

FATHOMLESS OCEAN

GOMEZ SOPHIA
U. ANAMICA



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QUEST FOR SELF-IDENTITY IN JEAN RHYS'S *WIDE SARAGOSSA SEA*

I. SINDHIYA GAAN

Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) is a masterpiece of the British writer Jean Rhys, a mid-20th-century novelist who was born and grew up in the Caribbean island of Dominica but settled in England from the age of sixteen. She lived for some time in Europe where she experienced feelings of alienation because of her own personal background and multicultural upbringing. As a white Creole writer living in England, Rhys attempts to capture the issue of being caught between two cultures and not able to identify fully with any of them. Born to a Welsh father and a Creole (White West Indian) mother on the island of Dominica in the West Indies, Rhys was white but not English, West Indian but not black. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a postcolonial-feminist novel where events explore the tragic fate of the female protagonist Antoinette who is a sensitive and lonely young Creole girl whose arranged marriage to an unsympathetic and controlling English man provokes her already, isolated life and pushes her to fits of violence. Antoinette is caught in the midst of three deeply-rooted ideologies about women that marginalize them on the basis of their class, gender and race. It exposes the life of the Afro-Caribbean (Jamaicans) who were invaded and occupied by the British as early as 1655 and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In her arduous attempt to realize her identity, Antoinette is subjected to different forms of pressure and oppression exercised upon her by her Jamaican society, the British colonizers and her English patriarchal husband. Eventually, her husband brings her to England and locks her in his attic. Frustrated and illusioned, Antoinette awakes from a horrific dream and sets out to burn down the house.

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been the object of several ethnic, racial, postcolonial and feminist critical readings. Taking those interpretations into account, this paper attempts to shift the focus to the relevance of the socio-psychological questions of racial, parental, colonial and social oppression on the novel's protagonist Antoinette. In this paper we intend to investigate the manifestations of the crisis of identity in Jean

Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* in light of the traditional approaches and in accordance with the socio-psychological approach. We notice that Antoinette suffers while she struggles to develop her own identity in the face of social, cultural and racial rejection. Several factors contribute to the crisis of identity that Antoinette faces. An important factor that leads to the fragmentation of Antoinette's identity and her identity crisis is concerned with race/ethnicity. Antoinette is a white Creole, a woman of mixed Black and European ancestry. After the Emancipation Act 1833 under which Britain outlawed slavery in all its colonies, the suppressed hatred between blacks and whites was released and increased. As a result, Antoinette's childhood has been replete with racial violence, discrimination, anxiety, poverty and fear. All these problems affected her desire to construct her own identity or her independent self and eventually led to the definite destruction of her identity.

As a white Creole in the West Island of Jamaica, Antoinette suffers a confusion of identity and individual existence. She is caught in the middle between the purely white people and the black people without belonging to either race. The black people consider her a hybrid that they look down upon while the British colonizers consider her an alien or an outsider. This leaves Antoinette caught between two cultures and never she is able to identify fully with anyone. Antoinette becomes the "other" who is unable to claim the English identity as her own, nor can she break from the complications of her ethnic background to create an independent self. As Creoles, Antoinette and her mother Annette are maligned by both the black Caribbeans and the white Europeans. Though the Creoles are taught to consider England as home, they are labeled as inferior colonials but they are racially privileged in relation to the Africans. This results in creating a sharp conflict between the white and black population of the West Indies.

Antoinette's struggle for her identity, her belonging and her existence began when she was just a little child where she could not define her own self properly. She was marginalized not only for being of a mixed blood but also for being a female and for being the colonized object. Antoinette is born in the midst of racial conflict. She is the daughter of a white Creole woman and an English slave owner in Jamaica. Her family

is hated by the locals who consider it as a family of colonizers. Antoinette is also excluded on the basis of her mother's Creole origin, and so she is rejected by both the black and white population of the island. As Antoinette wistfully explains to her husband in the novel:

...a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they [the blacks] call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. ... I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. (Rhys, p. 64)

Another factor affecting Antoinette's identity crisis is her gender and her shifting social class and status. Since early childhood, Antoinette has been desperately trying to fit herself into her Caribbean society. Antoinette is a sensitive and lonely young Creole girl who grows up with neither her mother's love nor her peers' companionship. By the time she was supposed to construct an identity of her own away from the values and expectations of others, she gets married to Rochester who becomes an obstacle in the way to an independent self. Rochester is the unnamed white Englishman whom we know only by *Jane Eyre's* (1847) Rochester, particularly by his biased, racist and repulsively gendered descriptions of his wife Bertha, the Antoinette of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette's unnamed husband is a representative of both colonial and patriarchal systems. Though Rhys tries to humanize the marginalized protagonist Antoinette by giving her a voice to speak out about her own suffering and to express her own feelings, her husband endeavours to suppress her attempts and to deny her from her right to speak or to have her own independent cultural and social identity.

Antoinette's ill-timed, badly-motivated and portentous marriage makes her suffer from a role confusion or identity crisis because her husband is attempting all the time to eliminate her and her own sense of identity. Antoinette is faced with a crucial decision in her life and on her way to achieving her long-time desired sense of identity. If she decides to fight against the obstacles that are presented through her husband and begins to find a way out to self-realization, she might succeed in resolving her identity crisis and ultimately begin an intimate relationship with the

husband just for the fact that she is a woman who is considered less important and inferior to men according to the traditional gender roles and the patriarchal norms that have been internalized and taken for granted in her society. Being a Creole of a mixed blood or a hybrid, Antoinette feels alienated and exiled in her community, feeling that she neither belongs to the black Jamaicans nor to the white Europeans. The effect of colonization is actually felt in the novel and acts a deterrent to Antoinette's interaction with her society. Deprived of her inherited property by her patriarchal husband, Antoinette becomes helpless and is in bad need for the financial support of her husband. She is left with hardly any opportunity to gain her identity or change her financial and social status until she finally decides to take a fatal decision that would end her life and put an end to her suffering and failure. The struggle for a true identity and an independent self reaches its resolution for Antoinette who chooses death as the best solution to get herself out of her misery by burning the place where she is imprisoned. In one sense, Antoinette somehow reaches her own identity but on her own terms and through her own and not other decision.

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