Muffled Woman. Gender and power in Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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*Perhaps Love would have smiled then*
*Shown us the way*
*Across that sea. They say it’s strewn with wrecks*
*And weed-infested*
*Few dare it, fewer still escape.*

Jean Rhys, “Obeah Night”.

**Resumen:**


**Palabras claves:**

Teoría crítica feminista, estudios poscoloniales, patriarcado, poder.
Introduction

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Jean Rhys subverts and transforms Charlotte Brontë’s classic novel, *Jane Eyre*, by rewriting it into a different setting and by challenging the codes of English imperialism. The Dominican writer thus produces a postcolonial work from the perspective and voice of the Creole lunatic as a prequel to Brontë’s novel. Rhys’s portrayal of Antoinette as the ‘other’ and of her culture as hybrid effectively unveils a subtext of racial prejudice and female oppression.

In a subversive movement, Rhys overturns perspectives and shows the other side of the story. Readers now learn that the character of Bertha, Edward Rochester’s apparently mad wife in *Jane Eyre*, is named by birth Antoinette Cosway. As a Creole, she belongs to two clearly distinct worlds: the sensuous Caribbean world of the West Indies, with its profusion of wild nature, symbolizing chaos and primitivism; and on the other extreme, the civilized world of the European colonizer with its laws and customs.

This research work outlines the different ways in which the Creole female protagonist in *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been led to reinforce her muted position and, ultimately, to lose her identity in phallocentric society. Feminist literary criticism along with post-colonial studies guide this research work. Such an interdisciplinary approach allows for a detailed and comprehensive analysis on gender issues and power relations. Specifically, the notions of the dominant and the muted together with monodimensional and multidimensional perspectives on reality as proposed by Dale Spender are used throughout the analysis.

Feminism, not merely as a literary approach but rather as a social, revolutionary movement and set of beliefs that reached its peak precisely in the 1960s, questions the long-standing power relations and reveals the prejudices about women constructed by men so as to perpetuate male dominance. In addition, post-colonial studies serve to highlight the tension between the imperial power and the hybrid colonial culture.

**Theoretical Framework**

- Feminist Criticism

By the late 1960s, a movement in critical literary theory had clearly emerged as an attempt to describe and reinterpret women’s experience as portrayed in literature, especially in the novel. Feminist criticism challenges “the long-standing, dominant, male, phallocentric
ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations in literature. It also questions traditional and established male ideas about the nature of women and about how women are supposed to feel, act and think. Therefore, it attempts to unveil the prejudices and assumptions about women constructed by male writers. Feminism could thus be defined as “a critique of the phallocentric assumptions that govern literary works”.

Anglo-American critics have been mainly involved with “thematic studies of writings by and about women” while French feminist critics have focused on “the theory of the role of gender in writing”. Influenced by semiotics and deconstruction, these theorists have been concerned with “a critique of language”. Since they sustain that “most Western languages are male-dominated and male-engendered”, discourse is thus considered mainly ‘phallogocentric’, as Derrida explained. Consequently, they are interested in “the possibility of a woman’s language and of écriture féminine”. According to Hélène Cixous, écriture feminine offers the possibility of disrupting the bases of patriarchal logos; that is, the hierarchical binary oppositions that lie behind the systems of cultural and political repression. “In recent French writing ‘woman’ has come to stand for any radical force that subverts the concepts, assumptions and structures of traditional male discourse.” It is thus argued that feminine writing will provide literature with meaning generated not through hierarchical binary oppositions but through difference. Feminine discourse would deconstruct the order of preference between signifiers. “‘Naming’ would no longer be based on the desire to appropriate a person or object but on the attempt to bring the other to life.”

In her seminal critical essay “Toward a Feminist Poetics”, Elaine Showalter, an advocate of Anglo-American feminism, examines the process of evolution of feminist criticism and distinguishes two distinct varieties – literary criticism concerned with woman as a reader or with woman as a writer. Showalter explains that feminist criticism deals with “the way in which the hypothesis of a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text, awakening us to the significance of its sexual codes”. In addition, Gynocritics, as Showalter stated, “is concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the

26 CUDDON. “Feminism” The Penguin Dictionary ... 315.
28 CUDDON. “Feminism” The Penguin Dictionary ... 318.
30 CULLER. On Deconstruction ... 61.
31 SELLERS. “Writing Woman ...” 445.
history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women. Their texts begin to be seen as experimental and self-contained.

Furthermore, the literary critics Gilbert and Gubar question the patriarchal notion of writing in their renowned essay, “The Madwoman in the Attic”. It has long been held in patriarchal Western literary tradition that “male sexuality [is] the essence of literary power”. The writer, therefore, seems to ‘father’ his text. “The text’s author is a father, […] an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis.” Consequently, the origin of meaning lies exclusively in male hands since the pen, that is a male ‘tool’, becomes “not only inappropriate but actually alien to women”. Accordingly, these ideas basically prevented women from writing and any intellectual activity was seen as alien to the female. In order to criticize phallocentrism, Derrida describes the literary process in the following terms: if the pen represented the penis – a proper male quality, a creative gift and the essential feature for begetting thought on paper, then the woman – the hymen – was represented by the blank page that was passively acted on by man; thus becoming mere sexual objects. The implications are that women lack autonomy as well as power to create and that their blankness is symbolically defined as “a tabula rasa, a lack, a negation [or] an absence.”

In Man Made Language, an influential work of feminist criticism, Dale Spender resorts to the terms of dominant and muted, from Edwin Ardener’s anthropological studies, to explain how men and women differ in the construction or validation of meanings in social discourse. Spender explains that Ardener has used these terms to clarify some evidence he found in his research. Ardener stated that the meanings and structures that existed in 20th century western society had been formulated by males and validated by other males. Since such “activity has been the prerogative of men, Ardener labelled men as the dominant group.” Women were thus considered the muted group since they did not participate in the construction or validation of meaning; consequently, having no means to express themselves. Shirley Ardener, working on Edwin Ardener’s model, argues that the registers for public discourse have been encoded by men; therefore, women are forced to translate their meanings into the male code. “In order to meet these linguistic demands

33 SHOWALTER, ELAINE. “Toward …” 131.
34 GILBERT, SANDRA AND GUBAR, SUSAN. “The Madwoman in the Attic”. Women and Literary Production. 64.
38 GUBAR. “‘The Blank Page’ and … “ 89.
40 SPENDER. Man Made … 77.
which are not of their own making, [...] women are obliged to monitor, to transform their meanings so that they conform to male requirements.  

The silence of women is essentially inherent within patriarchal order. If men are the dominant group, then they control the language, the meanings and the knowledge. As a consequence, women will not be able to be represented outside that male control. Women thus encounter “a block between the generation of meaning and the expression of meaning”. Such an obstacle emerges when women have no choice but to “tell it slant” in order to express their message in the form of patriarchal order. Self-generated meanings may become unclear, obscure and elusive when women strive to accommodate them in the public male space.

Being confined to the register of the dominant group, women must encode their meanings in an alien language. Generation of meaning takes place in the deep structure, and after a process of transformation, women express their meanings in a male-defined register in the surface structure. Therefore, when women need to transform or monitor their speech, they become more hesitant. “[T]hey could be robbed of drive, conviction and stature when they have to ‘tell it slant’”. Such hesitancy emerges not from “the deficiencies of women but [from] the deficiencies for women [to use] male-encoded registers”.

As Shirley Ardener outlined, women’s views need to be presented in a way that is acceptable to men; otherwise they “will not be given a proper hearing”. Women are accused of speaking vehemently, aggressively, irrationally, emotionally; then, their comments are rapidly dismissed and the dominant group can still maintain control. Male dismissals occur on the grounds of women lecturing, moaning and being incapable of speaking reasonably.

The patriarchal assumption that it is “the power of all males to define reality, to decree what is reasonable/proper/worth while and appropriate/acceptable” leads, once again, to preventing women from surfacing their meanings in mixed-sex conversations. Women have traditionally reacted by moving back into silence after their comments were discounted and devalued in such situations. “Systematically rejected, denied the confidence to express and affirm the validity of their own experience, any human being would […] employ similar ‘protective’ strategies and reinforce their own muted position”.

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41 SPENDER. Man Made ... 81.
42 SPENDER. Man Made ... 82.
43 SPENDER. Man Made ... 84.
44 qtd. in SPENDER. Man Made ... 84.
45 SPENDER. Man Made ... 86.
46 SPENDER. Man Made ... 87.
According to Spender, as women live under the reality of the dominant group and need to operate within it, they are able to understand or see the dimensions of both male and female reality. Most men, on the other hand, can only see their own reality. In patriarchal order, male reality has been established as the only one, having no reason to believe that their reality could be questionable. Such a delusion is the result of men being able to disregard female meanings as unreal, queer or neurotic, and of women collaborating in maintaining male illusions and, therefore, reinforcing male blindness or tunnel vision.47

Women have successfully learnt to function in a multidimensional reality. They have mastered the skills necessary to deal with the complex and ambiguous meanings proper of such multidimensional reality. On the contrary, men seem to be restricted to the skills needed in a monodimensional reality – i.e. “the skills of tunnel vision, of eliminating and dividing according to the principles of linear progression”48. As a direct consequence of such divisions in patriarchal order, women “have been deprived of the full use of their voice” while men appear to “have denied themselves the full use of their vision”49.

When dividing the reality within patriarchal framework, males seemed to have appropriated the categories of strength, reason, logic, objectivity, among others, for themselves and then invested them with positive value. In addition, they allocated weakness, irrationality, emotion and subjectivity to women, adding negative value to these. Such mutilating categories are constructs that represent the dichotomies and hierarchies which permeate the reality of the dominant group. Males need these dividing categories to frame an unequal world and thus maintain their supremacy – they are, in fact, dependent on these. Women’s silence is therefore a condition for male supremacy; otherwise the whole order would collapse. However, women can stop subscribing to these categories and abandon their roles as passive slaves50. All hierarchical dichotomies proper of patriarchal order can be subverted when women begin to encode their own meanings in their own register.

Multidimensional reality is therefore a necessary prerequisite for pluralism, flexibility and understanding, in order to accept the experience of all individuals as equally important. Through the feminist movement, women have been encouraged to cease their willing subservience to men and to take advantage of their vision of a multiple reality. They have thus begun to deconstruct mutilating dichotomies and, especially, their muted position.

○ Post-Colonial Studies

47 SPENDER. Man Made ... 90.
48 SPENDER. Man Made ... 96.
49 SPENDER. Man Made ... 97.
50 SPENDER. Man Made ... 101.
Post-colonial literary theory emerges since European literary theory turned out to be inadequate to account for the complexities and cultural variety of post-colonial writing. Such writing challenged theories of style and genre, linguistic studies, epistemologies, value systems and the literary canon. Post-colonial theory has thus become necessary to deal with this different writing practice: “Indigenous theories have developed to accommodate the differences within the various cultural traditions as well as the desire to describe in a comparative way the features shared across those traditions.”

The term post-colonial refers to “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.” Post-colonial literatures emerged as a result of the experience of colonization. These literatures affirmed their essential post-colonial identity “by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre.” They aim at laying bare issues of colonial hegemony, destruction and devastation. The culture of the ‘other’ is now able to express itself.

As Edward Said claims in Orientalism, “the West has always projected its own universal ‘Other’ onto the variety of cultures it calls the Orient”. The oriental then becomes characterised as “objectified, unknowable, feminized, dehistoricized, ripe for colonization, and so forth.” The ‘other’, the oppressed, has been given inferior features, among them, the ‘feminine’ is mentioned. The “other”, being considered as strange, different and unknown, is construed as a menace.

A great many novelists resort to writing their stories so as to voice their hybrid cultural background. The issue of hybridity or syncretism is highly present in postcolonial studies. Both terms refer to the “mixed cultural lineage of post-colonial writers.” Today, hybridity is “constantly struggling to free itself from a past which stressed ancestry, and which valued the ‘pure’ over its threatening opposite, the ‘composite’.”

By resorting to an interdisciplinary research approach, it is possible to question and deconstruct power structures in Wide Sargasso Sea. Gender politics is thoroughly examined below along with the notion of the dominant both as male and as the white civilized colonizer.

Analysis

52 ASHCROFT et al. The Empire … 11.
53 ASHCROFT et al. The Empire … 2.
54 KERSHNER. The Twentieth-Century… 85.
55 qtd. in KERSHNER. The Twentieth-Century… 89.
In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys subverts and transforms Charlotte Brontë’s text – generated within the parameters of English imperialism, Christianity and patriarchy – by “writing it into her own time and frame of reference”; thus creating a prequel to Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* \(^{56}\). Born in the West Indies, Jean Rhys associated this place with the repressed and the oppressed in *Jane Eyre* and claimed that Brontë’s depiction of “the poor Creole lunatic” was only one side of the story – “the English side”\(^{57}\). Rhys was determined to give a voice to the raging Creole madwoman in *Jane Eyre* and thus produced a post-colonial work.

By portraying the female protagonist, Antoinette, as the ‘other’ and her culture as the ‘orient’, Jean Rhys deals with the conflicting claims of feminism and postcoloniality. In her novel, Rhys makes a masterly presentation of “an analogy between male-female relationships and those of the imperial power and the colony”\(^{58}\). The author plays with the boundaries between the categories of ‘Same’ and ‘Other’: Christianity in *Jane Eyre* and voodoo and obeah in *Wide Sargasso Sea*; the English garden and wild nature; the romantic patriarch, Mr Rochester, and his unnamed cruel double; the lunatic, Bertha, and her sensuous twin, Antoinette.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the male character, Mr. Rochester, who is paradoxically never named, represents the colonial and patriarchal oppressor that exercises his power to diminish Antoinette’s threatening otherness. There are several ways in which Mr. Rochester marginalized and silenced Antoinette to the point of causing her to become invisible, muted and eventually to die.

- **Loss of Voice**

Rochester’s ill-treatment of his wife, Antoinette, lays bare the hypocrisy of a patriarchal society, where women are seen as different from and inferior to men:

> This was Antoinette. She spoke hesitatingly as if she expected me to refuse, so it was easy to do so” \(^{59}\).

As Antoinette needs to accommodate her message within the male code – an alien code; it becomes slanted in order to conform to patriarchal order. As a result, her message losses clarity and conviction and she seems to speak hesitatingly, since she is conscious that she

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\(^{57}\) qtd. in FRIEDMAN. “Breaking the Master…” 120.

\(^{58}\) KERSHNER. *The Twentieth-Century…* 89.

will not be listened to, no matter how hard she tries to adjust her meaning to the male sphere. Rochester, needless to say, takes advantage of his dominant position and exercises his power at will. Due to his wife’s subservience, he is empowered to decide where and when to talk to her.

The next example further illustrates the way women adjust their discourse to be able to enter into communication with men. In this case, Christophine, well-aware of the features of male register, advises Antoinette on the proper way to communicate with her husband:

“Christophine was saying, ‘Your aunty too old and sick, and that Mason boy worthless. Have spunks and do battle for yourself. Speak to your husband calm and cool, tell him about your mother and all what happened at Coulibri and why she get sick and what they do to her. Don’t bawl at the man and don’t make crazy faces. Don’t cry either. Crying no good with him. Speak nice and make him understand.’

‘I have tried,’ I said, ‘but he does not believe me. It is too late for that now’ (it is always too late for truth, I thought). ‘I will try again if you will do what I ask. Oh Christophine, I am so afraid,’ I said, ‘I do not know why, but so afraid. All the time. Help me.’”

Antoinette is wisely advised by her da to speak in a way that is acceptable to men. Being confined to patriarchal order, Antoinette has to speak in a feminine style—quietly, pleasantly, never cry or shout—otherwise Rochester would not listen to her. Christophine is conscious of male sanctions; they accuse women of being emotional, irrational, and vehement and thus disregard their comments. As a consequence of such restrictions, Antoinette becomes less confident, insecure, and afraid to talk to her husband, and gradually retreats into silence.

In the following example, Antoinette attempts to engage Rochester into conversation. As Antoinette has repeatedly asked him to listen to her and he has refused, she feels exasperated and overwhelmed, and demands for an explanation:

“Will you listen to me for God’s sake,’ Antoinette said. She had said this before and I had not answered, now I told her, ‘Of course. I’d be the brute you doubtless think me if I did not do that.’

‘Why do you hate me?’ she said.
‘I do not hate you, I am most distressed about you, I am distraught,’ I said. […]
‘Then why do you never come near me?’ she said. ‘Or kiss me, or talk to me. Why do you think I can bear it, what reason have you for treating me like that? Have you any reason?’
‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I have a reason,’ and added very softly, ‘My God.”

60 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 73.
61 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 80.
When Antoinette asks for tenderness, affection and attention, she appears to be emotional, irrational and over-sensitive in a male’s eyes. Rochester’s tunnel vision prevents him from understanding her feelings and therefore dismisses her demands on the grounds that she is nagging or that she is to blame for his distress. Rochester cunningly inverts appearances and acts as if Antoinette has built a mistaken image of him as a “brute” and has misunderstood the situation.

In the last part of the conversation, Rochester takes the leading role, once again, and decides what the appropriate place and time to talk is:

‘We won’t talk about it now,’ I said. ‘Rest tonight.’
‘But we must talk about it.’ Her voice was high and shrill.
‘Only if you promise to be reasonable.’
But this is not the place or the time, I thought, not in this long dark veranda […] ‘Not tonight,’ I said again. ‘Some other time.’
‘I might never be able to tell you in any other place or at any other time. No other time, now. You frightened?’ she said, imitating a Negro’s voice, singing and insolent.62

Not only does Rochester establish that the conversation should end and send his wife to rest, but he also sets the conditions if the conversation is to continue. Since in patriarchy it is men who state what is appropriate and acceptable, Antoinette is forced into a mode of communication that is not her own. She is prevented from expressing her genuine thoughts or emotions and is blatantly required to surface her meanings only if these are reasonable and fit into patriarchal order. The moment Rochester describes her voice as unpleasantly high, his rejection is revealed; he seems to associate her voice with the phallocentric construct of female hysteria.

In the examples below, Antoinette is expected again not to voice her gut feelings, to hide her emotions and adjust to patriarchal standards and to her husband’s hypocritical English culture:

“… She passed me without looking at me, dismounted and went into the house. I heard her bedroom door slam and her handbell ring violently” 63.

“Antoinette shrieked from the bedroom, ‘Baptiste! Christophine! Pheena, Pheena!’ […]
The door of Antoinette’s room opened. When I saw her I was too shocked to speak. Her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was

62 RHYS. Wide Sargasso … 82.
63 RHYS. Wide Sargasso … 92.
flushed and looked swollen. Her feet were bare. However when she spoke her voice was low, almost inaudible.”

“I managed to hold her wrist with one hand and the rum with the other, but when I felt her teeth in my arm I dropped the bottle. The smell filled the room. But I was angry now and she saw it. She smashed another bottle against the wall and stood with the broken glass in her hand and murder in her eyes.

[...] Then she cursed me comprehensively, my eyes, my mouth, every member of my body, and it was like a dream in the large unfurnished room with the candles flickering and this red-eyed wild-haired stranger who was my wife shouting obscenities at me.”

After she discovers that her husband cheated on her, she is devastated, hopeless and enraged. However, she is expected not to make a fuss, she is not supposed to cry, shout, drink or react aggressively, although she has been ruthlessly mocked at and terribly hurt. Raised in a phallocentric world of repression and hypocrisy, Rochester is unable to bear her spontaneity and honesty. He describes her as wild, unbalanced and neurotic, and what is more, at no time did he attempt to sympathise with her or see the other side.

- Loss of identity

In phallocentric western thought, men need to assert their superiority in the male/female opposition and therefore appropriate themselves of the female by naming, with the result of dispossessing the woman of her subjectivity. Rochester has succeeded in appropriating Antoinette’s subjectivity in various aspects. First, he takes all her property at their marriage due to an English law at the period. Then, he calls her at will, by a name suitable to his culture, Bertha. Finally, he takes most decisions for her, calls her “My lunatic” and even keeps her in one room as his possession.

In the role of the colonial, patriarchal oppressor, Rochester resorts to renaming Antoinette as a strategy to contain her threatening otherness. He eventually imposes a foreign pattern upon her true self, with the result that she is reduced to Mrs Bertha Rochester:

“I have said all I want to say. I have tried to make you understand. But nothing has changed.’ She laughed.
‘Don’t laugh like that, Bertha.’
‘My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?’
‘Because it is a name I’m particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha.’

64 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 93.
65 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 95.
‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said.66

‘… Sleep now, we will talk things over tomorrow.’
‘Yes,’ she said, ‘of course, but will you come in and say goodnight to me?’
‘Certainly I will, my dear Bertha.’
‘Not Bertha tonight,’ she said.
‘Of course, on this of all nights, you must be Bertha.’
‘As you wish,’ she said.67

‘… When he passes my door he says. “Good-night, Bertha.” He never calls me Antoinette now. He has found out it was my mother’s name. “I hope you will sleep well, Bertha” – it cannot be worse,’ I said.”68

She eventually submits to his power, as if unwilling to put up a fight, as if incapable of voicing her real opinion; or simply as if being aware that there is no use in contradicting him – he will impose his power and take a final decision. Antoinette is deeply disturbed by his ill-treatment. She has already realised that there is little left to do for their relationship and, therefore, resorts to Christophine’s voodoo witchcraft.

In despair and infuriated after Rochester cheated on her, Antoinette finally manages to assert herself and to speak forcefully, as the example below illustrates:

“When I turned from the window she was drinking again.
‘Bertha,’ I said.
‘Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeah too.”69

Antoinette is well-aware of Rochester’s intention by naming her Bertha. He attempts to impose the model of English femininity that fits into his mindset. She refuses to be appropriated by him, though unsuccessfully.

In a blatant imperialist assumption of racial superiority, Rochester describes Antoinette as subhuman. Rochester frowns upon her lifestyle, the way she dresses and speaks, and the way he assumes she behaves with men. The following examples show that he considers her wild and sees her as a child, a doll and a marionette:

“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

66 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 86.
67 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 87.
68 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 71
69 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 94.
made much difference. Her mind was already made up. [...] and her ideas were fixed. About England and about Europe. I could not change them and probably nothing would. Reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality. It would be only a mistake, a misfortune, a wrong path taken, her fixed ideas would never change.”

Rochester sees his wife as a child – a stubborn child – who seems to be unable to understand reality or serious matters. He thinks of her as inferior, incapable of reasoning or thinking abstractly – as if she was living in a dream. As the narration proceeds, Antoinette’s countenance dramatically deteriorates into the lifeless person who eventually becomes the madwoman locked in the attic in *Jane Eyre*. Rochester fears this transformation, which, paradoxically is the image he himself has helped to build up.

*I listened. Christophine was talking softly. My wife was crying. Then a door shut. They had gone into the bedroom. [...] I could see Antoinette stretched on the bed quite still. Like a doll. Even when she threatened me with the bottle she had a marionette quality.*

“‘She tell me in the middle of all this you start calling her names. Marionette. Some word so.’
‘Yes, I remember, I did.’
(Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta)
‘That word mean doll, eh? Because she don’t speak. You want to force her to cry and to speak.’
(Force her to cry and to speak)
‘But she won’t. So you think up something else. You bring that worthless girl to play with next door and you talk and laugh and love so that she hear everything. You meant her to hear.’
Yes, that didn’t just happen. I meant it.”

Rochester considers and has even mockingly called Antoinette a marionette. He takes such flagrant abuses of power that he even plays with the words Antoinette, marionette and marionetta, Antoinetta. His dominant role enables him to manipulate his wife so as to make her act and react the way he pleases. Puppets are handled by a master who has taken control over the body, movements and voice of the doll. This is, in fact, an effective metaphor to illustrate Antoinette and Rochester’s relationship, as well as most men and women’s relationship in phallogocentric western society.

70 RHYS. *Wide Sargasso* ... 58.
71 RHYS. *Wide Sargasso* ... 96.
72 RHYS. *Wide Sargasso* ... 99.
The colonial oppressor, Rochester, has repeatedly devalued Antoinette’s comments and diminished her whole self, her confidence and her own culture. She has thus been forced to adapt to the male space in patriarchy and to recoil and take refuge in silence.

At the end of part two, Rochester decides to leave the West Indies and takes Antoinette away from her place and her friends. After he cheated on her next door with Amélie, Antoinette suffered deeply and reacted aggressively. Rochester, taking advantage of his position again, manages to create the illusion that they have to leave as a result of Antoinette’s disturbance and threatening actions, rather than as a result of his unfaithful act. Again, it is the female who accommodates into the reality of the male and accepts it:

“I said it, looking at her, seeing the hatred in her eyes – and feeling my own hate spring up to meet it. […]

. . . If I was bound for hell let it be hell. No more false heavens. No more damned magic. You hate me and I hate you. We’ll see who hates best. But first, first I will destroy your hatred. Now. My hate is colder, stronger, and you’ll have no hate to warm yourself. You will have nothing.

I did it too. I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness. Say die and I will die, say die and watch me die.

She lifted her eyes. Blank lovely eyes. Mad eyes. A mad girl. […]

She had followed me and she answered. I scarcely recognized her voice. No warmth, no sweetness. The doll had a doll’s voice, a breathless but curiously indifferent voice”.73

Antoinette is now unable to utter her feelings; however, they seem to leak out of her. Rochester notices hatred and indifference in her eyes and in her scarcely perceived words. Therefore, he seems determined to take revenge, to make her suffer – his words hint at his future actions in Thornfield Hall. Antoinette’s joyful, caring prior self has vanished and her muteness has been reaffirmed more strongly. She merely becomes the shadow of her former self, a ghost that will soon inhabit the unreal, cardboard world of Thornfield Hall.

○ Madness

Intimidated by the excess of Antoinette’s sensuality and life, Rochester feels alienated in her world of intensity, of excessive colours and smells. Since he belongs to a world of repression and insincerity, he can hardly stand the natural expression of life and emotions, and eventually destroys Antoinette’s spontaneity and passion. Through an imperialist monodimensional perspective, Rochester relates what is different from his own culture as deviant, and in this case, he relates Antoinette’s ‘oriental’ customs to hysteria and insanity:

73 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 110.
“Pity. Is there none for me? Tied to a lunatic for life – a drunken lying lunatic – gone her mother’s way. She’ll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (A mad girl. She’ll not care who she’s loving). She’ll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would – or could. Or could. [...] She’ll not laugh in the sun again. She’ll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass. So pleased, so satisfied. Vain, silly creature. Made for loving? Yes, but she’ll have no lover, for I don’t want her and she’ll see no other. [...] She said she loved this place. This is the last she’ll see of it. [...] If she too says it, or weeps, I’ll take her in my arms, my lunatic. She’s mad but mine, mine. [...] Antoinetta – I can be gentle too. Hide your face. Hide yourself but in my arms. You’ll soon see how gentle. My lunatic. My mad girl.”74

Due to Daniel Cosway’s effective manoeuvre, Rochester’s view of Antoinette as sexually promiscuous and wild is reinforced. Therefore, Rochester, as the colonial tyrant, is determined to and manages to control ‘the other’. In the English phallocentric mind style and monodimensional perspective on reality, her sexual desire is equated with insanity.

Rochester succeeds in erasing her sensuality and laughter when he imprisons her in the attic in Thornfield Hall, where she becomes the lunatic Bertha. The next example shows this process of transformation:

“I wouldn’t tell Grace this. Her name oughtn’t to be Grace. Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass. There is no looking-glass here and I don’t know what I am like now. 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?75

It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a guilt frame but I knew her. I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of a tablecloth …”76

74 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 106.
75 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 117.
76 RHYS. Wide Sargasso ... 123.
Antoinette is fully aware that the person she embodies now is not herself. Her real self, her colourful clothes and her sweet fragrance have all disappeared. Rochester’s powerful control over her has led her to feel completely lost and dispossessed. Indeed, she is unable to recognize herself in the mirror; she can only see a ghost and is even frightened by its image.

After labelling her as promiscuous and renaming her Bertha, Rochester locks her away in the attic, where she is neglected to the extent of losing her identity. In an attempt to free herself from the stronghold of patriarchy, she jumps from the roof of Thornfield Hall, in a moment of self-realisation, and commits suicide. However, this climatic scene of insight is portrayed in *Wide Sargasso Sea* only as a dream; for its realization, Rhys’s text leads readers to Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

**Conclusion**

Having analysed some extracts from *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the light of feminist criticism and post-colonial studies, it could be concluded that the female protagonist, Antoinette, has suffered various attempts of diminishing her identity and of reinforcing her muted position in phallogocentric western culture. As a consequence of such mutilating actions and of being imprisoned in an attic, Antoinette seems to have become a spectre and is led to insanity in the end. The male character, Mr. Rochester, stands as the colonial and patriarchal oppressor who blatantly exercises his power and destroys Antoinette’s otherness. Rhys provides a clear parallel between male-female relationships and those of the empire and the colony.

The male protagonist asserts his superiority in the male/female opposition and therefore appropriates himself of the female by *naming*, with the result of dispossessing the woman of her subjectivity. Antoinette is forced to express herself in a language which is alien to her in order to conform to the terms of the *dominant* group. Gradually, Antoinette, *the muted*, is led to commit suicide, her definite silencing. As the story progresses, it is evident that Mr. Rochester sustains a monodimensional perspective, i.e. “a tunnel vision” on reality, whereas Antoinette has to encode her meanings into the male register, i.e. “tell it slant.” She is simply unable to defy the mechanisms which enforce her condition as a member of the muted group.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is a characteristically hybrid, multicultural novel and a composite of genres, cultures and point of view. Indeed, it has a highly polyphonic structure, which implies that versions of what actually takes place can be distorted or that each character may experience them differently. Both protagonists seem to be incapable of reconciling their perspectives.
Jean Rhys greatly succeeded in her rewriting of the narrative from the Creole madwoman’s point of view, in deconstructing the power relations in Brontë’s text and in unveiling the subtext of racial prejudice and female oppression. In her post-colonial novel, Rhys manages to write back to a canonical text of English literature, challenging and revising its imperialistic assumptions.

Works Cited:


Wide Sargasso Sea offers a counter-reading of a classic of British literature: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) WSS lays bare Bronteâ€™s and Jane Eyreâ€™s limited (and limiting) view of womenâ€™s roles and agency. 8 The Complex Location of Wide Sargasso Sea Most of the novel is set on the island of Jamaica (although it is not named in the novel, critics have agreed that the island described is Jamaica) during the years immediately after the Emancipation of the slaves across the British Islands (1833) A time of turmoil, when the island still bears the marks of. 12 Creole is also one element in a rigid power structure (Stuart Hall â€œNegotiating Caribbean Identitiesâ€​) It is impossible to approach Caribbean culture without understanding the way it was continually inscribed by questions of power. Wide Sargasso Sea, a masterpiece of modern fiction, was Jean Rhysâ€™s return to the literary center stage. She had a startling early career and was known for her extraordinary prose and haunting women characters. With Wide Sargasso Sea, her last and best-selling novel, she ingeniously brings into light one of fictionâ€™s most fascinating characters: the madwoman in the attic of Wide Sargasso Sea, a masterpiece of modern fiction, was Jean Rhysâ€™s return to the literary center stage. She had a startling early career and was known for her extraordinary prose and haunting women characters. That doesn't mean all colonies hate the powers that once ruled over them and see them as evil. It's a complicated relationship, like that of Rochester & Antoinette. Wide Sargasso Sea is an analysis of how such a process has been accomplished, outlining "the processes whereby the Great Mother Goddess becomes sister to the god, wife of the god, mother of the god, becomes Mary the Virgin mother, becomes lady to be worshipped, becomes, finally, prostitute and temptress to be reviled with hatred" (Nebeker 144) and constitutes, as a novel, a. Â Identity crisis for the Creole woman: A search for self in Wide Sargasso Sea.  Jan 2010. S V Coartney. Coartney, S. (2010). Identity crisis for the Creole woman: A search for self in Wide Sargasso Sea. Å Multiple identities in Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys (Unpublished thesis, University of Pardubice, Pardubice, the Czech Republic). The impossibility of creating identity in Jean Rhys. Jan 2013. El Quardi.