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**Displacement and Search for Home in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea***

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**Abstract**

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) offers an essential perspective in understanding Caribbean experience in all its complexity. She focuses on the most tragic fate of the Caribbean white ex-plantation owner's minority community in the post modern era. It offers rare insight into the exploiter-exploited relationship. The novel presents the tragedy of Antoinette, a creole white girl, covering her life from childhood to her premature death. She symbolizes a sense of homelessness, and of despair for the inability to fulfill the urge for home. It symbolizes community too.

Rhys models her novel on Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. She visualizes a parallel between the fate of Antoinette and that of the first creole wife of Rochester, the mad woman in the attic, from Bronte's novel. She gives the marginal woman in the original novel, exiled both culturally and sexually, a sense of past and an identity.

**Key Words:** displacement, exploitation, marginality, identity

Jean Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)<sup>1</sup> offers an essential perspective in understanding Caribbean (West Indian) experience in all its complexity. She focuses on the most tragic fate of the Caribbean white ex-plantation owner's minority community in the post-emancipation era. It offers rare opportunity of insight into the reversibility of the exploiter-exploited relationship. Her novels *After Leaving Mr. McKenzie* (1931), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), *Good Morning Midnight* (1939) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* liberate the Caribbean whites and blacks from the historical trap of the oppressor-oppressed relationship as they classify how it is reversible, repetitive and hence, a permanent aspect of human condition.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the traumatic condition of uprootedness of the white - ex-plantation owner's community finds its most appropriate co-relative in the

individual's relationship with the family. The novel presents the tragedy of Antoinette, a creole white girl covering her life from childhood to her premature death. She symbolises a sense of homelessness, and of despair for the inability to fulfill the urge for home. It symbolises her community too.

Rhys models her novel on Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. She visualises a parallel between the fate of Antoinette and that of the first creole wife of Rochester, the mad woman in the attic, from Bronte's novel. She gives the marginal woman in the original novel, exiled both culturally and sexually, a sense of past and an identity.

Antoinette's family life as a child reflects her community's state of homelessness due to their sense of insecurity for being the targets of revenge by the black majority, and their inability to cope up



with the unexpected situation of poverty and loss of social status. In the first part of the novel, protagonist Antoinette remembers her past, her childhood in Grandbois in Jamaica. Her mother, Anette, speaks good English and French, once a highly privileged woman, who enjoyed power and glory. She got a black maid servant Christophine, as a wedding gift from her father. Now she is a widow with two children, a daughter Antoinette and a handicapped son Pierre. She is unable to adjust with the new situation because hatred for whites has vitiated Jamaican air. Her Coulibri estate is covered with plants and weeds as it is neglected because emancipated black servants refuse to work on it. They get threats. They hate them. As a child, Antoinette is also a victim of their hatred, "one day a little girl followed me singing, 'Go away white cockroach, go away, go away ..... Nobody want you. Go away.'" (P.23). The experience of slavery and hatred trained Caribbean women to survive in any situation. But Anette is not equipped with all these tactics like Christophine.. From power to poverty is very hard for her to cope up with. Once she enjoyed status as a rich woman who owned black slaves. Now her only hope is her black maid servant Christophine, a powerful, trustworthy and faithful obeah woman who even after emancipation does not leave them. The heat of the hate in the atmosphere makes Anette restless. Some of the whites manage to sell their properties and leave the island but Anette has no chance. As John Hearne states she belongs to 'a marginal community run over and abandoned by history'.<sup>2</sup> Antoinette remembers, 'Now we are marooned', my mother said, ' now what will become of us ?' (P.18)

There is always a frown on Antoinette's mother's face because of hateful laughs of the passing people. Antoinette tries to understand her and wants to help her but she is thoroughly engrossed with her own sorrowful condition. The little girl is neglected when she needed her mother's care. She wants to reach out, "I hated this frown and once I touched her head trying to smooth it. But she pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her". (P.20) Outside the house, the girl and her family are persistent victims of racial hatred. When the child is exposed to her cultural and racial differences from the blacks, she cannot comprehend them wholly. Thorunn Lonsdale comments, 'What is most apparent is the children's acute but confused awareness of cultural identity, and that, combined with an inadequate development of feminine persona and sense of self, explains... exiled positions both sexually and socially.'<sup>3</sup>

Family, that cannot fulfill Antoinette's urge of relatedness, obsesses the child with its loneliness, neutrality and fear. She struggles to search for home on the unconscious level through creating relationship with the surroundings of the house, on the one hand, and with the black maid Christophine, on the other. The lonely child searches for solace in the surrounding. She passes her time in the company of nature, 'our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible the tree of life grew there orchids flourished, it was a bell shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong.' (P.19). Sometimes she goes to sleep in the garden.

The relationship between Antoinette and her black maid as well as surrogate mother, Christophine, plays a crucial role not only in the life of the heroine but more significantly, in the vision of the novelist. Jean Rhys affirms, through it, her grasp of evolution of society as a process of positive development in spite of its history of hatred. In the novel the white - black relationship is mainly negative but suggests positive possibilities. Through the creole white girl's relationship with the black maid, Rhys opts for the creative future for the racially stratified Caribbean society where the whites and the blacks will overcome the historical guilt of skin and be integrated in positive human relationship. Christophine fulfills the girl's need of companionship, love and care.

Christophine is 'da' and Antoinette is 'doudou' of Christophine. It is comforting name Christophine gives to Antoinette - it means, 'my dear', 'my child', 'my lovely one'. Christophine knows at which place the lonely child could be found. She picks her up from garden where she falls asleep. It is she who understands her need of companionship, so she introduced Tia, a black girl to her, a daughter of Christophine's friend, Maillotte. One day Tia wears her dress and Antoinette has to wear the dirty, torn clothes of Tia. In front of the white guests mother finds it embarrassing; she scolds Christophine who reminds her that the child has only two dresses. 'You want clean dress to drop from heaven? Some people crazy, in truth... she grow up worthless. And nobody care.' (P.26)

Christophine's physical comforts help Antoinette to bring her senses back. Her touch gives Antoinette confidence.

Christophine does it so naturally as if she were her real mother. She spends most of her time in kitchen with Christophine. She sleeps next to Antoinette's room. She sings patois song for her at night. It is an elegy. It means, 'The little ones grow old, the children leave us, will they come back?' And the one about the cedar tree flowers which only last for day.' (P.20). Christophine tries her best to maintain the balance between emotional and physical growth of the child. Her mother has deserted her but Christophine is 'Oassis' for her. According to Maria Olausen Christophine's most important function as a powerful protector and nursing mother - figure suggests ironically how, 'The life of the white family is now in the hands of a person who once was part of their property.'<sup>4</sup>

Antoinette's mother is fully engaged in the strategies for economic survival. As Olausen rightly points out, 'These qualities, such as beauty, fragility, dependence and passivity, make it impossible for her to change actively their situation.'<sup>5</sup> Her survival in feminine way is concentrated on getting a new husband. She marries white person Mr. Mason Cosway. As a perfect imperialist, Mason never fails to call the black servants 'niggers'. Her marriage brings temporary economic stability in her life. As a widow of a slave owner and a daughter of a slave owner, Anette is always afraid of the attack of natives. She tries to persuade Mr. Mason to leave Coulibri and go to live in Trinidad or in Antigua where he has his estate, but he is overconfident about his imperialistic power. She never forgives him for that.

The step-father, Mr. Mason Cosway always remains 'Mr. Mason' or 'white

pappy' for Antoinette. The atmosphere of the house becomes European after his arrival. Antoinette says, '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.' (P.35) Their richness becomes the cause of hatred for the people. They set fire to their house. Their another black servant Myra, leaves handicapped Pierre in the burning house to join the burners outside. The fire kills Pierre and the caged parrot. Their death turns Anette insane. Mr. Mason escapes from his responsibilities and duties towards his family. He makes arrangements for Anette's stay in a new house with some black servants, sends Antoinette to the convent school, and returns himself to England.

Antoinette's search for home is expressed also in her attempt to befriend Tia, the little black girl. 'Soon Tia was my friend and I met her nearly every morning at the turn of the road to the river.' (P.23) She enjoys wandering and swimming with her. But their different complexions reveal that they are different, separate. Sometimes it becomes the cause of teasing to each other. Antoinette thinks that Tia cheated her even though she has taken somersault under water, the bet decided between them to win pennies, which are now in the hands of Tia. 'Keep them then, you cheating nigger', I said. She said, she hear, all we poor like beggar, .... old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger'. (P.24) Unconsciously the seed of hatred is sown by the changing human environment in the minds of innocent children. Antoinette is confident that Tia's family will give them support, after the burning of the

house, 'As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her .... I saw a jagged stone in her hand. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. I was as if I saw myself. Like in looking glass'. (P. 45) Antoinette herself is the product of mixed blood, the product of Caribbean hybrid culture; so Tia becomes her mirror image. Jean Rhys always wishes to be black, so she has created her black half, Tia. Both the colonizer and colonized are trapped in complex Caribbean environment. Antoinette's childhood is destroyed by the racial hatred and it creates permanent psychological scar.

Trapped by the abnormal historical conditions, Caribbean society is compelled into the policies of mutual exploitation for self-interest. It is seen in way in which Antoinette's father, Mason compels Rochester to accept marriage with his daughter by setting a large amount in his name and in the way in which Rochester, the young moneyless white man from England, rejected by his family, accepts the proposal due to his need of economic security. Marriage offers home for the homeless girl, at least for a brief period. It is like discovery of illusory home by the girl.

Rochester has, 'come to the West Indies in search of wealth in the shape of rich wife.'<sup>6</sup> Antoinette once again feels insecure. Her second dream hints at her fatal destiny. A man with weapon directs her to a building in the deep forest and forces her to climb the fort like building, the dark house, 'I follow him, sick with fear but make no effort to save myself, if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse. This must happen.' (pp. 59-60) Her dreams are significant. They provide

her marginal escape from the hostile world as well as prove indicative of her future. According to Maria Olausen, her second dream 'contains even more clearly the fear of sexual violation.'<sup>7</sup> Antoinette refuses the proposal of Rochester but he does not give up. He does not want to return to England, 'in the role of rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl.' (P.78) He promises her peace and happiness. Richard, her step brother, is also involved in the marriage transaction. Thirty thousand pounds have been paid to Rochester without any question or condition. No provision is made for Antoinette. Urbashi Barat states, 'human relationships here, governed by the cash nexus are directed solely towards extracting the maximum of profit for the individual, no matter they destroy others in the process.'<sup>8</sup>

As the husband of estate owner's daughter, Rochester received rich fortune and status. After one week in Spanish town Antoinette and Rochester come to Massacre, the hilly region of Jamaica, the ancestral place of Antoinette, which she loves most for its beautiful surroundings. For Rochester it is lonely place but for her, 'I love it anywhere in the world. As if it were a person. More than a person.' (P.89). 'This is my place and everything is on our side.' (P.74). Her existence relies on nature, typical surrounding and environment. Nature is her trustworthy companion, where betrayal has no place. Their honeymoon days are idyllic. Rochester appreciates her every move, the begins to love that place even if sometimes he feels scary. For Antoinette it is paradise. Dr. Ramkundu comments, 'She has kind of communicative friendship with the "fragipanni" trees.'<sup>9</sup> Antoinette is happy in her family, but this

family cannot survive because it is based on exploitative relationship between husband and wife. She enjoys a brief period of their married life.

Antoinette's brief period of passionate love relationship with her husband is followed by the period of estrangement between the two. The illusory home is lost. Unfortunate girl who suffers from homelessness in her mother's family is made homeless once again in her own family by her crooked husband. However, Rhys adds a special dimension to her study of the Caribbean situation through the portrayal of Rochester as a white exile in Caribbean islands. The man is obsessed by the inner conflict between his attraction for the beautiful wife and his sense of insecurity because of her so-called heredity of insanity.

Rochester does not suspect the betrayal of Mr. Mason until he receives the letter of Daniel Cosway, step brother of Antoinette, who reveals the heredity of madness in the family of Cosways. He poisons the life of innocent Antoinette. He tells him about Sandi, the Creole friend of her. Daniel is dissatisfied man, who wants share in estate. When he realises he could not get it, he takes revenge on his sister. All relationships in the novel are dead relationships. Mr. Mason's marriage to Anette and vice-versa, Rochester's marriage to Antoinette, Daniel's disclosure of insanity in family originate in the crucial need for economic survival or economic power, or economic stability. Rochester is filled with insecurity. The letter of Daniel gives him chance for escape. From that day his behaviour with Antoinette changes and he decides to take calculative moves. He



begins to call her Bertha a traditional name for servants.

When Rochester begins to sleep in dressing room and neglects Antoinette, Christophine smells the danger. She wants to caution her but she remains passive. She tells her 'All women, all colours nothing but fools. Three children I have one living in this world, each one different father, but no husband .... I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man.' (pp. 109-110). Then she tells her to win his favour once more. But Rochester does not budge by these tactics. Then she gives her very practical advice, 'A man don't treat you good, pick up your skirt and walk out. Do it and he come after you.' (P.110). Even she tells her to squeeze her own money from him by making the excuse of sickness and go to Martinique to live. But Antoinette does not want any disgrace by breaking the marriage.

Rochester starts asserting his authority and it causes estrangement between husband and wife. Antoinette feels lonely and frustrated. Christophine cannot tolerate the humiliation of an innocent girl. First she consoles her by singing songs, telling funny stories, starting with, 'Listen doudou che.' (P.114). But it does not work for long. Then she bluntly tells her that Rochester is interested in her money not in her. Christophine dares to ask her step brother Richard, 'she should be protected legally. A settlement can be arranged and it should be arranged'. (P.114) Rochester now wants to assault her dignity as a wife. He enjoys sex with Amelia, their black servant girl, beyond the thin partition of Antoinette's room. But she wants to win his love, and it is her last attempt. She persuades Christophine

to use her obeah to make him love her. Even if Christophine knows that it will not work she does it for her doudou. But Rochester thinks that she tries to poison him. He plans to go away from insecure place as early as possible. He decides to take her to England, and never stops calling her Bertha, the colonial strategy to efface the identity of a person. Antoinette and Rochester both are the victims of colonial practices, he as an exiled insecure man and she as the victim of Victorian norms of family security. Urbashi Barat comments, 'Their marriage, again, is an image of the colonial experience which enriches the colonizer but impoverishes and enfeebles the colonized.'<sup>10</sup> Her urge for house through marriage, is destroyed. She becomes insane like her mother.

Christophine tries to rescue Antoinette from the clutches of Rochester, who is afraid of her, but 'Antoinette loves her with touching warmth. In her unberable grief she can come only to Christophine, her 'da' a surrogate mother figure and finds comfort by touching and smelling her.'<sup>11</sup> Christophine earnestly requests Rochester about Antoinette, 'She don't satisfy you ! Try her once more .... if you forsake her they will tear her in pieces - like they did her mother.' (P. 158) She reminds him, 'it's you come all the long way to her house, it's you beg, her to marry ....what do you do with her money, eh! ... 'leave the West Indies if you don't want her no more .... she marry with someone else. She forgot about you and live happy.' (pp.158-159) Christophine knows her limitations. Rochester threatens her of legal action over her illegal obeah practice, then she leaves the place wishing better life for Antoinette. The history repeats. The history of Anette

becomes the history of Antoinette. Anette is exploited by the black servants Mr. Mason has kept to take her care. She dies in madness, in dejected and rejected condition. The same fate is reserved for the daughter.

Nature, surroundings and environment develop man's personality. The surrounding includes animate and even inanimate objects with whom the person gets acquainted with from his childhood. Mental stability depends on that all. In Caribbean context definition of 'home' includes all that. If somebody deliberately displace someone from 'home'; naturally the person becomes mentally instable. Rochester uses that strategy.

Home turns into prison for Antoinette. when she is transferred to England, beyond Wide Sargasso Sea, the vast distance that she will never cross. By that time she has lost her sense of time and place. She is now Bertha. She asks, 'So between you and I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all.' (P. 85) He deliberately displaces her because he finds that Jamaican atmosphere is familiar to her and it keeps her sane. Christophine rightly calls him, 'Satan self'. (P.132) He keeps her in prison of Thornfield Hall for her crime of infidelity but infidelity is accepted norm in European society. Antoinette creates her illusory world in madness recreating the image of her mother and family. Rochester denies her good clothes and the comfort she longs for. Veena Jain comments, 'Rochester's inability to understand Antoinette's feelings and passions is England's failure to comprehend the negro world.'<sup>12</sup>

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Antoinette survives through hallucination and dreams and insanity. It is an attempt to create, on the imaginary level, the desired situation. She enjoys the healthy image of her relationship with mother, her Coulibri garden, that smell of frangipanni flowers, orchids. The touch of her red dress brings back her sanity because it possesses the smell of her soil, her sun ! She sees Tia and Christophine and her burning house. At once she finds the solution and burns Rochester's house and jumps into the Tia's world. Louis James points out, 'There are many islands in the novel, geographical, social and mental..... and the complexity of the ..... fragmentation of West Indian experience - --- it also a stage for the search for 'substance of life.....There is one island, the creative human spirit.'<sup>13</sup>

Antoinette is unfortunate. She never has a home. Her mother's house is burnt; then she has to leave her own house of Jamaica; and the third prison like house she burns herself. Antoinette from childhood is homeless and familyless, hence incapable to survive. Her family fails to give her sustenance. Her journey from childhood to suicide is the journey in search of authentic family. Her mother's and her insanity is not hereditary, but the evil forces of the environment turn them insane.

Antoinette's act of burning Rochester's house is associated with the image of the home, across her mindscape, with everything she yearned for throughout her life. Thus her act of destruction on the physical level is also an act of possession/creation on the unconscious level.

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