

The Fate of Marionette: The Causes of Antoinette's Tragedy

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Abstract: "Wide Sargasso Sea," authored by British writer Jean Rhys in 1966, serves as the focal point of this scholarly analysis. The research herein delves into multifaceted aspects, encompassing the profound cultural disorientation and identity dissolution inherent within the narrative, Rochester's pervasive influence upon the character of Antoinette, and the consequential ramifications of Antoinette's formative milieu on her evolving persona. Through a comprehensive examination of these thematic elements, our objective is to illuminate the intricate psychological and sociological transformations experienced by the female protagonists within this enduring literary masterpiece. Furthermore, this inquiry unveils the underlying socio-cultural underpinnings that manifest throughout the text, providing insight into the broader contextual significance of the work.

Keywords: Antoinette, Culture shock, Rochester, Identity.

1. The Causes of Indecision: A Dark Coming-of-Age Experience

a) Creole

Creoles, known as "Criollos" in Spanish, are individuals of Spanish descent born in the Spanish American colonies. Within the historical context of the Spanish American colonies, Creoles occupied a pivotal role. They emerged as a prominent class during the Latin American War of Independence and assumed positions of power and authority in the post-independence Latin American societies. These individuals, often referred to as native whites, held considerable wealth, albeit without the same political privileges enjoyed by the peninsulares, i.e., native Spaniards. This disparity in political and economic rights rendered them vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of the metropolis.

Consequently, during the fervent revolution against colonialism and slavery in 1790, a significant portion of the population, comprising blacks, indigenous people, and mixed-race individuals, joined the struggle for liberation. Regrettably, this revolution did not culminate in the complete dismantling of the established colonial order; instead, it reinforced existing social hierarchies. As a result, individuals of color began to direct their discontent towards their mixed-race counterparts who appeared to benefit from the conflict, especially those who found themselves in dire economic circumstances.

Within the novel, this discontent manifested in various forms, including derogatory labels such as "white cockroaches" and "white-skinned niggas." Such terms were not merely confined to verbal expressions but were also incorporated into songs designed to demean those mixed-race individuals who had profited from the conflict. The novel further depicts instances of physical aggression, including property damage, theft, and arson, directed at these marginalized and economically disadvantaged mixed-race individuals.

The portrayal of this complex social dynamic in "Wide Sargasso Sea" illustrates the intricate and multifaceted interactions between different racial and ethnic groups during this historical period, shedding light on the tensions, ambiguities, and conflicts that characterized their

relationships.

b) Betrayal by a Playmate

Tia, once the devoted companion of our protagonist Antoinette, underwent a profound transformation following the abolition of slavery. Her loyalties shifted, and she became consumed with envy over the new ball bestowed upon Antoinette by Christophine. Resorting to reprehensible tactics, Tia resorted to deceit and taunting to undermine Antoinette. Even after the initial conflict had concluded, she continued to employ deception, targeting not only Antoinette's cherished ball but also her exquisite attire.

Tia's disdain and humiliation of Antoinette stemmed from the latter's mixed-race white heritage, highlighting the racial tensions and hostilities that marred their relationship. This adversarial sentiment and behavior only compounded Antoinette's feelings of unease and deep-seated mistrust of the world. These dark childhood experiences left an indelible mark on Antoinette, influencing her subsequent interactions with others and taking a toll on her physical and mental well-being.

These early experiences significantly contributed to Antoinette's reluctance to enter into marriage with Rochester later in the narrative. Moreover, they sowed the seeds of bitterness in Rochester's heart, contributing to his eventual retribution against Antoinette. Tia's actions, therefore, stand as one of the pivotal factors contributing to the tragic course of events in the lives of these characters.

c) Family Upheaval

The untimely demise of Antoinette's father plunged the Coulibri family into a precarious predicament. Annette, her mother, was a young and captivating woman, yet due to her Creole heritage, she found herself subjected to discrimination and exclusion by Jamaican society, particularly the local women. Following her husband's passing, Annette endured the relentless barrage of cold and spiteful remarks, exacerbating her emotional torment. In this hostile environment, Annette found herself devoid of friends or romantic companions and redirected all her emotional focus toward her son, Pierre.

Being younger than Elchan and grappling with a speech impediment, Annette discovered solace and emotional fulfillment through her interactions with Pierre. Paradoxically,

she adopted a distant and harsh demeanor towards Antoinette, a manifestation of her silent resistance and discontentment with herself and the world around her. Consequently, Antoinette found herself deprived of her mother's support and understanding, intensifying her isolation and unease within the family. This family dynamic also foreshadowed the trajectory of Antoinette's subsequent growth and destiny. Antoinette reflected on her relationship with her mother, saying, "Unexpectedly, she pushed me away. She was not violent, but calm and indifferent... 'Oh, don't bother me'... I was a little scared of her."

Following Annette's remarriage, Antoinette gained a British stepfather of pure white descent. While the family's exterior appeared stable, the intricate composition of this family unit exacerbated the animosity of the local indigenous population towards them. Ultimately, this culminated in the tragic burning of their home, the loss of their brother, the descent of their mother into madness, and Antoinette's loss of security. In this oppressive environment, Antoinette was compelled to navigate her days carefully, observing words and emotions, unable to freely express her thoughts and emotions. She endured bullying from those around her but refrained from resistance, understanding the futility of such efforts. She once voiced her independence in the novel, stating, "I am old enough to take care of myself," revealing her profound desire for self-reliance and self-preservation. Consequently, she struggled with decision-making when it came to her own marriage.

d) Disdain and Impatience from Surrounding Individuals

The early deaths of Coulibri and Pierre, leaving behind only the ruins of their home, shattered Antoinette's family completely, and her mother, Annette, suffered a severe mental breakdown. Antoinette visited her mother, but was apprehensive that mentioning Pierre would cause her more pain. Consequently, she could only murmur, "I'm coming, I'm coming." However, her mother paid her no heed and roughly pushed her away, resulting in Antoinette's fall and injury. She recounted, "She pushed me away. I fell and struck the partition, injuring myself." Following this traumatic incident, Antoinette was compelled to enter a convent without any guardianship. Within its confines, she lacked familial support and was instead subjected to relentless teasing and abuse from her peers, rendering her profoundly isolated and vulnerable. The author vividly captured this torment in the text, noting, "The girl started laughing... Then she dared to walk in front of them... She also wanted to harm you... Let me catch you alone one day."

After her mother's remarriage, she repeatedly conveyed to her stepfather the hostility directed at their family by the local community and her desire to relocate away from Coulibri. Regrettably, her stepfather did not take her concerns seriously and perceived Annette as excessively anxious. Tragically, this attitude contributed to Biel's death and the ultimate destruction of Coulibri. Throughout Antoinette's formative years, she grappled with the incomprehension and impatience of those around her. Despite enduring injustice, she struggled to articulate her emotions. The article poignantly reflects the frustration she faced: "'What's the matter with you? Why are you crying? What happened?' I still can't answer." "You've cried enough this time. It's time to stop."

e) Formation of Avoidant Attachment

Avoidant attachment often emerges as a consequence of unmet emotional needs and neglect experienced during an individual's formative years. In Antoinette's case, her

upbringing was marked by instances where her mother failed to comprehend her emotional requirements, leading to feelings of rejection and alienation. Furthermore, there were occasions when she received gifts from her stepfather, gifts she genuinely cherished, yet she chose to feign indifference out of fear that her emotional expressions would be met with indifference or disapproval. This fear of having her emotional enthusiasm extinguished became a coping mechanism for her.

When confronted with emotional challenges, Antoinette lacked the courage to confront them directly, often resorting to the more passive approach of seeking assistance from Christophine's Obi witchcraft. She consistently prioritized the feelings and needs of others over her own, relegating her own emotional needs to the background. This habit persisted even when she harbored intense feelings for Rochester, as she concealed her emotions deep within her heart, unwilling to fully acknowledge or express them.

f) Inner Sense of Insecurity

Antoinette's life journey is marked by persistent unease and a series of traumatic experiences. She bore witness to her mother's horse being cruelly poisoned to death, and this trauma left her with a deeply ingrained fear, causing her to clutch a stick even while sleeping as a means of self-defense. She endured the harrowing ordeal of her home being consumed by flames, resulting in the agonizing death of her beloved pet parrot and the tragic loss of her brother in the inferno. Witnessing the destruction of everything she held dear, the gradual deterioration of her mother's mental state, and the growing hostility of those around her, Antoinette's world became increasingly fraught with turmoil.

In a candid moment with Rochester, she confessed, "I didn't want to live at all before I met you," revealing the profound despair that had enveloped her life. Her habitual act of holding her left wrist with her right hand, which Rochester found repulsive, was, in reality, a manifestation of her inner insecurity and vulnerability. From a behavioral perspective, this gesture symbolized her instinctual need for self-protection and support in the face of overwhelming emotional turmoil and uncertainty.

2. The Reasons for the Loss of Identity and Self-Identification

a) The Red Dress and the White Dress

In "The Wide Sargasso Sea," the red skirt and the white skirt emerge as powerful symbols encapsulating Antoinette's complex journey of identity. The red dress signifies her Creole heritage, while the white dress embodies her assimilation into British culture.

Upon her initial encounter with Mr. Mason, her mother's second husband, there was a palpable eagerness to see Antoinette adorned in the white dress that Tia had taken away. Following her marriage to Rochester, he favored dressing her in white attire, while Antoinette clung to her preference for the red dress, even embroidering her name on a handkerchief with red silk thread. The color red holds significant symbolic value within Creole culture, representing the unique identity and cultural traditions of the Creole people. By donning the red dress, Antoinette outwardly expresses her deep connection to and pride in her Creole heritage. In British culture, the red dress also comes to symbolize her Creole identity, reflecting her steadfast attachment to her roots and her sense of self.

However, as her conflict with British culture intensifies,

Antoinette begins to gravitate towards white dresses. White is often perceived as a symbol of purity and nobility in British culture, but in Creole culture, it symbolizes the loss of cultural heritage and roots. Antoinette's choice to wear white attire signifies her attempt to conform to British societal norms and to forsake her Creole identity in the pursuit of assimilation. Yet, paradoxically, this process results in a gradual erosion of her sense of self and identity.

b) Conflict between Creole Culture and British Culture

Antoinette's upbringing immersed her in the vibrant tapestry of Creole culture, a rich heritage encompassing language, religion, customs, and traditions steeped in history. However, as her mother remarried, the encroachment of British culture began to subdue and displace Antoinette's Creole identity. Her daily meals transformed into the conventional British fare of beef, lamb, pies, and puddings. While she found solace in the semblance of an English lifestyle, there remained a longing for the flavors of Christophine's cooking that she once cherished.

Over time, Antoinette's Creole heritage was relegated to the status of the "other," marginalized and subjected to discrimination within British society. This relentless assimilation effort sought to erode her identity, compelling her to relinquish her cultural roots and assimilate into the dominant British milieu. Simultaneously, this cultural conflict left Antoinette feeling bewildered and adrift in British society, struggling to reconcile her Creole heritage with her attempts to conform to British norms. She grappled with a profound quest for identity and a sense of belonging, yet the journey was fraught with challenges as she sought to authentically define herself in the midst of this cultural clash.

c) Loss of Identity and Self-Identification

In the narrative, Antoinette candidly expressed her inner turmoil to Rochester, saying, "I often can't figure out who I am, where my country is, where I belong, and why I was born." This profound statement encapsulates the gradual erosion of Antoinette's sense of self in "The Wide Sargasso Sea." The environment in which she was raised left her feeling alienated and adrift, struggling to define her identity and unable to ascertain her cultural allegiance. In both British society and the West Indies, she found herself relegated to the status of an "other," unable to find her place or establish a firm cultural identity. This loss of roots and cultural heritage left Antoinette feeling disconnected and adrift, a void within her that rendered her incapable of understanding herself or her place in the world.

In a bid to rediscover her identity, Antoinette attempted to assimilate into British culture, but this endeavor only further obscured her sense of self. She once possessed an identity, but it was shattered by Rochester's betrayal. Consequently, she grappled with loneliness, helplessness, and a profound lack of self-confidence, leading her to question her very existence and worth.

Despite Rochester's actions and words, which were steeped in violence and betrayal, Antoinette still clung to her belief in their marriage. To her, marriage was a sacred vow, a promise for two individuals to navigate life together. She steadfastly held onto this commitment, making it difficult for her to relinquish easily. When Antoinette resorted to Obi witchcraft in an attempt to rekindle Rochester's love, his anger at her actions exacerbated the conflict between them, serving as one of the indirect catalysts for Antoinette's eventual descent into madness.

During their honeymoon, the union of Antoinette and

Rochester symbolized the merging of red and white, as well as the fusion of Creole culture and British culture. As their conflicts deepened, the cultural disparities between them became increasingly pronounced. Ultimately, Antoinette's descent into madness and the unequal power dynamics in their relationship could not be reconciled. Rochester's dominant culture eventually suppressed Antoinette's marginalized culture, culminating in a complete colonialist dynamic.

3. The Catalyst for Tragedy: The Complexity of Rochester

Rochester's marriage to Antoinette was not a product of his own free will but was dictated by his family background. As the second son in his family, Rochester perennially lived in the shadow of his elder brother, a circumstance exacerbated by his father's preference for the firstborn. Consequently, Rochester occupied a relatively inferior position within the family and relied on his father's financial support. This inferiority complex rendered him passive in matters of marriage, where he felt more like a commodity being "sold" to Antoinette rather than actively pursuing her affection.

Rochester's deep-seated sense of inferiority had a profound impact on his psyche. To mask his insecurities, he often engaged in false displays of superiority. Despite continually extolling Britain's superiority, he grew weary of the picturesque West Indies scenery before him. He believed he had bartered away his soul, deeming the beauty of the West Indies as "too blue, too purple, too green..." (Rhys, Part 2, 1966).

Initially, Rochester did harbor genuine affection for Antoinette, empathizing with her suffering and misfortune. He held her tightly, hoping to grant her happiness and peace. However, a person riddled with anxiety and insecurity finds it challenging to fulfill such wishes.

Rochester frequently felt scrutinized and deceived, fostering suspicion and distrust within him. Upon receiving Daniel's letter, he uncritically accepted its contents. His upbringing as the second son taught him to conceal his emotions, and these memories resurfaced, fueling his hatred. "I couldn't help but think of my father's face, his thin lips, and my brother's round eyes that he thought were so great. They all knew... They all knew." Seeking vengeance, he began with those closest to him—Antoinette.

He distanced himself, acting cold and aloof, withholding affection and resorting to Amélie's betrayal to provoke and disgust her. Through his cruelty, he allowed Antoinette's Garden of Eden, the picturesque archipelago, to vanish from existence. Driven by possessiveness and control, Rochester started exerting excessive dominance over Antoinette, resorting to violence and psychological manipulation without hesitation. He regarded her as his possession, even justifying violence as an expression of protection and love. His possessiveness spiraled into an extreme distortion of Antoinette's personality and image, treating her as a mere object. This perversion not only inflicted profound harm on Antoinette but also led Rochester to a spiritual abyss, causing him to lose himself.

Upon their return to England, Rochester imprisoned Antoinette in the dark attic as he had envisioned, and this series of complex behaviors directly contributed to Antoinette's descent into madness.

4. The Significance of Marionette: The Impact of Names on Antoinette

a) The Significance of Antoinette's Name

Antoinette's name carries profound symbolism intertwined with her destiny. The name "Antoinette," of French origin and reminiscent of "Antonia" and "Antonietta," derives from the Latin "Antonius," which encompasses meanings like "worthless," "lovely," or "precious." However, it also bears a resemblance to "Marionette," an English term that translates to "string puppet." In the context of Antoinette's fate, this name appears to foreshadow her tragic life journey.

Throughout the novel, Antoinette's dreams serve as a window into her subconscious, offering glimpses into her existential uncertainties and her yearning for self-control. These dream sequences often feature pursuits, symbolizing the fear and anxiety deeply embedded within her psyche. They convey a sense of powerlessness and a loss of control, reflecting the profound emotional and psychological wounds she has endured. These dreams underscore her inability to find inner peace and serenity.

Simultaneously, these dreams may also be interpreted as a reflection of the limitations placed upon her as a woman in her society. Antoinette possessed limited autonomy and power in a world dominated by male authority, with her marriage arranged by her stepfather's son rather than being a product of her own choice. Consequently, her dreams illuminate her inner yearning for freedom and independence, while also shedding light on the plight of women in her era and the constraints imposed by her social milieu.

b) The Meaning of "Bertha"

Rochester's character is marked by complexity, driven by an intense desire for dominance and control, with an inclination to orchestrate situations in his favor. He perceives himself as Antoinette's savior and protector, but his actions, in reality, strip Antoinette of her freedom, plunging her into a state of despondency and unease. In the narrative, Rochester confines Antoinette to the attic of Thornfield Manor, essentially placing her under house arrest, in a bid to regulate her actions and thoughts, rendering her subservient to his will.

Towards the conclusion of "The Wide Sargasso Sea," Rochester persistently addresses Antoinette as "Bertha." This naming choice underscores his dominance and the fervent desire to exercise control over her. It can be interpreted as an endeavor to pigeonhole Antoinette into a prescribed role and identity, an attempt to mold her in accordance with his envisioned image, thereby dictating her thoughts and actions. Additionally, this appellation can also be viewed as a form of branding, a means to designate Antoinette as his personal possession, thereby enhancing his authority and dominion over her. This manifestation of his urge for control and dominance underscores the intricate facets of Rochester's

character and his inherent ambivalence.

Moreover, Rochester's choice of the name "Bertha" for Antoinette hints at cultural disparities. Antoinette hails from a Creole background in the West Indies, while Rochester is English. In British culture, "Bertha" is considered a more commonplace and ordinary name, in stark contrast to the nobility and distinctiveness of "Antoinette." This cultural conflict can be perceived as Rochester's endeavor to normalize and standardize Antoinette, aligning her with the conventions and norms of British society, underscoring the inherent tension stemming from their cultural differences.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of Jean Rhys's novel "Wide Sargasso Sea" and its central characters, Antoinette and Rochester, allows for an exploration of various thematic elements, including culture shock, the influence of personality on destiny, and the significance of labeling. Notably, the clash between white and red cultures plays a pivotal role in Antoinette's life. White symbolizes British nobility, while red embodies Creole passion. The cultural collision resulting from the convergence of these two worlds compels Antoinette to grapple with an ongoing quest for her identity and a sense of belonging.

Additionally, examining Antoinette's fate through Rochester's perspective and delving into the meaning of her name offer deeper insights into the cultural and psychological nuances embedded within the novel. This exploration serves as a reminder that literary works possess the capacity not only to provide entertainment and enjoyment but also to stimulate critical thinking and reflection on matters related to culture, human nature, and societal issues. "Wide Sargasso Sea" serves as a compelling narrative that invites readers to engage with these profound themes and encourages introspection about the complexities of identity and the impact of cultural clashes.

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