

Discourse on Creole Identity: from Ambivalence to Madness Post-Colonial Reading on Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of creole identity is presented in several literary works, one of them is in the portrayal of Antoinette Cosway in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette Cosway firstly is the minor character in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The research traces the link between Antoinette Cosway's creole identity with her madness. According to Bhabha's ambivalence theory, creole identity possibly creates a new identity as the result of interrelation between colonizer and colonized. Based on the research, Antoinette Cosway failed to create a new identity and became a madwoman instead. The cause is the complex situation faced by her and the lack of supporting aspects for constructing a new identity.

Keywords: *ambivalence, Antoinette Cosway, creole identity, Homi Bhabha*

INTRODUCTION

Wide Sargasso Sea is a novel written by Jean Rhys. She worked on the novel for twenty-one years and it was published in 1966 (Ramazani, p.2357). Later, the novel is commonly accepted as her masterpiece. Jean Rhys had written several novels and short stories before *Wide Sargasso Sea* but through this novel, she got her position as one of the distinguished authors in the world.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys creates West Indian prehistory for the first Mrs. Rochester, Antoinette Cosway, the madwoman in the attic of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. While in *Jane Eyre* the character has very little presentation and she does not speak for herself, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* she becomes the main character. The story in the novel is presented through her point of view, except for Part Two of the novel in which her

point of view and her husband's present the story alternately.

There is a similarity between the real-life of Jean Rhys and the imaginary life of Antoinette Cosway. Jean Rhys was born Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams on the small island of Dominica in the West Indies in 1890. Her father was a Welsh doctor; her mother is a creole descended from wealthy, slave-holding plantation owners. She leaves Dominica at the age of seventeen to attend the Perse School in Cambridge, England, and returns to her birthplace only once, in 1936 (Ramazani, p.2356).

Jean Rhys's feelings toward her Caribbean background and childhood were mixed: she deeply appreciated the rich sensation and cross-racial engagements of her tropical experience, yet she was haunted by the knowledge of her violent heritage and carried a heavy burden of historical guilt. As a West-Indian she felt estranged from mainstream European culture and identified

with the suffering of Afro-Caribbeans, yet as a white Creole she grew up feeling out of place amid the predominantly black population of Dominica.

In other words, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys gives an example of one possible result of creole identity. According to Homi Bhabha theory of ambivalence, it will construct a new identity based on the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. Nevertheless, the novel shows the availability of an alternative result where the new identity is failed to be constructed because of the particular situations faced by the creole. What follows is the depiction of Antoinette Cosway as a Creole in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Creole is derived from the Portuguese *criolulo* meaning “native”, via French *créole*, meaning “indigenous”. In general, creole refers to a white person of European descent, born and raised in a tropical colony. From 17th until 19th century, the most common use of the term is in English was to mean “born in the West Indies”, whether white or negro.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette Cosway and her mother, Annette, are Creoles. The place setting of the story is in Jamaica in the 1830s. According to Brathwaite as it is quoted by Ashcroft (Bill Ashcroft, p.51), in Jamaica, and the old settled English colonies, the word [creole] was used in its original Spanish sense of *criollo*: born into, native, committed to the area of living, and it was used in relation to both white and black, free and slave.

There are some passages in the story which depict the representation of Antoinette Cosway as a creole. Through these passages, the motive behind Antoinette's acts may be understood clearer. Besides, since the story is narrated mostly through her point of view, it also can help the reader to understand the psychological condition of Antoinette relating to her status as a creole.

(1) The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, ‘because she pretty like pretty self’ Christophine said. She was my father’s second wife, far too young for him they thought, and, worse still, a Martinique girl. (Rhys 9)

This passage shows the position of Antoinette Cosway in Jamaican ladies’ view. Antoinette Cosway is seen as different from them. She is prettier and she is a Martinique girl.

(2) I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping dogs lie. One day a little girl followed me singing, ‘Go away white cockroach, go away, go away.’ I walked fast, but she walked faster. ‘White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you. Go away.’ (Rhys 13)

This passage shows the image of creole people in black people’s view and vice versa. In one side, black people like to mock creole people (in this case physically white people). Consequently, creole people then think that black people hate them.

(3) We ate English food now, beef and mutton, pies and puddings. I was glad to be like an English girl but I missed the taste of Christophine’s cooking. (Rhys 21)

This passage shows the desire of a creole to adapt one dominant culture. In this case, the dominant culture is the colonizer’s culture that is English culture. Nevertheless, the adaptation is not fully desired since in the other side, there is also the desire to adapt the colonized culture which in this case is symbolized by “Christophine’s cooking”.

(4) Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either. (Rhys 39)

This passage shows the dominating people’s view toward the creole which constructs the creole’s ambivalent identity. Even if the creole is the descendant of pure English but he/she is not classified as the English or European.

(5) They tell you perhaps that your wife's name is Cosway, the English gentleman Mr. Mason being her stepfather only, but they don't tell you what sort of people were these Cosways. Wicked and detestable slave-owners since generations—yes everybody hate them in Jamaica and also in this beautiful island where I hope your stay will be long and pleasant in spite of all, for some not worth sorrow. Wickedness is not the worst. There is madness in that family... Money is good but no money can pay for a crazy wife in your bed. Crazy and worse besides. (Rhys 59)

This passage shows the one-side view of the dominating people toward the creole. This view indicates the complex situation faced by a creole. Besides, it also becomes the symbol of the lack of supporting factor to construct a new identity.

(6) Miss Antoinette a white girl with a lot of money, she won't marry with a coloured man even though he don't look like a coloured man. (Rhys 73)

This passage indicates the complex situation faced by a creole too. In this case, Antoinette Cosway is a rich white girl and so people assume that she will not marry a coloured man. Nevertheless, without the mixture with coloured people, the new identity will not be constructed.

THEORETICAL CONCEPT: BHABHA'S AMBIVALENCE

Ambivalence is one notion of the post-colonial key concepts confined by Homi K. Bhabha. In his book, Bhabha differentiates the diversity and difference of the culture. The ambivalent concept was elaborated in the difference. The concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority that is the attempt to dominate in the name of cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation (Bhabha, 2002, p.35). Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other. The pact of

interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the "I" and the "You" designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places/ entities be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. He explains that the intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and references an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code (Bhabha, 2002, p.36). It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity, that even the same sign can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. Third Space of enunciation has become the precondition of cultural difference (Bhabha, 2002, p.38). This argument has become Bhabha's counter account on Said's Self-Other binary. The elaboration of the ambivalence describes the relation among the colonizer and colonized is never simply one-way order, but more in two ways. Both groups are affected and influenced by each other, the discursive process of class among people creates a new identity for a certain group.

Bhabha's ambivalence is commonly read in a positive notion since it serves as a way out from what Said's Self-Other binary cannot explain. An example of the positive nuance of ambivalence can be seen in the article "Iranian Exilic Poetry in Australia: Reinventing the Third Space" written by Laetitia Nanquette in 2014. In this article Nanquette argues that the way the Poet makes her own style by combining both her original country's landscape and her new country's landscape provides her a quirk in the literary world. The poet also accepts a literary prize on her ambivalent poems

indicating the society's acceptance of her style, her ambivalent style. In this case, it can be said that the poet is successful in negotiating her new identity with the existed cultures. Besides the success story in achieving Third Space, there are also condition when the ambivalent character achieves no negotiated identity. The example is captures in the article entitled "Heirs of Ambivalence: The Study of the Identity Crisis of the Second-Generation Indian Americans in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies" written by Harehdasht et al. in 2018. In this article, the second generation Indian diaspora are in the ambivalence in constructing their identity, whether to introducing their new identity as a part of the American society which marginalized them or to identify themselves as a part of Indian immigrant which they have no experience being in the "homeland" India. In this article, they end up with their ambivalent identity. They prefer to be acknowledged as a part of the dominant culture, America in this case, indicating their incapability to negotiate between American society and their identity as a second-generation Indian immigrant.

DISCOURSE ON CREOLE IDENTIFY: FROM AMBIVALENCE TO MADNESS

Jean Ryes' Wide Saragosa Sea presents Creole as an ambivalent identity which leads to the madness for two major characters, Antoinette and Annette. As a Creole woman, Antoinette as well as her mother, Annette faces a situation that is being alienated from both the colonizer (British) and colonized (Jamaican). Creole is a mixture person of the European descendant and black people, especially the Caribbean. Performing an ambivalent identity, having an extreme alienated experience in the story drives these both women to the madness.

Annette's Ambivalence Identity to her Madness

The ambivalence of Annette's identity as a creole woman is depicted explicitly by Ryes. The position as a slave Dominican woman who married a master is a starting point for her. Then the depiction starts growing to the more complex situation on Jamaica in Coulibri Estate, the new plantation of her husband, especially when it entered the moment a year after the slavery liberation from the parliament the UK in 1833. The society becomes sensitive regarding the enslavement practice done by Mr. Cosway, his first husband. After the death of Mr. Cosway, she needs to fight for both economically and socially. The situation becomes worse by the time she married another white man/master, Mr. Madson. He is described as the one who has a lot of money and comes to seek peculiar gain from the fallen of economic in Jamaica. Under her second husband, the situation in Jamaica becomes worse. Her husband's economic greediness leads to the anger of the native. The anger turns into action when one of the Jamaican burn Annette's house down which resulted in the death of her son, Richard Mason. The death of her son leads to her madness.

The ambivalence of Annette's identity, the half white and half black puts her in the situation of not belonging to any of the group. For her husbands, she never really a wife, the love of their life, especially for Mr. Madson. Her position also places her as a colonizer through the eyes of the Jamaicans which results in their anger upon her. According to Bhabha, the conflict between people, between self and other is needed to achieve a discursive way out, a new identity which is hoped to be accepted by both cultures. Seen in the story that the figure, Annette, possesses not enough capital to present herself as a white and gains less social interaction to become accepted by society. More than that, her identity as a white makes her labeled as a colonizer first before her attitude as a part

of society. In this sense, she is unable to achieve the discursive position, the new identity accepted by both cultures. This failure to fulfill the agreement between self and others, the inexistence of the third space drives Annette to the imbalance mental situation. Even though, the direct cause of her madness is the loss of her boy, but the circumstances forcing that particular situation to happen is because of her (family) incapability to adjust in the society.

Antoinette's Ambivalence Identity to her Madness

As a main character in the story, Antoinette is presented as a creole woman under the oppress of patriarchal society, British colonizer and even Jamaican society. Being not belong to any of the group drives Antoinette into a madwoman (in the attic). The oppressions she experienced are distributed in all three chapters of the novel. Unlike the oppresses that happened to her mother, in her experience, the oppressions are intensified by the oppression within her marriage life with unknown Englishman which is presumed to be Mr. Rochester. Despite the oppression by the social life in Jamaican and alienated in English society as it is seen in the previous subtitle, her personal marriage even pushes her harder to be mad. Since she is a creole, she is considered not as a wife by this unknown Englishman, and only considered only as the object satisfying his (animal) desire. She has never been acknowledged as a woman which can feel the way Mr. Rochester can feel. He looks down at her. He even cheats on her by their own servant, Amelie. She is also treated as a madwoman when she tries to go away from her husband. She is carried away to England and locked up in the attic until the end of the story.

The source of Antoinette's misery life is her identity as a creole. Her ambivalent identity influences her husband's attitudes toward her. Despite all the discrimination she

experienced during childhood until the moment she married Mr. Rochester, her marriage life is the direct cause of her madness. Being a creole places her into a pathetic life journey. Her current condition, even though it is beyond her will, damages her present situation. Her surroundings are the entities who fail to accept the existence of the third space, the ambivalent identity.

CONCLUSION

It is observed throughout Rhys' *Wide Saragossa Sea* that it is not simply the self and other binary relation which influences the oppression between races. The fact that there is a race between, there is an entity with a mixture identity which also experiences the discrimination needs to be highlighted. Annette and Antoinette are the examples of the ambivalent identities experiencing social oppression because of there is no discursive way out upon it. They present how racial discrimination is a complex situation.

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