

Power through the Text: Jean Rhys' Caribbean and her Black Protagonists on the 'Imperial Road'

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Abstract

In her text, Jean Rhys provides a 'renewed' understanding of subaltern writing and criticism. This renewed perspective is not one that merely 'unsilences' black/Caribbean voices or asserts an oppositional narrative that counters Euro-Western colonial philosophies. Rather, the theoretical underpinnings disclose the ways in which the critical writings and thoughts of these writers "envision the future by questioning the terms in which the colonial past has been cast rather than by reacting against it.

Key words

Caribbean voices, creolité, Western criticism, double voiced discourse, ethnicity.

1. Woman Writer's Anxiety in-between 'Authorship' and 'Influence'

In this theoretical chapter, I will focus on the feminist literary criticism, starting from two feminist critics who seek to define what it means to be a woman writer in a patriarchal culture. In other words, Gilbert and Gubar go back to the theories of literary history proffered by Harold Bloom, to wit, his account of the process by which writers "assimilate and then consciously or unconsciously affirm or deny the achievements of their predecessors" [3]. They find Bloom's theory of the 'anxiety of influence' particularly useful in this respect, to be precise, the writer's "fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors... assume essential priority over his own writings" [3]. Gilbert and Gubar sustain that Bloom's Oedipal model of the 'strong poet' is undoubtedly a masculinist one but one, as such, eminently suited to understanding the patrilinearity of Western literary history and the "psychosexual and sociosexual contexts by which every literary text is surrounded" [3]. They contend that Bloom's theory less recommends or perpetuates than it analyses the "patriarchal poetics and attendant anxieties which underlie our culture's chief literary movements" [3]. The question is: How can his theory of the 'anxiety of influence' explain the female tradition? In answer to this, Gilbert and Gubar show that women writers experience what they term an "anxiety

of authorship” [3] for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her. Thus the ‘anxiety of authorship’ consists in the “radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” [3]. The female writer revisionary struggle often becomes a struggle for what has been called ‘Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction’... [3]. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the woman writer can begin such a struggle “only by seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal authority is possible” [1]. It is in this way that the female writer seeks to “legitimize her own rebellious endeavours” [3]. At the same time, it is a fact that one of the consequences of living in a patriarchal society is that women experience their gender “as a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy” [3]. Thus, Gilbert and Gubar contend that the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly predecessors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention – all these phenomena of ‘inferiorization’ mark the woman writer’s struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart. From this point of view, for both male and female writers, “literary texts are coercive, imprisoning... literature usurps a reader’s interiority, it is an invasion of privacy” [3].

2. Imagining the “Black Atlantic”: Trans-Racial Identity

The image of the ‘Black Atlantic’ is at once a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence and by that same token a metonym, a sign of its absence and loss. It is precisely from this edge of meaning and being, from this shifting boundary of otherness within identity that we can ask: ‘What does a *black* man want?’ The black man wants the objectifying confrontation with *otherness*; in the *colonial psyche* there is an unconscious disavowal of the negating, splitting moment of desire. Thus, if the subject of desire is never a simply Myself, then the Other is never simply an *It-self*, a font of identity, truth, or misrecognition. As a principle of identification, the Other bestows a degree of objectivity but its representation is always ambivalent, disclosing a lack.

In this section we aim to explore the ambivalent, uncertain questions of colonial desire with a study case of Jean Rhys's Caribbean writing. We can think of a correspondence between the *mise-en-scène* of unconscious fantasy and the phantoms of racist fear (the language of colonial racism) and hate that stalk the colonial scene. Taking into account the condition of the colonial world, we can see the colonizer caught in the ambivalence of paranoid identification, a Manichean allegory of his colonial consciousness. In this case, the white man is projecting his fears and desires on 'them'. From this Manichean perspective, the native's violence is a force intended to bridge the gap between the white as subject and the non-white, the Black man as object. Moreover, this fact reflects his view of the psychic structure of the colonial relation: the opposition between the native and the settler zones, like the overlaying of black and white bodies. In a Hegelian sense, this flash of 'recognition' fails to acknowledge the colonial relation: "And yet the Negro knows there is a difference. He wants it... The former slave needs a challenge to his humanity" [1]. In the absence of such a challenge, Fanon argues that the colonized can only imitate, never identify. Beyond the permeable boundaries of the colonial desire, the white masked black man lurks. Thus, it becomes possible to cross, even to shift those boundaries, for the strategy of the colonial desire is to stage the drama of identity at the point at which the black mask is trying to reveal the white skin. At the margins, the transformative forces in-between the black body and the white body changes the psychic of the racialized subjects. Thus, in the Caribbean colonial discourse the stereotype of the *mulata* evokes contradictory feelings: fear and desire.

For example in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the Jamaican social structure hierarchy includes at a first level the whites born in England, distinguished from the white Creoles, descendants of Europeans who have lived in the West Indies for one or more generations. At another level in the stratification of the social structure, the population of black ex-slaves who maintain their own kind of independence is placed. For instance, Sandi and Daniel Cosway, Alexander Cosway's illegitimate children, both occupy this in-between position between black and white people. Moreover, Antoinette and her mother recognize their dependence on the black servants (Christophine), showing a respect that combines fear and resentment.

In Rhys's fiction every text includes fragmented elements of Afrocentric identity that acknowledge the culture of the Black Atlantic. John Martin further asserts that the Afrocentric spirituality provides all of Rhys' protagonists with an "alternative epistemology" [6], "to transcend or, more important, to transgress conventional

modes of knowing and behaving” [6]. Thus, in her fiction Rhys transgresses these Black ‘cultural aesthetical references’ under the form of ancestral Black legacy such as: Caribbean voodoo, obeah folk magic, religious practices from the West African culture that ‘crossed’ the Atlantic, towards her Dominican homeland. The rhetorical and stylistic strategies of the Afrocentric orality, strategies of parody, satire, and masquerade and folklore interrogate the colonial and metropolitan power structures in *Wide Sargasso Sea* through “forms of verbal artistry such as calypso that require economy and highly developed verbal play [and] permit a depth of signification without many words” [9]. Albert Gilson writes that in the metropolis “she was subject to disparagement reserved by the English for West Indian colonials whose racial identity was suspect and whose social position was questionable at best” [4]. ‘The Atlantic world’ is a useful concept here, long a staple of slave-trade studies, recently given a cultural twist in Paul Gilroy’s notion of a ‘Black Atlantic’, and already present in the deeply mediated title of Jean Rhys’s novel, which names that which slows down the channels of communication which criss-cross the Atlantic: “I thought of ‘Sargasso sea’ or ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’ but nobody knew what I meant” (*WSS*, 154).

In conclusion, the abuse of power, the exploitation of the weak, and “disillusionment at the colonial, patriarchal lexicon of ideas that pass for universal truths” [11] themes that characterize the Black Atlantic become central in Rhys’ oeuvre. Since “linear European narrative cannot register plausibly her own experiences and those of her characters” [11], Rhys creates a multiplicity of voices and perspectives through heteroglossia and call-and-response. The Rhysian woman always rejects a “single compartmentalizing vision in favor of one that opens up the realms of possibility” [2]. Her Black protagonists, though temporally and geographically removed from the Caribbean space, are yet informed by an Afrocentric aesthetic of resistance, survival and celebration.

3. The White West Indian Writer and her Black Protagonists on the ‘Imperial Road

By using a model of women’s cultural difference, Elaine Showalter argues that feminist critics can also incorporate ideas about their language, bodies and psyche, but they will ‘interpret them in relation to the social context in which they occur’ [10]. She argues that a cultural theory identifies women’s ‘collective experience within the cultural whole’, whilst simultaneously acknowledging important differences amongst women writers. She concentrates on the notion of the ‘wild of women’s culture’, a zone spatially, experientially and metaphysically outside the

dominant boundaries. Spatially it is a ‘no-man’s’ land, forbidden to men, and experientially, it includes parts of female lifestyle unlike those of men: in both these areas there are corresponding male zones, not open to women. Metaphysically, however – in terms of consciousness – there is no corresponding male experience alien to women. All male consciousness is within the boundaries of the dominant structures and thus accessible or structured by language. Although they have never experienced it first hand, women may know what male experience is like, since it has been the subject of myth and legend. But man can never know what is in the wild. It is always imaginary. “In their texts it becomes the place for revolutionary women’s language – the language of every thing that is repressed” [10]

Furthermore, Showalter argues that the ‘wild zone’ represents the true arena for an examination of women’s difference. It is here that she locates the essence of femininity. A cultural model of feminist criticism and women’s difference establishes the female tradition as a “positive source of strength and solidarity” as well as a ‘negative source of powerlessness’ [10]. Since women are inside two traditions simultaneously, feminist critics must address themselves to both dominant and muted structures. Women’s fiction should thus be seen as a “double-voiced discourse, containing a dominant and a muted story” [10]. Using Showalter’s cultural model of gynocritics for Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I shall be examining the novel in two different perceptions of reality corresponding to ‘dominant’ and ‘muted’ groups. Within the text, it can be argued that Rhys creates these two axes in a variety of different forms. The most obvious is the male/female dichotomy. But there is also a racial divide, primarily between the British and Jamaican communities (e.g. the novel’s protagonist’s white Creole origin of mixed European and Negro descent). There are frequent references to the differences between the naturally wild landscape of the Jamaican countryside, and memories of the cultivation and urbanization of England, representing the conflict between nature and culture. And perhaps most importantly, there is the contrast Rhys draws between madness and sanity.

Gathering the ‘negatives’ from all the above oppositions, Rhys concentrates on a portrayal of ‘Otherness’, of cultural negativity as defined by Western civilisation’s system of signification – the ‘muted’ group. But she also challenges the classification system itself by depicting cultural negativity as a source of power and strength. *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be seen as Rhys’s attempt to find a matriarchal and ‘natural’ female discourse. Metaphorically, we can trace the wild zone of the

Jamaican landscape and lifestyle as a platform for that discourse, a space within which the muted groups can speak. Yet the dominant culture is ever-present, embodied in British imperialism, personified by Rochester. Hence the importance of the concept of madness in the novel, which must immediately become a relative term in its position at the centre of the debate about alternative perceptions of reality.

4. Power through the Text: Jean Rhys's Caribbean

Wide Sargasso Sea is for example concerned to depict the gulf, due both to cultural and gender differences, between the experiences and lifestyle of its young Creole heiress – her perception of reality – and that of Rochester: the British, male imposter. In their commentary on *Jane Eyre*, Gilbert and Gubar describe Bertha as Jane's 'hunger, rebellion and rage'. This too corresponds to Rhys's portrayal of Antoinette's madness: a madness that epitomizes her difference from Rochester, and her refusal to accept his perception and values as the norm. By displacing Brontë's Rochester into an alien culture, Rhys attempts an inversion of the dominant ideology in order that she may allow the muted group to speak. The novel is initially concerned with Antoinette's insecurity (and that of her whole family), due to their racial origin. Neither Antoinette nor her mother has either money or blackness to secure themselves an identity. Moreover, Harold Bloom writes that modern authors (specifically male authors) are concerned about their ability to resist the influences of their literary forefathers in order to achieve an original work of their own, with no mention of how a female author might be challenged to create in response to such a male dominated literary past. Bloom relates his theory to Freud's Oedipus complex and the male child's desire to overthrow his father in order to establish his own supremacy. The *Madwoman in the Attic* looks at Bloom's argument from a female viewpoint, with readings of a number of female authors in the nineteenth century examining how it was impossible for them to follow Bloom's theory and identify with the authors who have superseded them in order to respond with their own creations. As a consequence these novelists create heroines whose rebellious desires against the patriarchal domination of their social milieu and their subsequent oppression are enacted if not by themselves then by one or more 'Others' in the texts, such as Jean Rhys's 'Other' Antoinette Cosway.

Gilbert and Gubar say that the elements of *Jane Eyre* comprise 'the paradigmatic female story,' exploring "the tension between parlor and attic, the psychic split between the lady who submits to male and the lunatic who rebels" [3]. Although

Bronte wasn't the first to use gothic spaces to comment on gender roles, her haunted house formula, with the madwoman, the governess, and the Byronic master, stuck. Thornfield is, to Gubar and Gilbert, "more metaphorically radiant than most gothic mansions" [3]. Like Bronte, Rhys is drawn to using architectural spaces and doubling to represent the scarred, split female – and in this case, West Indian – psyche. In Rhys' post-colonial, modernist prequel/companion to *Jane Eyre*, the Caribbean mansions of Coulibri (burnt tragically down during the narrator's childhood) and Granbois (decaying) set the scene for the heroine's descent into madness. Antoinette (later Bertha)'s "wicked" stepfather, a British colonist, arranges her match with Rochester. Although there are moments of affection in their young marriage, Rochester cannot 'read' his foreign wife, and grows suspicious of her. He privileges a lying male relative's slander about the family he's married into, over Antoinette's emotional version of the truth, shattering her confidence. Her stability is further threatened when her black servant Amelie sleeps with Rochester, a liaison that furthers both Amelie's scheme to improve her life, and Rochester's need to assert power over Antoinette. (Here, and in other treatment of black characters, we can argue that Rhys shows the racist tendencies she rails against in Bronte.)

Frantz Fanon points out that "In the colonies, the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich" [1]. Undeniably, the white West Indian's burden involves grappling with such stereotypes. On the other hand, the burden also involves struggling with a sense of marginalisation as a dwindling minority in an environment of increasing Afro- and/or Indo-centricity. In such an atmosphere of polarisation, how have white West Indian writers negotiated their identities or more specifically, how have they conveyed such a negotiation in their depictions of the blacks who make up the majority of the population? Charles Mills has suggested: "Being white in the Caribbean cannot mean the same thing as being white in Europe, for being white in the Caribbean means, above all, not being black" [7].

In conclusion, notwithstanding any current trends in Caribbean intellectual thought towards the Utopian notion of creolité, race seems to matter more than ever in the Caribbean society, and the divisions based on ethnicity/race/class widen steadily.

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