide Sargasso Sea" *expose the main characters and their fate. However, places and landscapes are more than simply the setting for the action. They not only form the structural and thematic patterns of the novel, but they are used to construct the character's state of mind and/or their sense of personal, racial and cultural identity. For example, Rochester's sense of Granbois, seen as a place of refuge is related to his fragile English identity in that alien place. The opposition between the two main characters can also be expressed in their different responses to the same landscape, as in the different ways in which Antoinette and Rochester respond to Granbois.*

***Keywords**: location metaphors, doubled identity, periphery of consciousness.*

Introduction

The most important location in the book is the island of Jamaica, where the action of the novel takes place, more specifically the house in which Antoinette spends her years as a young girl. The nature that surrounds her home is seen as the 'Garden of Eden': "Our garden was large and beautiful as the garden in the Bible- the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell" (Rhys, 1999:10-11). Apart from the intertextual link with the downfall of the Bible's Eden, it is a foreboding image of Antoinette's life. Her garden is a symbol for her own fate. She too will grow out of control and in a way be a mixture of life and death, ending up crazy.

The Sargasso Sea

The state of being marooned links Antoinette to the wilderness of her place and her existence: "Indians who escaped the genocidal tactics of the colonizers were then called Maroons. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the word had taken on connotations of being 'wild', 'fierce', and 'unbroken'" (Emery, 1990: 54). One of the locations within the island itself is the convent in which Antoinette lives a regular life for a while. She finds her identity within the patterns of the convent. As Emery Mary Lou says: "[t]he opening of the convent gates represents the dissolution of Antoinette's feelings of security and clarity behind the convent walls" (Rhys, 1999: 71). The convent is all that oppose the island itself: strictly divided, regular, understandable and predictable, while she herself is too wild, just like the island.

Moreover, there is Mr. Rochester, Antoinette's husband, not by choice. It is soon apparent that he does not get on well with the island, illustrated by his thoughts: "Everything is too much ... Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (Rhys, 1999: 71). He is

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blown away by its overpowering beauty, it is almost as if he cannot handle the island. Antoinette means the same to him as the island does:

> I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and 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 the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it. (Rhys, 1999: 50)

Rochester hates what he desires, yet cannot understand; both island and Antoinette are a mystery to him, but both cast a certain enchantment upon him. To sustain this fact, in his *Critical Study* of Rhys, Thomas Staley stresses their differences: "[...] we are constantly made aware of the unbridgeable gulf of understanding which separates them. […] Antoinette is a part of the Islands; her attraction to the wild and the exotic confirms her affinity; it ties her irrevocably to this land" (Staley, 1979: 103). From this quotation it clearly appears that Antoinette cannot really be separated from the island. In this sense, John Su asserts: "Antoinette expresses a profound longing for the West Indies of her youth; [she] contrast[s] [her] lifeless and lonely present among the white English against a vibrant past among the black West Indians" (Su, 2003: 68). Their honeymoon takes place on island of Granbois, near a village with a very much evil omen name, that of Massacre. Therefore, their marriage will not last, but will in a way end up in a massacre. Even more Rochester's attitude towards the island shows that his relationship with Antoinette will not last, especially when he takes her to England. Although most of the significant locations in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are exotic, the contrast between Jamaica and England is also meaningful. On the island itself, the honeymoon estate titled Granbois ('great forest') foretells her emigration to the cold large forests of England.

Rochester stays with Antoinette only for her money, so he has to take her with him to England, because he will not stay on the island. It is too wild and complicated for him. On the one hand, he leaves Antoinette (the island) behind and on the other, he takes her (Bertha, his creation) with him. With this act, part of Antoinette dies:

> I have been too unhappy, I thought, it cannot last, being so unhappy, it would kill you. […] England, rosy pink in the geography book map, but on the page opposite the words are closely crowded, heavy looking. […] Cool green leaves in the short cool summer. There are fields of corn like sugar-cane fields, but gold colour and not so tall. After summer the trees are bare, then winter and snow. White feathers falling? Torn pieces of paper falling? They say frost makes flower patterns on the window panes. I must know than I know already. For I know that house where I will be cold and not belonging. (Rhys, 1999: 68)

Antoinette does neither belong to England, nor has she left her real identity, self on the island. "Her image of England is gradually dominated by cold and snow, all of its features set in careful contrast to the warmth of her native land. England holds no hope for her; it is cold, menacing, isolated, dead. […] There is no unifying element where the two of them [Antoinette and Edward Rochester] can meet; there is no context to join them" (Staley, 1979: 90). England was always dead to Antoinette, as is Rochester to her. Antoinette belongs to her island, even though she has a complicated relationship with its native inhabitants. She is as colourful, wild and unpredictable as the island. England and Rochester are cold and do not and will not understand Antoinette. She

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lives there, but her mind in on the island: "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (Rhys, 1999: 112).

Finally, the major location, the Sargasso Sea is situated between the West Indies and the western (other) world of the United States. Not only does this part of the ocean seem to be torn between these two different cultures, but it also covers the notorious and mysterious Bermuda Triangle, or also known as "The Sea of Lost Ships". If the plot of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is unknown to the reader, at least the title is foreboding for Antoinette's fate: she will get just as lost as ships in the Sargasso Sea, both being an unstable mixture of two cultures.

The Caribbean (Is)landscape as Homeland

In the process of locating the cultural identities to the *place*, Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin argue that the concept of place in post colonial societies is a "complex interaction of language, history and environment" (Ashcroft *et al*., 1995: 389). The *Caribbean landscape* is both beckoning and impenetrable; it is wild and lush and it is corrupt and untameable. It discloses great mystery and beauty but this merely tempts the greedy of heart to cry: "I want what it hides" (*WSS*, 189).

The displacement and resettlement of Rhys's protagonists is condemned to *inbetween-ity*. Antoinette's belonging to the *Caribbean landscape* can be observed in *Wide Sargasso Sea* through the colonial distance from what it must forever be her *dream space*: "we changed course and lost our way to England" (*WSS*, 213). Thus, the Caribbean islandscape becomes an *illusory psychic space* made out of flashbacks of second-hand memories.

In dealing with *the loss of Caribbean landscape as homeland*, Rhys's fiction foreshadows the issuse of homecomings and alienating experiences of the white Creoles who oscillates between the lost ancestral cultures, harsh poverty-stricken island societies and the hostile landscape of the metropolitan host cultures. Homecoming then can only be a contradictory return in and to a *Caribbean imaginary* or the Caribbean *topoi*.

Not quite English and not quite 'native', Rhys's Creole woman straddles the embattled scission between human and savage, core and periphery, self and other. For example, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, after a disagreement, Antoinette accuses her friend of being a "cheating nigger" (*WSS*, 10) and Tia calls her a "white cockroach" (*WSS*, 9). Both girls are moved by the touching atmosphere of the moment because they feel that something has been lost. They see each other as in a mirror image. Moreover, if immediately after her mother's second marriage Antoinette is glad "to be like an English girl" (*WSS*, 17), later she will come to wonder who she is: "So between you 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*, 64).

Christophine, "a wedding gift from Martinique" (*WSS*, 8), is an emblematic character in the novel. She is practically Antoinette's caretaker and – in the first part of the text – appears different from the other women in Antoinette's eyes: "she was not like the other women. She was much blacker. [...] she had a quiet voice and a quiet laugh (*WSS*, 7). Nevertheless, as soon as Christophine says she does not know England, Antoinette thinks "but how can she know the best thing for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate, old Negro woman" (*WSS*, 70).

But once the local has been fixed, once the materials out of which a text has been made have been located and studied, the critical movement has finally to be

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outwards, towards the larger picture of which the locality forms only a part. Readings that focus on the counter-discursive strategies of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, though often carried out with radical motives, have tended to set the categories of 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' in stone. Jean Rhys's novels, especially *Wide Sargasso Sea*, may be seen as an entry point to the analysis of the Other as 'latent' to the Western metropolitan centre and its discourses. As the metropolitan space is unmapped, the Other therefore destabilizes the terrain on which Western appropriating strategies are conducted. To re-map the centre's geographies and identities can be an act of resistance especially when metropolitan space is re-described from within the perspective of the Other. The oxymoronic conceptualization of the Other as absent/present defines the Other as never *present*, never *now*. Rhys's postcolonial narrative strategies institute accordingly new stances about identity. Rhys's postcolonial strategies of resistance seek to embrace a perspective whereby identity, space and temporality may be rendered contingent, shifting and uncertain.

In dealing with the absent Other of the metropolitan centre, Rhys's novel does not only undermine the universal consensus of human rights and social equality as an impossible political and social utopia, but it also touches upon the limits of the finite thought of the Same, upon the inadmissible and the uncanny. They point to the uncertainty and ambivalence at the heart of the self and other, centre and periphery to make up that which exceeds the 'historical', the 'social', the 'rational', and above all the 'Manichean'.

Moreover, Rhys shows the tension between imperial and resistant constructions of 'place' through her attention to the ways in which the island is produced not only by her protagonist's imagination, but by a dominant, imperial imagination as well. The relationship between identity and belonging focuses on two directions of thought: one that claims that the reinvented self expresses the simultaneity of home-exile; and the other one that argues that the existential anxiety is related to the feeling of estrangement from the natural environment. First, a colonial who is trapped within the logic of a place that enforces her Caribbean status while insisting that she can never really be English, exposes his/her national identity itself that is always subject to confusion. Secondly, as long as Englishness is so unreliable, the Caribbean 'colonial identity' too must remain in doubt. There are reasons to believe that both these views offer a broad picture of the relationship between the two approaches of belongingness.

Taking into consideration the 'multi-relation' that 'shadows' the region, a new creative and cultural context for Caribbean identity can be effectively forged. Essentially an artistic framework that draws on linguistic, cultural, and historical patterns of pluralism within the region to express the totality of the Caribbean experience, 'Creolité', as Michael Dash continues, "is essentially a strategic defence of the ideal of diversity in a world threatened by the disappearance of cultural difference" (Dash, 1998: 239). Barbados, Jamaica and Martinique are among the remnants of a British-colonial empire which now only encompasses a few overseas departments, overseas territories and 'collective territories'. While their historical past and colonial present relate them to a distant metropolis, their history, socio-demographic profile, their cultural traditions and geographical location place them within a Caribbean continuum. They serve to anchor the fundamental role played by the struggle between the written and the oral word in the search for identity in the British Caribbean. This linguistic/literary struggle has also led to the creolizing the literary trace left by European authors in an attempt to open new perspectives on Creoleness.

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Conclusions

To conclude, it can be said that locations play a large role in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Places can symbolise a character's attitude and opinion towards something, such a Rochester's view towards both island and Antoinette. She herself is very much entangled with the island, sharing main characterisations as viewed by Rochester. He hates and fears both of them in a way, but desires to have them and their secrets. For Antoinette both wilderness and peaceful convent show her own contrasts. Her need for regularity, but her craving towards the wild. She is not able to control herself, just as the island cannot control itself. It is the core of what Rochester fears: lack of control. This aspect explains Rochester locking his insane wife away, in that way he can still control her.

The locations are also foretelling: the names of the places, feelings, surroundings, already show that Rochester and Antoinette will not live a happy life. Even the title itself signals how lost Antoinette will be in the end. Thus, the reader is introduced through all the descriptions of the locations into the tragic climax of Antoinette's sad fate, namely the madness at the end of the novel (see the figure in the appendix).

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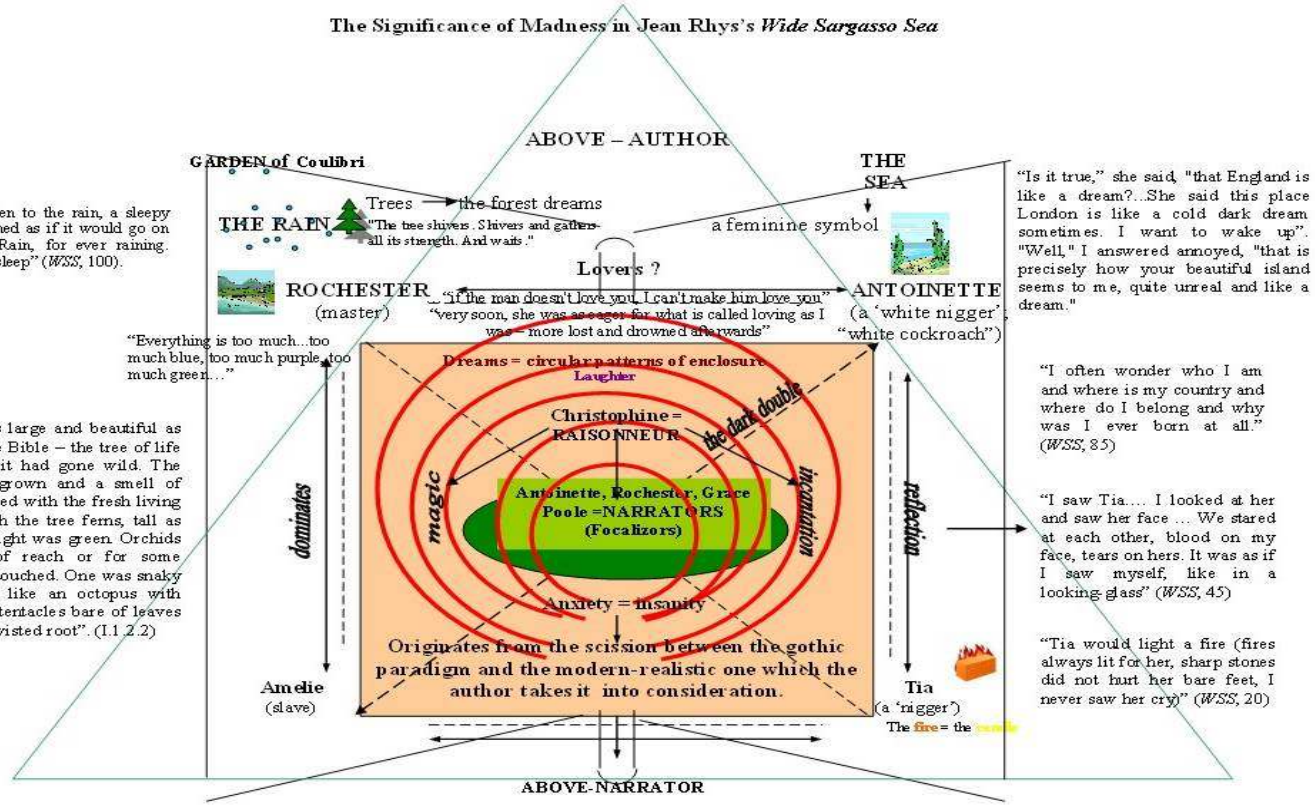
LOST IN THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE:

The Significance of Madness in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*



"Then I'd listen to the rain, a sleepy tune that seemed as if it would go on for ever … Rain, for ever raining. Drown me in sleep" (*WSS*, 100).

"Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest trees, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root". (I.1.2.2)

"Is it true," she said, "that England is like a dream?...She said this place 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."

"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*, 85)

"I saw Tia.... I looked at her and saw her face … We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself, like in a looking-glass" (*WSS*, 45)

"Tia would light a fire (fires always lit for her, sharp stones did not hurt her bare feet, I never saw her cry)" (*WSS*, 20)

"It was a beautiful place – wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness 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". (II.3.4.4) (*WSS*, 51-52).