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Abject by Gender and Race: The Loss of Antoinette's Identity in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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ABSTRACT

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a postcolonial novel that gives a voice to Antoinette, the Creole woman described as the "mad woman in the attic" in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been widely discussed by critics, especially in the fields of postcolonial, feminist and modernist literary theory, but while many critics have focused on how it rewrites race and gender as expressed in *Jane Eyre*, this work highlights the novel as an independent entity and introduces the notion of abjection to analyze Antoinette's identity crisis. Thus, by examining the connections between race and gender in Rhys' novel in the light of Ania Loomba's ideas about colonialism and postcolonialism and linking it to psychoanalytic feminism with Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, it is possible to understand why Antoinette loses her identity and how madness actually operates in a colonial and patriarchal society. Race and gender are used to provide metaphors for one another and to abject 'the other' among us, driving it to insanity.

INTRODUCTION

In Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), Edward Rochester's first wife, Bertha Mason, is described as a Jamaican madwoman locked up in the attic of their house in England because of her violent insanity. The novel predicates Edward as a victim who was tricked into marrying Bertha, a "lunatic," "whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing—" (Brontë, 303-304). Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) tells the story of this 'other woman,' originally named Antoinette Cosway, and how her identity was oppressed, eventually leading to complete madness and loss of self.

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Because of this background, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has often been discussed in its relationship to Brontë's novel. As a "writing back to *Jane Eyre* done before such intertextuality became identified as a widespread postcolonial response to colonial literary canons" (Savory, 80), it has thus "challenged easy definition and has invited intense debate" (Raiskin, xi). Research on the novel has often dealt with both the relationship between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* and the characters of Jane and Antoinette[1], Rhys as a West Indian writer in the Caribbean tradition[2], or questions of race, colonial domination, gender, and female subjectivity[3]. This paper, focusing entirely on Antoinette as an individual character separate from Jane, ties together issues of race and gender as oppressive categories in the context of forming one's identity. Postcolonial critics have discussed Antoinette's 'otherness' as a result of colonial rule, while feminist theorists (using, for example, the texts of Irigaray and Kristeva) have often emphasized the patriarchal dimension of society and the connection between madness and the mother-daughter relationships of the book. This paper focuses on otherness and madness, which include not only the colonizer-colonized, male-female and mother-daughter relationships, but also the repression coming from the *self*, together in a patriarchal and colonial society, leading to the complete abjection of Antoinette and a loss of her identity.

WRONG RACE AND GENDER: THE ULTIMATE SUBALTERN

Antoinette is a white Creole woman living in nineteenth century, British-owned Jamaica after the emancipation of slaves. She and her mother represent the white minority on the island and are despised by black Jamaicans because of their family's background as slave owners. Since early childhood, Antoinette's family was ridiculed and tormented by the people around them: "I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us, they called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping dogs lie" (13). Simultaneously, it is implied that the differences between the English and the Creoles were considered "racial as well as cultural" (Raiskin, 39): "[Edward's[4] narration:] Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (Rhys, 39). Thus, Antoinette and her mother were "white niggers" who belonged neither to Jamaican *nor* English culture, but instead were trapped in between: "And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and

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[1] See article by Maurel.

[2] See Ramchand for an analysis of Wide Sargasso Sea as a West Indian novel.

[3] On imperialism and colonial domination, see Spivak. For an insightful analysis of female subjectivity under patriarchal domination, see Fayad. On madness and mother-daughter relationships in postcolonial texts, see Gunner.

[4] Edward Rochester is actually never named in Wide Sargasso Sea, but in this paper he will be referred to as Edward, according to the story of Jane Eyre.

where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (61). In the midst of two different cultures and nations Antoinette cannot find any place of her own.

Antoinette's role becomes almost worse than that of the traditionally colonized. She is not just the 'other' to black Jamaicans but to the white English, too, and therefore her ambiguous position in Jamaica as a white Creole becomes her personal tragedy ("'None of you understand about us', I thought" [18]). Furthermore, she is a Creole woman. Ania Loomba describes in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* how race and gender provide metaphors and images for each other in the colonial arena: "In short, lower races represented the 'female' type of the human species, and females the 'lower race' of gender" (161). Loomba explains how in colonial texts (and thus in common opinion) both non-Europeans and women were viewed as being either passive, child-like and needing leadership or as sexually aberrant, emotional, wild and outside society (159).

Loomba's ideas can be used when analyzing Antoinette's position in *Wide Sargasso Sea;* she is constantly perceived, especially by Edward, in these two traditional ways. She is either child-like, needing Edward to love and guide her ("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" [56]), or she poses a threat to him with her dangerous outbursts, sexuality, and knowledge of (her Martiniquais servant's) Caribbean black magic ("Then she cursed me comprehensively [...] this red-eyed wild-haired stranger who was my wife shouting obscenities at me" [89]).

In addition, Loomba points out how the analogy between the subordination of women and colonial subjects easily leaves out the question of colored women, because "the colonial subject is conceptualized as male and the female as white" (163). Therefore, colored women who "suffer from both racial and gendered forms of oppression simultaneously" (163) are forgotten, which is the case for Antoinette as well. Although being white by skin, she is not considered European or Western by others and thus belongs to both a subordinate race and gender. In this forgotten category, Antoinette is forced to try to form her identity and become a part of the symbolic order –and ultimately fails in her attempt.

THE FIGURE OF THE 'OTHER WOMAN'

Having lived during the colonial era, Edward's conception of people in Jamaica, including Antoinette, is heavily influenced by the tradition of colonial texts. Although he is not an actual colonizer himself and supports the end of slavery, to him, Antoinette—despite her English roots—becomes very much like the figure of the 'other woman' in colonial writing. Edward's perception of Jamaica and Antoinette are closely entwined to each other and his attitude towards them changes throughout the story, from affection and fascination to hatred and disgust, and culminates in the end as they are ready to leave the country:

> I was tired of these people. I disliked their laughter and their tears, their flattery and envy, their conceit and deceit. And I hated the place. I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain [...] 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. (103)

In Edward's mind, Jamaica and Antoinette become one. From the beginning of the colonial period, female bodies symbolized the conquered land (Loomba, 152) and the effects of this symbolization can be seen in the way Edward perceives Antoinette. However, for Edward, this conquest never succeeds; he fails to understand Antoinette or the country that—to him—seems dream-like and unreal (Rhys, 47). In the tradition of colonial texts, the white Western man functions as the conqueror and observer who also speaks for and represents the colonized land and its women, for they have no voice of their own under the colonizer's dominance. In addition to giving a voice to the 'other woman' through Antoinette, *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a postcolonial novel also shows the reversed side of the white man's role; Edward often feels lost, observed and hated in Jamaica, at the same time as he is indifferent to what is happening around him. He understands he does not have a connection to the "brightly colored, very strange" country which, just like Antoinette, "never had anything to do with me at all" (45).

Thus, to Edward, Antoinette remains distant and alien. Loomba describes how the figure of the 'other woman' often encoded colonial fantasies of the perfect feminine behavior, of the Western man taking care of and saving the native woman (157). Although Antoinette wants to believe that Edward will save her from her unhappiness, Edward himself is not able to perceive this, and instead is unmoved: "You're safe, I'd say. She'd liked that–to be told 'you are safe' […]I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did" (55). Therefore, when Edward realizes his isolation and lack of ability to truly understand and possess this Creole woman, when he does not get a hold of the secret and magic inside Antoinette and her country, he starts to suffocate her identity.

'THE OTHER' PUSHED TO ABJECTION

As Edward understands he can't access Antoinette's mind, in addition to the rumors he hears of her past (a lunatic mother, mentally disabled brother, servant who knows black magic), Antoinette becomes more and more a symbol of the "fear of the colonial land" (Loomba, 151). To him, Antoinette is something he can't quite comprehend or define – something that is approaching abjection. This can be clearly seen in the twofold way Edward perceives Antoinette; he simultaneously desires and loathes her. In *Powers of Horror,* Julia Kristeva describes the relationship we have with the abject as follows: "[the abject] lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (1). In a very similar way, Edward's desire for Antoinette turns into loathing and rejection.

> [Antoinette:] '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? Then try, try, say die and watch me die.' [Edward:] 'Die then, die!' I watched her die many times. In my way, not

> in hers. In sunlight, in shadow, in moonlight, by candlelight [...] Very soon she was as eager for what's called loving as I was – more lost and drowned afterwards. (55)

Sex and death become connected; Antoinette provokes Edward "to tell her to die (literally), but he speaks of her 'dying' many times in the sense of orgasm" (Savory, 85). Edward thirsts for Antoinette, but soon the roles are reversed as he starts to suppress her identity, and sex itself becomes a way of control for Edward to achieve domination over her. He cannot access her culture and country, but he can become sexually superior by using Antoinette's desire and later completely rejecting it: "Christophine, he does not love me, I think he hates me. He always sleeps in his dressing room now [...] if he, my husband, could come to me one night. Once more, I would make him love me" (65-68). Loomba writes about the "tradition of stories in which the desire of the native woman for the European man coded for the submission of the colonized people" (153), and on some level that is what Edward is trying to achieve. When Antoinette seduces him to bed with black magic, Edward's loathing has already become so strong that he wakes up the next morning vomiting; it is as if he is trying to cast Antoinette, the abject, out of himself. He is reacting to Antoinette the way Kristeva describes our reaction to the abject: "'I' want none of that element, sign of their desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not want to assimilate it, 'I' expel it [...] I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which I claim to establish *myself*" (3).

According to Kristeva, what causes abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Antoinette has been viewed this way throughout her life; she has been ridiculed, oppressed and observed as something between subject/object, English/Jamaican, past/future. It is hard for the English and the Jamaicans to classify her, as she represents something in the past (her family's history with colonialism and slavery) that wants to be forgotten. In addition, she is a female – a dangerous one, because of the madness in her family and the black magic her servant practices. Kristeva states that the only quality that the abject and the object share is that of being opposed to 'I' (1); as the 'other woman' Antoinette has always represented something in opposition to everyone around her.

Because of her past, Antoinette is already on the verge of losing herself when married to Edward, who begins to oppress her further in order to gain control over her. In the end, Antoinette is a thing that Edward needs to possess, to be superior to, as an English man: "If she too says it, or weeps, I'll take her in my arms, my lunatic. She's mad but *mine, mine*" (99). By forcing Antoinette to lose connection to herself, by pushing her to the borders of existence, to abjection, Edward thinks he can finally access and dominate her, like he describes the wind mastering the bamboos on the island: "The bamboos take an easier way, they bend to the earth and lie there, creaking, groaning, crying for mercy. The contemptuous wind passes, not caring for these abject things. (*Let them live.)* Howling, shrieking, laughing the wild blast passes" (98). Edward starts calling Antoinette by another name, Bertha, to deny her true identity and past ("Names matter, like when he [Edward] wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass" [107]). He forces her to speak only to deny her voice and right to be heard, her right to be a part of the

symbolic order ("'Will you listen to me for God's sake', Antoinette said" [76], "'You have no right to ask questions about my mother and then refuse to listen to my answer'" [78]), and finally starts treating her like a doll, an object, denying her own subjectivity ("The doll had a doll's voice, a breathless but curiously indifferent voice [...] the doll's smile came back – nailed to her face" [102-103]).

THE ABJECTION OF SELF

Kristeva states how the peak of abjection happens when "the subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject" (5). Instead of being able to relate to the people around her, Antoinette had to repress her identity around others since early childhood. She tries to identify with Edward, too, almost as a desperate last attempt to achieve happiness: "I never wished to live before I knew you [...] Why did you make me want to live? Why did you do that to me?" (54), "I have been too unhappy, I thought, it cannot last, being so unhappy, it would kill you. I will be a different person when I live in England—" (66). However, Edward, just like everyone else before, rejects her. Under these circumstances Antoinette starts to become abject to even herself; the hatred she experienced from others turns into loathing within herself. Kristeva continues: "abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of memory" (5). Antoinette ends up seeing herself outside human contact, which would forces her to picture herself as something contaminated, repulsive, abject:

> And if the razor grass cut my legs and arms I would think 'It's better than people.' Black ants or red ones, tall nests swarming with white ants, rain that soaked me to the skin – once I saw a snake. All better than people. Better. Better, better than people. Watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door opened and I was someone else, something else. Not myself any longer. (16)

In Antoinette's case, the abjection of self goes back to the relationship she had with her mother. Kristeva describes how abject is linked to primal repression; how it confronts us "with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity – thanks to autonomy of language" (13). One has to become "homologous to another in order to become himself" (13) and then abject the maternal to become a subject. But all Antoinette could identify with and try to abject was a distant mother who refused to have a close relationship with her; a mother whom others drove to madness and one who rejected Antoinette's presence ("she was so lonely that she grew away from other people",[78], "Not my mother. Never had been. Never would be" [21]). In a way, Antoinette cannot abject her mother because instead her mother abjects her: "as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her" (11). Thus, Antoinette's entering into the symbolic order was troubled from the beginning. This can also be seen in the way she perceives language itself: Antoinette only dares to tell her secrets in the darkness of the night ([Edward:] "Shall I wake her up and listen to the things she says, whispers, in darkness. Not by day" [54]), and during the daytime she often keeps her thoughts to herself and implements silence as a way to stifle them: "Say nothing and it may not be true" (35).

Loomba states that both women and the colonized are split subjects who "watch themselves being watched by men. They run themselves into objects" (162). Antoinette looking at her image in a mirror is a continuous theme in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. However, rather than observing herself as an object, what is more important is her failure in surveying herself at all. Antoinette doesn't quite relate to the woman she sees in the mirror: "I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself […] Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (107). Being pushed to the limits of the symbolic order, she cannot survey herself as a whole identity could; therefore, she is hypnotized with the mirror, trying to find herself and understand what she sees, just like her mother did: "I used to think that every time she [Antoinette's mother] looked in the glass she must have hoped and pretended. I pretended too" (78). The further her subjectivity and identity are oppressed, and the more she becomes abjected by others and herself, the harder it is for her to relate to her own image. By the end of the text, when Antoinette has been locked in the attic in England and deprived of all identity and subjectivity, she no longer recognizes herself in the mirror but instead sees the abject, the ghost of a woman "who they say haunts this place" (111): "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" (111-112).

Edward attempts to hide the abject out of sight and push it away from consciousness by locking Antoinette in the attic of their house after their move to England. The abject, however, can never be completely destroyed. It lingers, threatening its master just as Antoinette does when she escapes her prison from time to time and creeps around the house, a reminder that her presence is still there, even if kept seemingly invisible ("When night comes and she has had several drinks and sleeps, it is easy to take the keys […] Then I open the door and walk into their world" [107]). Antoinette's madness and her last dream – where she jumps down from the roof after setting the house on fire – have been analyzed as signs of her defiance against the colonial and patriarchal power structures (See, for example, Gunner 143-149). Eventually, she does not yield to anyone but instead escapes. Unable to fully be a part of the symbolic order, Antoinette has to manifest her existence through madness. It is only after death that one can escape the condition of waste, reject and abject (Kristeva, 16) and therefore, by deciding to burn the house and jump from its roof, Antoinette can break away from abjection: "I was outside holding my candle. Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do […] it burned up again to light me along the dark passage" (112). In the end Antoinette, like the abject, defies and destroys the limits others have tried to set on her and decides to free herself.

CONCLUSION

As a postcolonial novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* brings out the oppression and domination of a colonial and patriarchal society under which Antoinette lived; it shows how Antoinette, under the pressure of her race and gender, is forced to abject her own identity. Her subjectivity is trampled upon, ridiculed and torn into pieces by everyone around her – she is never given the chance to respect herself or even form a clear perception of her identity in relation to others. As someone who is always othered and abjected, she never fully becomes a part of the symbolic

order that, according to Kristeva, separates us from the abject and is crucial to the formation of one's own identity. Antoinette is forced to repress and abject herself and there, between the boundaries of object and subject, as something loathed by others, she slowly begins to lose herself. Just like the abject that needs to be hidden out of sight and denied because it threatens our own borders and existence, Antoinette had to be locked away too – in the attic as – a desperate attempt to control and silence that which cannot be kept away and continues to impose its threat on us. In the end, Antoinette defies her role as an outsider of the symbolic order by deciding to destroy and escape the house that tried to tie her into a life of abjection.

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