

Jean Rhys's Construction of Blackness as Escape from White Femininity in "Wide Sargasso Sea"

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JEAN RHYS, while reluctantly trying to settle in England as a white West Indian, started working on her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* with the primary intention of describing the Dominica of her childhood. In 1956, she wrote in a letter: "I still work but write mostly about the vanished West Indies of my childhood. Seems to me that wants doing badly—for never was anything more vanished or forgotten. Or lovely" (*Letters* 133). This preoccupation with the lost island of her childhood came very early on to be tied to another concern, that of "rescuing" the white Creole madwoman from the denigrating descriptions of her found in *Jane Eyre*. The choice of *Jane Eyre* as a starting point is important to Rhys. In one of her letters, she writes about her work on the novel: "it might be possible to unhitch the whole thing from Charlotte Brontë's novel, but I don't want to do that. It is that particular mad Creole I want to write about, not any of the other mad Creoles" (*Letters* 153). This connection to one of Britain's most well-known women writers puts Rhys's exploration of the construction of her own racial identity into a larger political context. Rhys shows awareness of the fact that the meaning of who she is as a white West Indian woman cannot be understood separately from the way this identity has been constructed in the dominant Anglo-Saxon cultural context.

Rhys worked on the novel during the 1950s and 1960s, a period of increasing West Indian immigration to Britain and of a growing awareness of the issues involved in struggles for independence in colonized countries. She sets her novel in a time which was crucial in the development of colonial history: the time just following the passing of the Abolition of Slavery Act in

1833. She focuses on the experience of the white plutocracy, people born in the West Indies who derived their wealth, status, and identity from the system of slavery. In the mid-nineteenth century, the colonies were no longer economically important for Britain. Planters often pocketed their compensation money, sold their estates, and left the island. The freed slaves bought land where they could or squatted on the estates. Estate owners who decided to stay on, therefore, were faced with a process of considerable restructuring which left many of them destitute (Williams 400). Rhys's primary concern was the fate of a woman belonging to a group which no longer has a place, or in John Hearne's words, "a marginal community run over and abandoned by History" (324).

An important part of the exploration of the white colonial experience is an understanding of the consequences of the division between black and white. Rhys remembers a fierce longing to be part of the black community, something she expected to happen through a miracle: "Dear God, let me be black" (*Smile* 42), she used to pray. She often describes black women in contrast to white women: "They were stronger than we were, they could walk a long way without getting tired, carry heavy weights with ease . . . Also there wasn't for them as there was for us, what I thought of as the worry of getting married . . . Black girls . . . seemed to be perfectly free" (*Smile* 50-51). Rhys's clearly expressed longing for blackness in her letters, in her autobiography, and in her fiction has caused critics to draw the conclusion that she was concerned with issues of racial justice and that she had taken the side of black people. Lucy Wilson, for instance, looks at Rhys's black characters Christophine in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Selina in the short story "Let Them Call it Jazz" and comments on the contrast to the white characters. She sees Rhys's description of both strong and assertive black women and the weak and dependent white women as a way of fighting for justice. According to Wilson, Rhys simply describes two ways of being victimized and two ways of non-cooperation with oppressive structures. Selma James similarly sees the ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a reconciliation between black and white:

Many years before she had said, "I will live with Tia and I will be like her." But first she had to let Tia know the terms on which she planned for them to be together. All she had offered Tia before was the domination of her white skin. But as Antoinette burns down the Great House which imprisons her—as Tia had burnt down the Great House which was the centre of her exploitation—Tia welcomes her home. (73)

Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell reads Rhys's autobiographical comments on her childhood preference for a black doll over a white one as an indication of her "sense of kinship with her black compatriots" (292). Carole Angier in her biography of Rhys draws similar conclusions from Rhys's own statements about her relations to black people. Although Angier analyzes Rhys's fiction carefully, her analyses do not include a critical approach to Rhys's professed preference for black over white people. On the contrary, this is one of the rare instances where Angier takes Rhys's own view and hands it on unexamined.

Rhys's rather complicated attitude towards black people should be looked at in the context of her enterprise of writing the Creole madwoman's part of the story. It is the "worrying of getting married" that for her defines womanhood. The specific limitations and complications connected with white womanhood did not apply to black women, and therefore Rhys sees them as "perfectly free." Needless to say, this is not an accurate description of black women's lives but a construction which functions to define the dilemma of the white woman as a biological necessity. For a white woman, blackness as freedom means that the only way for her to be free is by miraculously changing the colour of her skin; biological determinism is thus not limited to sex alone.

This clinging to biological determinism can be understood within the context of Rhys's own lack of a clearly defined identity. Lee Erwin argues that although in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys takes up her West Indian past, she cannot be said to articulate West Indian nationalism. "The novel seems rather to inhabit a limbo *between* nationalisms; it exists as a response to the loss, rather than the recovery, of a 'place-to-be-from'" (143). Mary Lou Emery describes Jean Rhys asking: "Am I an expatriate? Expatriate from where?" (13-14). In this way, Rhys articulates the connection

between place and identity which Houston A. Baker describes as follows:

For place to be recognized by one as actually PLACE, as a personally valued locale, one must set and maintain the boundaries. If one, however, is constituted and maintained by and within boundaries set by a dominating authority, then one is not a setter of place but a prisoner of another's desire. Under the displacing impress of authority even what one calls and, perhaps, feels is one's *own place* is, from the perspective of human agency, *placeless*. Bereft of determinative control of boundaries, the occupant of authorized boundaries would not be secure in his or her own eulogized world but maximally secured by another, a prisoner of interlocking, institutional arrangements of power. (104)

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the starting point is this placelessness. Although Rhys's novel starts with Antoinette's childhood in Coulibri, its boundaries lie outside the novel in another woman's text. In *Jane Eyre* we have the madwoman Bertha locked up in the attic of Thornfield Hall. We know the ending of the story and thus the restrictions placed on both the narrative and the main character. The significant title "Wide Sargasso Sea" refers to the dangers of the sea voyage. Rochester first crosses the Atlantic alone to a place which threatens to destroy him, then once more, bringing his new wife to England. Both Rochester and Antoinette are transformed through this passage. Rochester gives Antoinette a new name, Bertha, and in England she finally is locked up as mad. Rhys finds her own place in *Jane Eyre*, "a prisoner of another's desire." She sets out to describe that place and, in doing that, she redefines it as her own. In her challenge to *Jane Eyre*, Rhys draws on the collective experience of black people as sought out, uprooted, and transported across the Middle Passage and finally locked up and brutally exploited for economic gain. She uses this experience and the black forms of resistance as modes through which the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* is recreated.

Another white Dominican novelist, Phyllis Shand Allfrey, also makes her white protagonists use black ways of resistance in her novel *The Orchid House*, first published in 1952. In distinction to Shand Allfrey, Rhys constructs black womanhood as exactly that which is desirable and lacking in the white woman's position.

Here many critics actually repeat Rhys's wishful thinking, equating British colonial rule over all inhabitants of the colonies with the specific situation of slavery. Emery writes: "The protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette (Bertha) Cosway Mason (Rochester), undergoes sexual and class enslavement as a white Creole woman" (19). Such a definition of slavery disregards the actual, historical institution of slavery as experienced by black people under the domination of their white owners. That these white slave owners could also be oppressed and excluded by metropolitan politics and the fact that patriarchal oppression took on a specific meaning for a white Creole woman still did not make her share the experience of slavery. Rhys does not suggest such a "women and blacks" equation; instead, she moves within the shifting boundaries of constructed racial identities desperately trying to find her own place. Her descriptions of black women serve this purpose.

With the imprisoned madwoman in Thornfield as both starting point and end, Rhys starts her own narrative. The narrator is the madwoman but her tale is the young Antoinette's. The theme is the fear and the possibility of losing one's whiteness. The very first sentences of the novel set the tone: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (15). Also the black people point out that they now lack real whiteness: "Real white people, they got gold money. They didn't look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger" (21).

The lack of real whiteness gains increasing significance when Antoinette grows up. The meaning of her sexual identity is what ultimately determines her racial identity and vice versa. Antoinette recollects an incident where she returned home in her black friend Tia's dress to find that they had beautifully dressed white visitors. Antoinette's appearance in a black girl's torn and dirty dress causes a great deal of disturbance; it shows that she is not part of the real white people. The black servant Christophine is the one who points to the necessity for change when she says: "She run wild, she grow up worthless" (22). Tia's dress has to be burned, and Antoinette's mother comes out of her passive state

and tries to provide Antoinette with new clothes. Antoinette remembers this change in her mother: "it was my fault that she started to plan and work in a frenzy, in a fever to change our lives" (109). Here Antoinette has a dream which is then repeated three times in the novel, each time with more clarity and detail:

I dreamed that I was walking in the forest. Not alone. Someone who hated me was with me, out of sight. I could hear heavy footsteps coming closer and though I struggled and screamed I could not move. (23)

This dream suggests fear of sexual violation. Antoinette fears her future when it becomes clear that she cannot grow up like Tia.

The real change, however, comes with Mr Mason, Antoinette's mother's second husband. He sees himself as a liberator; he "rescues" Antoinette from growing up worthless, from being a "white nigger." This he does by reestablishing the black-white dichotomy, reintroducing the connection of white with wealth and domination, and the connection to England. For Antoinette the meaning of being a woman is firmly placed within a colonial context. Growing up worthless, on the other hand, is the result of a situation where the black-white dichotomy no longer exists.

The most important black character in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the servant Christophine. She is the first character to speak within Antoinette's narrative and her voice is used to explain the behaviour of the white people. "The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, 'because she pretty like pretty self Christophine said" (15). A description of Christophine, again, is given by Antoinette's mother Annette. Antoinette wants to know who Christophine is, her origin and her age. Annette tells her that Christophine was a wedding present from her first husband; she knows that Christophine comes from Martinique, but she doesn't know her age. Annette says:

I don't know how old she was when they brought her to Jamaica, quite young. I don't know how old she is now. Does it matter? Why do you pester and bother me about all these things that happened long ago? Christophine stayed with me because she wanted to stay. She had her own very good reasons you may be sure. I dare say we would have died if she'd turned against us and that would have been a better fate. (18-19)

Christophine's most important function as a powerful protector and nursing mother-figure is thus introduced against the backdrop of the information that she was a wedding gift. The life of the white family is now in the hands of a person who once was part of their property. The reasons for staying are Christophine's own, her age is unknown, her origin on another island. She is thus outside the sphere of what can be controlled and understood by the white family once slavery has ended.

Christophine is mentioned in her relation to Antoinette at a point in the narrative where Antoinette most clearly describes the indifference of her mother to herself: "she pushed me away, . . . without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her" (17). When her own mother pushes her away and finds her 'useless,' Antoinette turns to Christophine for the mothering she needs. It is Antoinette who finds Christophine useful. "So I spent most of my time in the kitchen which was in an outbuilding some way off. Christophine slept in the little room next to it" (17). Antoinette's mother, the white lady, develops only her feminine qualities in spite of their distressing situation. These qualities, such as beauty, fragility, dependence, and passivity, make it impossible for her to change actively their situation. They also make her unable to care for her daughter or to perform the most necessary household tasks. Antoinette's mother concentrates her energies on survival in a feminine way in that she does everything to get a new husband.

Christophine's function in the novel has to be understood within the overall context of the white woman's tale. Antoinette's narrative in Part One is a reminiscence of her childhood which carries within it an awareness of the loss of place and identity which, for her, is the meaning of womanhood. Christophine belongs to her childhood, to a period of time which is lost even before the narrative begins. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes about Christophine:

Christophine is tangential to this narrative. She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native. No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always

already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self. (272)

Black feminist critics in the United States have studied black female characters in texts by white authors and pointed to the way in which these characters are constructed to fit a view of history which mystifies the oppression of black people. Although there are important differences between the American South and the Caribbean, they have the history of slavery in common. Hazel Carby argues that stereotypes about black women have their origin in slavery and furthermore that these stereotypes do not exist in isolation but should be understood in connection with dominant ideas about white women. "The dominating ideology to define the boundaries of acceptable female behavior from the 1820s until the Civil War was the 'cult of true womanhood'" (23). This ideology defined white women as physically delicate and saw this as an outward sign of chastity, sensitivity, and refinement; it also defined the black woman but in different terms. Here the physical strength and endurance necessary for the work required of black women were seen as signs of moral and spiritual depravity. The function of these stereotypes becomes clear only when the situation of the white slave-owning man is seen as the determining instance, the centre around which female identities were constructed. Carby writes:

The effect of black female sexuality on the white male was represented in an entirely different form from that of the figurative power of white female sexuality. Confronted by the black woman, the white man behaved in a manner that was considered to be entirely untempered by any virtuous qualities: the white male, in fact, was represented as being merely prey to the rampant sexuality of his female slaves. A basic assumption underlying the cult of true womanhood was the necessity for the white female to "civilize" the basic instincts of man. But in the face of what was constructed as the overt sexuality of the black female, excluded as she was from the parameters of virtuous possibilities, these baser male instincts were entirely uncontrolled. (27)

In contrast to the stereotype of the black woman as a "whore," another stereotype emerged, that of the "mammy." Barbara Christian points out that also this stereotyped role has to be

looked at in the context of the role of the white woman. "The mammy figure, Aunt Jemima, the most prominent black female figure in southern white literature, is in direct contrast to the ideal white woman, though both images are dependent on each other for their effectiveness" (2). The mammy is the house slave or domestic servant, who is represented as being loyal to the white family and who has no ties to the black community; the needs of her own family do not interfere with her work for the white family. She is harmless or benevolent and can therefore be trusted with a great deal of responsibility when it comes to taking care of the white children. In this way the contradiction of considering black people less than human and at the same time entrusting the care of one's children to them is to some extent made less apparent. Christian argues that the mammy, the whore, and the conjure woman as stereotypical roles for the black woman are based on a fear of female sexuality and spiritual power. In the oral tradition of the slaves the mammy is still present as a stereotype:

She is there as cook, housekeeper, nursemaid, seamstress, always nurturing and caring for her folk. But unlike the white southern image of mammy, she is cunning, prone to poisoning her master, and not at all content with her lot. (5)

The complexity of Christophine as a character does not challenge these stereotypes. Christophine's relations to her own children and to the rest of the community are made to fit the needs of the white family without making Christophine's own situation seem overly oppressive. Only one of her children survived and he is now grown. She does not have a husband having chosen to be independent. Although the family unit takes on different forms because of the situation of slavery, there is ample evidence to show that such units existed and were maintained and recognized as families by the black community (Klein 170). Similarly, the fact that black women could have children on their own, and thus were not subject to the same rules as white settler women, does not mean that most black women did not, sooner or later, live together with men. According to Herbert S. Klein, it was common during slavery for black women in the Caribbean "to engage in pre-marital intercourse on a rather free basis. This

continued until the birth of the first child. At this point in time a woman usually settled down into a relationship which might or might not be with the child's father" (172). As Hortense J. Spillers has written in an analysis of the meaning of black American kinship systems as determined by slavery,

"kinship" loses meaning, *since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations*. I certainly do not mean to say that African peoples in the New World did not maintain the powerful ties of sympathy that bind blood-relations in a network of feeling, of continuity. It is precisely *that* relationship—not customarily recognized by the code of slavery—that historians have long identified as the inviolable "Black Family." (74)

Rhys works within an ideological framework where property relations are given the meaning of blood-relations for black people. By describing Christophine as perfectly free of social ties and responsibilities, she makes her primary attachment to the white family seem natural. Being a white Creole woman implies the necessity of securing a husband by clinging to a definition of womanhood which makes that husband necessary in the first place. The black woman is, however, free to work and support herself. She is furthermore in a position to help the white woman in distress until the husband is found. She is not able to prevent the ultimate disaster where the white woman is victimized precisely through her womanhood, but she herself is saved because as a black woman she is excluded from that definition of womanhood.

Black feminist critics claim that it is the mystification of sexual relations between white men and black women that has given rise to the stereotype of the black whore. We find two important incidents of this kind in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette's father is said to have had several children by his black slaves; one of these children, Daniel Cosway, approaches Rochester with fatal information about the Cosway family. This he does in revenge for not having received proper recognition as one of the family. Daniel's mother is described as a liar, someone who tempted Mr Cosway and then tried to trick him into taking responsibility for her son.

The second incident concerns Rochester and the servant girl Amélie on the honeymoon island. Amélie destroys what is left

between Rochester and Antoinette by seducing Rochester at a crucial moment. She is scheming and finally manages to take advantage of the white man so that she can start a new life with the money she gets from him; at the same time, it is the "white cockroach" that she is willing to harm most ruthlessly. Thus we have the white mistress, victimized by the white servant woman who takes advantage of the white master and husband. Christophine takes the side of the white mistress when she tells Rochester, "Why you don't take that worthless good-for-nothing girl somewhere else? But she love money like you love money— must be why you come together. Like goes to like" (123).

In both these incidents the victim is the white wife. The first incident causes suffering for Antoinette's mother and later destroys Antoinette's life; the second incident brings a great deal of pain to Antoinette and constitutes a turning point in her life. The black women are not seen to suffer; even the white men are to some extent victims of their own confusion caused by the cunning of the black women. The mammy turns against the whore in defending the white mistress. The identification of black with sexual power and white with innocent confusion is further underlined through the description of Antoinette's mother: mad and abandoned, being sexually abused by her black warden while his female mate watches them, smiling maliciously.

Significantly, Rochester is the narrator of Part Two of the novel, which describes his encounters with Daniel Cosway and Amélie. In this way his confusion and fear of the island, his desire for black women, and his guilt are all narrated from his point of view. This narrative also contains the possibility of blackness for Antoinette but here blackness is given an entirely new meaning. When Daniel Cosway visits Rochester he makes a clear link between sexual promiscuity and blackness: "Give my love to your wife—my sister," he called after me venomously. 'You are not the first to kiss her pretty face. Pretty face, soft skin, pretty colour—not yellow like me. But my sister just the same'" (104). Shortly afterwards, Rochester looks at Antoinette and thinks that she looks very much like Amélie. As Lee Erwin points out,

[i]f Antoinette's racial imagination is metaphoric, based upon the wished-for substitution of one term for another, Rochester's

is metonymic, constantly expressing itself as a perception of contamination from contiguity, one racial term slipping or “leaking” into another through sheer proximity, obsessively perceived as sexual. (146)

Antoinette’s own wish to be part of the black people is thus supported by Rochester’s fears. Rochester’s narrative gives the British point of view. This point of view starts in *Jane Eyre* and we know that what really happens next is that Antoinette goes mad and has to be incarcerated in the attic of Thornfield Hall. We also know that she will set fire to the house, kill herself, and blind Rochester. By giving Rochester a voice in the narrative, Rhys shows that this is only his perception of events. If we complement the black feminist insight about race and gender construction with analyses of nineteenth-century British definitions of womanhood, we find that sexual desire and womanhood are defined as mutually exclusive. Furthermore, Victorian psychiatrists established a link between mental illness in women and the female reproductive system. Elaine Showalter has studied these discussions and concludes that

[i]n contrast to the rather vague and uncertain concepts of insanity in general which Victorian psychiatry produced, theories of female insanity were specifically and confidentially linked to the biological crises of the female life cycle—puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause—during which the mind would be weakened and the symptoms of insanity might emerge. (55)

In Victorian discussions, female sexuality exists as a symptom of mental illness. In 1857, William Acton found sexual desire in women only among low and immoral women whom he encountered in the divorce courts and the lunatic asylum (Hellerstein 177). Not surprisingly, Charlotte Brontë describes her madwoman very much in accordance with the beliefs and attitudes of her time. *Jane Eyre* provides clear indications that Rochester fears Bertha’s sexuality: “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” (334). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys takes up this element but places it within Rochester’s narrative.

His encounters with the island, Amélie, Daniel Cosway, and finally Christophine's love-potion are described as a powerful illicit force, at once tempting and dangerous. The only escape is to project all the forbidden feelings onto Antoinette and define her as mad because of these feelings: "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*" (135-36). Rochester experiences only a brief conflict about the reality of his vision. He is aware of all that he has to give up in order to keep his view of the world intact.

I shall never understand why, suddenly, bewilderingly, I was certain that everything I had imagined to be truth was false. False. Only the magic and the dream are true—all the rest's a lie. Let it go. Here is the secret. Here. (138)

In Antoinette's narrative, which continues in Part Three and gives the final meaning to the events taking place in Part One, the alternative vision is expressed. The vision can only exist if the reality of England and the meaning of being a white woman in that context is denied. An identification with blackness is established as the only possible escape. In Part One, the burning of the great house at Coulibri is a final and clear manifestation of the hostility of the black people towards their oppressors. Antoinette's narrative is shaped around this event, in that everything that took place before it is reinterpreted and thus turns into premonitions. Everything that happened after the event is seen as resulting from this. The dead horse, poisoned by the black people, is one of the first signs of hostility. "Now we are marooned" (16) is the reaction of Antoinette's mother. Mary Lou Emery argues that this term, referring to the Maroon communities of escaped slaves, might suggest for Antoinette a possible way out of the necessity of getting married and living the life of a white lady.

Inadvertently Annette alludes to places in the island's history that Antoinette might inhabit and the wild unexplored parts of the island that may help her to survive. And she suggests possible kinship with Christophine, who, as an obeah woman, practices a magic that enables survival in dangerous and hostile environments. (40)

When the black people burn the house and it becomes clear that white and black are irreconcilable, Antoinette chooses sides: she runs back to her black friend Tia.

As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. (38)

Here Antoinette still believes that her racial identity is simply a matter of choice, that through an act of will she can make herself belong to the black community. The rejection by Tia places Antoinette firmly within the white community and thus secures her white female identity. Significantly, Antoinette's Aunt Cora later refers to the wound inflicted by Tia in this way: "That is healing very nicely. It won't spoil you on your wedding day" (39). The wound inflicted through the separation of white from black did not only not spoil her on her wedding day, it was in fact a necessary prerequisite for her wedding with a British gentleman. Without that separation she would not have been able to escape the risk of 'growing up worthless.'

The feeling of impending danger is momentarily relieved at the convent. The convent represents a world where definitions of womanhood are suspended and where the necessity of counter-acting black hostility and fighting for a place among the black people is no longer present. As soon as Antoinette is visited by Mr Mason the security vanishes.

It may have been the way he smiled, but again a feeling of dismay, sadness, loss, almost choked me. This time I did not let him see it.

It was like that morning when I found the dead horse. Say nothing and it may not be true.

But they all knew at the convent. The girls were very curious but I would not answer their questions and for the first time I resented the nuns' cheerful faces.

They are safe. How can they know what it can be like *outside?*
(49-50)

Here Antoinette has her dream for the second time. This time the dream contains even more clearly the fear of sexual violation but also an active determination not to fight or try to escape. It is significant that the visit by Mr Mason is a premonition equal to the incident of the dead horse. In this way, fear of sexual violation

is linked to the rejection by Tia: Antoinette is not a black person; thus she cannot escape what lies in store for all white women.

The theme of the burning of the Great House is repeated in the third part of the novel when Antoinette in a dream sets fire to Rochester's mansion in England. This dream is described by Antoinette when she has already lost her sanity and her ability to communicate her view of the world to other people. We arrive, then, back at *Jane Eyre*, from a world of relative clarity and sanity to a world of madness. This is the result of the passage across the Sargasso Sea and the other side of *Jane Eyre*. Rhys thus invites a comparison between Antoinette's situation and that of the slaves. Antoinette is captured, sold, given a new name, transported across the sea, and locked up. She does, however, offer passive resistance; the love-potion prepared by Christophine makes Rochester think he has been poisoned. Antoinette also resists in that she refuses her new identity. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha remains Antoinette. For her to keep this identity she is compelled to remember and to perform an important task, something which she has seen coming to her ever since the house at Coulibri was burned.

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. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us—hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I? (147)

Shortly afterwards, Antoinette has her dream for the third time. Now the dream is clear; she knows why she was brought to England. Antoinette is far from a passive victim. She is determined to fulfil her mission even though its significance lies entirely in the West Indies of her childhood. The confrontation with her mirror image in the hall brings her great confusion, and it is only by escaping that image that she can hold on to the significance of her dream. She calls to Christophine for help and miraculously escapes "the ghost" in the mirror.

The struggle for "Antoinette" against "Bertha" continues through the last part of the novel. "Antoinette" is connected to

the island and the power of Christophine's obeah, whereas Rochester's attempts to turn her into a Victorian woman is in Part Two rejected by Antoinette as just another form of obeah. In the dream, Antoinette sees the Coulibri of her childhood in the red sky:

I saw my doll's house and the books and the picture of the Miller's Daughter. I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, *Qui est là? Qui est là?* and the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha! The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones. But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought, *Why did I scream?* I called "Tia!" and jumped and woke. (155)

The dream finally shows her what she is supposed to do: "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (155-56). The second burning implies liberation and fulfillment and this meaning it derives by refusing the English context. At the event at Coulibri the whole family was saved by their parrot, which frightened the superstitious black people when it was falling off the railing with its clipped wings alight. Antoinette embodies the burning parrot when she jumps down from the battlement at Thornfield Hall, her hair aflame. As Wilson Harris suggests, Rhys here evokes the black legend of flying to freedom. In Virginia Hamilton's retelling of the legend "The People Could Fly" some slaves knew how to fly already in Africa but had to shed their wings on the slave ship. They thus looked the same as all other slaves but owned the secret knowledge and flew away to freedom when the situation in the fields became unbearable. The Master "said it was a lie, a trick of the light" (Hamilton 102). Rhys similarly invokes a secret knowledge which changes the meaning of her actions, a mission which will give her a new identity outside of that prescribed for her by patriarchal demands. The Master will always have his own interpretation of events, but within this frame Antoinette creates her own alternative.

It is finally the combination of both Rochester's and Antoinette's narratives that points towards blackness as the escape from white femininity. Lee Erwin sees Rochester's narrative as determinate in this respect: "The impossible desire evident in Antoinette's narrative, that is, to occupy a racial position not open to her, can only realize itself in the gaze of the Other, in an attempt to perform the impossible feat of seeing herself from the place from which she is seen" (155). Antoinette's use of black strategies of resistance reinforces the meaning of blackness as freedom. In exploring the construction of a particular white female identity, Rhys denies the existence of systematic oppression of black women. They, in turn, become "prisoners of another's desire" as the white Creole madwoman is set free.

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