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## **Towards Centralizing the Periphery in Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea(1966) as a Counter Narrative to Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre(1847): A Comparative Study**

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### **Abstract**

The binary opposition between the centre and the periphery has received great attentions in postcolonial studies, among them literature of writing back to the empire. The latter aims at comparing, revisiting and correcting the misleading portrayal of colonized people by the West. The present paper examines colonial traces in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by looking closely at the equivocal commonalities between the two works and the way they dialogize. In her response to the Victorian writer, Rhys forges a prequel counter-narrative as well as builds a clean portrait of the 'mad woman in the attic': Bertha Mason, who appears dehumanized in Brontë's novel. Owing to the nature of the study, the analysis pivots thoroughly on comparative approach with reliance on postcolonial theory. To a lesser degree, the arguments fall implicitly in line with Julia Kristeva's concept of Intertextuality. The paper argues that 'decolonizing the mind' from the fixity of stereotyped images is necessary in that the idea of 'moving the centre' is possible. To this end, centralizing the centre and marginalizing the periphery is but an illusion that is induced in some people's minds in the same way as of the notion of the centre and the periphery colonize their thoughts. The findings suggest that the Orient subaltern can speak for herself without the need to be (mis)represented by the Occident.

**Keywords:** Centre, Periphery, Counter-narrative, Comparative Approach, Postcolonial theory, Intertextuality, Subaltern, Stereotypes, Orient, Occident.

*Someone somewhere would always see in any kind of difference, an excuse to be mean. A way to get land, land and more land. (Aidoo 13)*

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## Introduction

The Other and the Self are two key terms that converge in postcolonial studies as much as they diverge in meaning. They form especially not a simple construct but rather an intimate deconstruct with regard to humans' diverse genealogies. The fact of being different is indeed the underlying impetus to frame racist stereotypes between the majorities and minorities. This is mainly because of the lack of information, misunderstanding and non-accepting others' distinct ethnicities, cultures, religions, political and economic systems. To this end, difference always appears to hold a pejorative meaning in that it creates a kind of pandemonium amongst individuals. In this regard, Hope A. Olson is of the opinion that the duality between sameness and difference is a deep-rooted phenomenon which dates back to the Greek epoch. In his article entitled: '*Sameness and Difference a Cultural Foundation of Classification*' (2001), Olson believes that "something either belongs to category X because it is in some way the same as other things as category X, or it does not belong because it is different. Sameness is the privileged factor in this pair because X defines sameness while difference is defined negatively as not -X" (116). The idea the quote draws upon is an open door to explain the persecution and discrimination of minorities who do not belong to category X. If truth be told, however, even if the world were composed of standard species at all levels, people would find reasons for conflict and create a certain difference from the same sameness. Philosophizing this way is the fundamental trajectory that this paper follows and embarks on the endeavour to compare, examine and revisit the depiction of the 'mad woman in the attic' in both Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).

While the nineteenth century symbolizes the traumatic era of colonialism, the twentieth century marks a large-scale movements ranging from constant revolts against colonial domination to independence. A literary output emerges as a response from the former colonies by intellectuals who were eager to deal with crisis *vis-à-vis* culture, identity, race and ethnicity. In literature, a significant number of writers, whose territories were invaded by supreme powers, understood that their people were belittled and relegated to the status of being the inferior, the other and the savage. Thus, postcolonial writers attempt to break the centre/periphery binary opposition. On the one hand, the centre represents the Western world, which is considered as the source that dispenses civilization and development to the rest of the world; on the other hand, the periphery stands for the non-Western world that is purportedly viewed uncivilized, non-advanced and mad. Thus, from the twentieth century onward, the role of the postcolonial writer revolves mainly around verbalizing the unspeakable truth about colonialism as well as its physical and psychological impact on vulnerable people. Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Buchi Emecheta and many other revered figures felt the need to write back to the canon so to show that the colonized people have been misjudged and stereotyped by the colonizer. They have tried, through their narratives, to give an accurate image of their culture that has not only been misinterpreted but also erased by the occident. A good example, probably not the best but the nearest to the paper's aim, is Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The latter is a 'brilliant deconstruction' of Charlotte Brontë's classic, *Jane Eyre*. i.e. what is known as the author's "worlding<sup>†</sup>" in the Western literary world. The novel

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<sup>†</sup>The feminist scholar, Gayatri Spivak in her essay entitled: "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" used this term as a concept, a relevant reference to which I invite the reader to consider.

tells the story of Bertha Mason before, during and after she gets married to Mr. Rochester. In her postcolonial response to the Victorian novel, Rhys rejects the imposing colonialstereotyped by providing the reader with a clean portrait of 'the mad woman in the attic'. As such, she simply "wants to disrupt, disassemble or deconstruct the kind of logic, ideologies of the West" (Quoted in Arif&Ullah257). What is peculiar is that the writer cogently resorts to literary devices such as intertextuality, influence and dialogism: she forges a counter-narrative by embracing a cultural dialogue and textual connections that are based on a canonical narrative under the influence of Brontë. We now wish to start scrutinizing the gamble of naming, renaming and non-naming through which the status of the Self falls in comparison with the Other and *vice-versa* despite, or because of, the irreducible difference to certain norms that revolve largely around cultural classifications. Of course, there are many stylistic items and thematic elements that qualify for being subjects to comparison, yet for reasons of time and space limits, a particular focus will be put on characterization so to entice future researchers to further reflect upon this critical concern.

### **I- Othering through Re-naming and Non-naming**

The discriminatory practice of re-naming has always been considered as a symbolic act that is used by colonial/imperial powers towards their colonized people in order to take control over both the land and the people<sup>‡</sup>. Actually, during the process of mapping newly-found lands, the colonizers used to have the tendency to name and rename places that belong to the occupied territories according to their perceptions. In the opinion of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, "the process of discovery is reinforced by the construction of maps, whose existence is a means of textualizing the spatial reality of the other, naming or, in almost all cases, renaming spaces in a symbolic and literal act of mastery and control"(28). It is often argued that the practice of giving new names to those former occupied places is similarly applied to that of renaming the colonized people's names. Indeed, the name has a crucial impact on the human psyche, for it makes individuals aware of their origins, cultural backgrounds and social affiliations, let alone religious significances. By renaming, one's identity is not only denied but also erased because "names are often central to our sense of identity" (McLeod 167). Accordingly, every human being, whatever his race, origin, or gender has to be given a specific name. No one can thus infringe the name of an individual, simply because it is a right just like that of education. Therefore, the re-naming of the female character: Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and the non-naming of the male character: Mr. Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea* evokes a kind of inextricable relation which needs to be examined comparatively from a postcolonial perspective.

#### **I.1. The Etymology of Antoinette Cosway with Reference to Bertha Mason**

The etymology of the name is what remains essential in both novels, for it makes the reader able to depict the distinct cultural background of each character and recognize it through his/her given name. An individual's name has an importance as well as holds power because it always symbolizes integrity to socio-cultural affiliation, mirrors identity and implies psychological comfort. The name is probably an identifier since it indicates the origin and

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<sup>‡</sup> For further details, I invite the reader to have a look at '*Post-Colonial Studies, The Key Concepts*', in which the issue of naming is tackled by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin.

identifies a history which, in its turn, embraces culture. Despite the fact that Jean Rhys borrows several characters from *Jane Eyre*, both Bertha and Rochester are the only ones she chooses to venture in order to stress the twofold function of re-naming and non-naming in postcolonial realm.

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë's "madwoman in the attic" is given an English name: Bertha. The latter is prevalent in the Western world, England in particular. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, the same character is given the name of Antoinette. By endowing this character with an English name -a token of integration to the British civilization and culture-, it might be interpreted as a new baptism of a Creole woman. In fact, the re-naming of Bertha, a point to which we highlight in the coming paragraphs, alienates her from herself and creates a new identity for her. To put it otherwise, by giving the character an English name, the western writer forges a flat and passive female character, in addition to associating her with British identity. Although the name of Antoinette appears once in Brontë's novel, it still problematizes the condition of oppression. For, it is adjusted by changing the last letter 'e' to 'a' in order to make its final spelling sound more Latin i.e. more European. This further evidences the stark contrast between cultures. When Mr. Richard Mason<sup>§</sup> hears about Rochester's wedding to Jane, he could not tolerate it because of the British customs<sup>\*\*</sup>. That is how he decides to revoke the illegal marriage and reveals the secret of his supposedly his biological sister who happens to be Rochester's wife. He declared:

I affirm and can prove that on the 20<sup>th</sup> October, A.D. - (a date of fifteen years back), Edward Fairfax Rochester, of Thornfield Hall, in the country of -, and of Ferndean Manor, in -shire, England, was married to my sister, Bertha Antoinetta Mason, daughter of Jonas Mason, merchant, and of Antoinetta Mason, his wife, a Creole, at - Church, Spanish Town, Jamaica." (Brontë 288)

Although this passage embraces Bertha's second name 'Antoinetta', it remains a problem, for it is placed as a middle name while the first name, which is supposed to prioritize one's identity, is always referred to as Bertha. In this vein, Brontë anticipates the name of Bertha over Antoinetta: the valorization of the English identity over the Creole one. As a response to the empire, Rhys makes Antoinette herself aware of the delicate issue of (re)naming. In one of the incidents, she is portrayed locked up in the attic of Thornfield Hall with Grace Poole, whom she mistreats her. Let us attend to her cognitive awareness, "her name oughtn't to be Grace. Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass. ... Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I? (Rhys 116). Antoinette clearly thinks of the name 'Grace' as a divine name that is related to Christian theology. It

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<sup>§</sup> It must be remembered that the character of Richard Mason is presented as Bertha's biological brother in *Jane Eyre*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, he is introduced as her stepfather's son. Indeed, a minor detail that makes a huge difference as far as characterization is concerned with both genealogy and etymology.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Polygamy is an illegal practice in the Occident sphere, especially in the United Kingdom. It rather fits the Orient, namely Africa, which may symbolize Brontë's critique of, and comment on, its practice.

means the state of sanctification by God. However, to her astonishment, Grace Pool does especially not reflect the real meaning of her name. Hence, she does not fit the name that has been given to her spiritually. For this incompatibility, Grace does not have to be named 'Grace'. Additionally, Antoinette realizes that her existence is stripped from her the day she became Bertha. Name, we shall reiterate, reflect the individual's identity.

Rochester, for its part, does not marry Bertha out of love but rather to make money. He does not care about his future wife who is only a stranger for him just like the Jamaica which "was all very brightly coloured, very strange, but it meant nothing to me. Nor did she, the girl I was to marry." (Rhys 46). Being the second son of his family, he explained to Jane: "did you ever hear or know that I was not the eldest son of my house; that I had once a brother older than I?" (Brontë 302). This indicates the reason behind his acceptance to marry a non-British wife: to buy an heiress with capital so that he can secure his financial position. He adds, "when I left college, I was sent out to Jamaica, to espouse a bride already courted for me (...) her family wished to secure me, because I was of a good race; and so did she" (Brontë 302). Bertha occupies in-between spaces that is split amidst two different cultures, identities, races and social positions. In Homi Bhabha's terms, "it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid." (114). Moreover, being the second son of his family seems to victimize Rochester. So that he becomes able to support himself financially after having trouble regarding his current financial status, he engages in a mixed-marriage journey. It must be admitted that Rochester is the victim of his society where he appears compelled to make certain changes in his life. That is because of the common law of paternal inheritance under which grants all lands and properties to the eldest son of the family. On this account, Spivak is of the opinion that Rochester is partially a victim. She states, "Rhys makes it clear that he [Rochester] is a victim of the patriarchal inheritance law of entailment rather than of a father's natural preference for the firstborn" (251). In one of the letters, Rochester accurately addresses his father on the matter. He writes, "Dear Father. The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her (that must be seen to). I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love. (Rhys 42). Accordingly, the letter explains the reason that pushes Rochester to leave his country under the pressure of both his family and the society he innocently belongs. He has to leave the comfort of his warm home and the familiarity of his habitual daily life for his cultural duties. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë makes it clear that Rochester's father negotiated an arranged marriage for his son with the daughter of a planter in the West Indies, Mr. Mason. The mentioned expression of "no provision made for her" in the above passage may be an allusion to one of the English laws during the Victorian Era which denotes the transmission of woman's property to her husband. In short, Rochester is but an agent of an imposed society and imperial system.

Despite the fact of creating a writing-back novel that aims at reducing the marginalization of Brontë's Bertha by giving her a voice, Rhys does not make her heroine get easily out of patriarchy and colonialism. Even when Rochester changes Antoinette's name, she could not defend herself or show a disapproval side. Antoinette chooses to accept the name of Bertha because of her unconscious assimilation to the canon. Similarly to Jane, she falls in the same line with the 19<sup>th</sup> century submissive women, hence why Rochester

personifies the Victorian dominant male. The following dialogue between the couple illustrates the stereotypical images of both colonial and gender discrimination,

'Yes,' she said, 'of course, but will you come in and say goodnight to me?'

'Certainly I will, my dear Bertha.'

'Not Bertha tonight,' she said.

'Of course, on this of all nights, you must be Bertha.'

'As you wish,' she said. (Rhys 87)

This dialogue shows the absence of equality between Rochester and Bertha as well as highlights gender binary opposition of male and female. He imposes the name of Bertha on her, whether she accepts it or not, she has to be called Bertha. The usage of Bertha as a name makes the reader think of the madwoman in the attic. In fact, the man/Rochester is not only the one to blame for oppressing his wife, Antoinette also seems to be responsible for accepting the given name, for she adheres to colonial rules. She appears slavish and unable to discuss the matter with him which makes her avoid further arguing, "she was silence itself." (Rhys 109) while he "look[s] like a king, an emperor" (Rhys 44) in their reflective sayings.

In order to feel more in touch with the British roots, the man (Rochester) oppresses his wife and changes her name. Such a behavior suggests that Antoinette's husband is longing for his country, his origin and his culture: England. He desires a British wife who belongs to him, he declares: "(...) because it [Bertha] is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha" (Rhys 86). Bertha, on the other hand, is physically described to have "long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (Rhys 40). This suffices to understand the difficulty of classifying her in specific cultural/racial sphere. It furthermore intensifies Rochester's superiority with regard to her cultural estrangement which, in turn, evokes the fear of gambling with mixed-marriage. On this account, Loombastates that:

The fear of cultural and racial pollution prompts the most hysterical dogmas about racial difference and sexual behaviours because it suggests the instability of 'race' as a category. Sexuality is thus a means for the maintenance or erosion of racial difference. Women on both sides of the colonial divide demarcate both the innermost sanctums of race, culture and nation, as well as the porous frontiers through which these are penetrated. Their relationship to colonial discourses is mediated through this double positioning. (135)

Rochester is afraid of mixing his pure race with a hybrid one. The couple's relationship seems distant that already prospects unsuccessful marriage, and therefore separation. They are racially not compatible for each other. In fact, the "skin colour and female behaviour come together in establishing a cultural hierarchy with white Europe at the apex and black Africa at

the bottom” (Loomba131). Rochester considers Bertha neither British nor European; suggesting her likelihood of having an African background. To this cultural classification, Rochester represents the apex culture and Bertha symbolizes the bottom one.

Despite the lack of communication between Rochester and Bertha makes them a remote couple, the lushness of their sexual desire unifies them. He confesses, “I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did.” (Rhys 58). Antoinette then becomes an obsession to the English man. Although he hates her, “above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and to loveliness” (Rhys 111) he does not want her to be free. He arrogantly affirms: “(...) my lunatic. She’s mad but *mine, mine*. What will I care for gods or devils or for Fate itself. If she smiles or weeps or both. *For me* (Rhys 167). Although Rochester’s dissatisfaction with his Creole wife, he could not let her go because she becomes his own property just like possessing her plantations. Such desire evokes a sense of submissiveness. As Loomba again points out, “the desire of the native woman for the European man coded for the submission of the colonised people” (130). After having experienced all kinds of subjugation, Antoinette follows passivity towards the male colonizer domination, she put up no resistance to being oppressed. Loomba further relies on Spivak who “reads this absence [of resistance] as emblematic of the difficulty of recovering the voice of the oppressed subject and proof that ‘there is no space from where the subaltern [sexed] subject can speak’ ” (195). The following dialogue between Rochester and Antoinette falls in line with what Spivak explained. Antoinette opens the conversation as follow,

If I could die. Now, when I am happy. Would you do that? You wouldn’t have to kill me. Say die and I will die. You don’t believe me? Then try, try, say die and watch me die.”

‘Die then! Die!’ I watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers. (Rhys 57)

It must be remembered that this incident happened just after the marriage. More precisely, while the couple was having their honeymoon time at Granbois. This indicates the early “the climax (both literally and figuratively) of their marital relationship” (Ruiz 63). Feminist critics argued that the above-mentioned quote concerning death is used as a metaphor to refer to orgasm. Loomba argues, “from the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond), female bodies symbolize the conquered land” (129). Bertha and Rochester appears to live in a sexual world only; their communication is bounded by their sexual desire for each other, which becomes their moment of ‘happiness’. To Rochester, the death that his wife wanted may stand for a sexual pleasure. It is used as a way of killing Antoinette’s emotion of love towards him. Antoinette, on the other hand, associates death with happiness due to her submissiveness which is reinforced through her acceptance to die happy than to live sad. Thus, she becomes his ‘conquered land’ which, again, evidences double colonialism at the level of abusing the female body and the land.

In Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, Bertha Mason is re-created to be called Antoinette Cosway; she is given a French name, her original name which means beyond praise or highly praiseworthy. Such a name explains the origin of her belonging as well as her

identity as a mixed-race woman of French background: she is the daughter of a Martinique girl. The man surprisingly says, "the doll had a doll's voice, a breathless but curiously indifferent voice" (Rhys 110). This provoking declaration suggests Antoinette's resistance through expressing her voice. Besides, the man appears unable to accept his wife's past and her familiarity with the natives, everything seemed hostile to him, "(...) but it seemed to me that everything round me was hostile" (Rhys 96). His wife, makes him feel embarrassed and ashamed *vis-à-vis* his cultural duties. In one of the letters to his father, he believes that "the less you talk to anyone about affairs, especially my marriage, the better. This is in your interest as well as mine" (Rhys 105). This belief strengthens not only Rochester's victimization but also Bertha's inferiority.

## **I.2. The Genealogy of Antoinette Cosway as a Counterpart to Bertha Mason**

Similar to the etymology of names, the genealogy of Bertha/Antoinette in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* stresses contrast between the two writers. In both novels, there is a reference to the history of her family; however, each writer looks at it from different lenses i.e. the English and the Creole stances. On the one hand, Brontë presents Bertha cursorily and superficially as being from the West Indies: a Creole girl, which can suggest that she does not want to preserve her past for future generations. The life of Bertha, for its confusing part, starts directly in England, more precisely in Thornfield Hall. The reader is never introduced to the background of this ambiguous character nor is he given any detail about her childhood. Bertha's family tree is pronounced by Rochester's biased recollections as follows, 'my bride's mother I had never seen: I understand she was dead. The honeymoon over, I learned my mistake; she was only mad, and shut up in lunatic asylum. There was a younger brother, too – a complete dumb idiot.' (Brontë 303). This passage should be read in its proper historical context, that of colonialism. Bertha and her family are only presented as 'mad', 'dumb' and 'idiot' because they occupy the periphery classification. The fact that the genealogy of her family is judged by her Western husband makes the reader question her own version. As such, Bertha is not only voiceless but also cut off from her past and from the history of her ancestors, which makes it impossible for the reader to know the reason behind her madness. Whether she was born mad or driven to madness remains obscure in the novel and unknown to the reader. Rhys, as a colonial subject, however provides a detailed description of Antoinette's family members and the people surrounding her. She has a little brother: Pierre "who staggered when he walked and couldn't speak distinctly" (Rhys 7). Moreover, her mother is dominantly present in the counter-narrative under the name of Annette. She is "pretty like pretty self (...) she was my father's second wife, far too young for him they thought, and, worse still, a Martinique girl (Rhys 5). This passage suffices to understand Rhys' denial of Brontë's baseless depiction of Bertha and her family as being mentally sick.

Furthermore, Bertha's genealogy appears personified with negative connotations which suggests a kind of cannibalization. In *Three Women Texts and a Critique Of Imperialism*, Spivak shows an interest in the role of Bertha. She suggests, "Bertha's function in *Jane Eyre* is to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal" (Spivak 249). According to Spivak, Brontë seems to demean Bertha as a sub-human category, an 'animal'. The fact that Bertha does not belong to the British culture, she comes from the West



Indies, makes her an overseas character. In a dialogue between Jane and Rochester, Bertha is described:

Fearful and ghastly to me (...) It was a discoloured face – it was a savage face, I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!

Ghost are usually pale, Jane.

This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed: the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes. Shall I tell you of what it reminded me?

Of the foul German spectre –the vampire (Brontë 281)

This negative physical description makes her inferior compared to the British characters such as, Mrs. Fairfax, Grace Pool and Blanche Ingram, to cite but a few. What is more threatening is that Brontë goes as far as to make her the epitome of not only a “ghost” but also a ‘vampire’ in the core of the story. On the other hand, Rhys introduces Bertha as being attractive and nice-looking with feminine beauty and human traits. In Rochester’s monologic discourse, “she was sitting on the sofa and I wondered why I had never realized how beautiful she was. Her hair was combed away from her face and fell smoothly far below her waist. I could see the red and gold lights in it. She seemed pleased when I complemented her” (Rhys 72). In short, the stark contrast between the two narratives in depicting the same character (Bertha/Antoinette) denotes a kind of dialogue between the two authors. Rhys seems to correct Brontë’s dehumanization of Bertha. She also appears to substitute to it a more accurate and sounder image of the Creole.

Moreover, Bertha’s family tree is introduced in a way that sounds disrespectful. This can be seen through Rochester’s declaration to Jane. He says, “Bertha is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard! –as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points. (Brontë 290). Rochester’s accusation against Bertha and her family coming from a mad family is supported by Brontë through the use of harsh verbal expressions such as, “idiots” “maniacs” and “drunkard”. This propounds a subjective judgment of the Creole communities in general. In this regard, Loomba argues: “discussions of ‘colonial discourse’ treat such images [the stereotypical images] as a static product of a timeless opposition between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ people and ideas. As a matter of fact, all these images about the other were moulded and remoulded through various histories of contact (54). Both colonial domination and male domination strengthen and reconstruct the former stereotypical images. Hence, fixity becomes the British colonial objective to impose a sense of superiority against the Creoles, and therefore legitimizing the British colonial presence in the West Indies.

What is more threatening is the fact that these stereotyped images might be a hint that Bertha’s past, ancestors and history are neither worth considering nor mentioning. They are

ignored in the canonical narrative because of Bertha's hybrid identity, being a Creole, for it is composed of different identities, namely French, Spanish and British. Bertha does not belong to the British culture nor her blood is of a good race, that is why her husband, as a superior figure, imposes another name on her through re-naming her "Bertha" despite her disapproval. Let us attend the incident of Bertha's rebellion against submissiveness and cultural assimilation. Her husband initiates the reflective scene,

After a long time I heard her say as if she were talking to herself, 'I have said all I want to say. I have tried to make you understand. But nothing has changed.' She laughed.

'Don't laugh like that Bertha.'

'My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?' (Rhys 86)

The above dialogues show how Antoinette is doubly colonized<sup>††</sup> by the West agent who uses power as a justifiable means to keep control over her gender as well as her land. Whatever the case, Bertha will always remain the 'other' in the eyes of Rochester no matter how hard she tries to defy the imposed biased images on her. Through making Antoinette refuse the new name (Bertha) in addition to the humiliation of her family; Rhys attempts to deconstruct Western stereotypes of Creoles as being mad. Furthermore, she empowers the female character with a voice. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, then, makes the reader aware of the origin of Antoinette and reveals her identity through the genealogy which is explained in details by the character herself. For this, Antoinette assures her husband that "there is always the other side, always"(68). Remarkably, Bertha is transformed from a flat character who has no voice-silenced by the Western writer- into a round character who has a voice, a belonging and a history. Antoinette stands for herself and fights for her identity and freedom. She now is the protagonist who owns the narrative from the beginning to the end. Thus, when Rochester is informed that Antoinette is mad just like her mother was and seems to be confused and hesitate whether to believe her or not, she defends her opinion and says "but we must talk about it" (Rhys 77). Antoinette deeply wants to show her side of the story and to make her voice heard unlike Bertha who has no other alternative than silence. She adds, "You have no right to ask questions about my mother and then refuse to listen to my answer" (Rhys 78). Rhys makes Antoinette a strong woman who can convince Rochester to listen to her version of the story. She further tells him, "You want to know about my mother, I will tell you about her, the truth, not lies." (Rhys 83). As such, Rhys challenges the British one-sided stance of the story. Her depiction of Antoinette's social background might be interpreted as a denial of Brontë's baseless depiction of the West Indians as being people without specific history and belonging. To this end, the stark contrast between the two narratives in depicting the same character's genealogy denotes a form of dialogue between the two authors. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette tries to resist the colonizer's attempt which revolves around categorizing her as the inferior Other through refusing to be called by an English name. The colonial traces in *Jane Eyre*, for its part, seem to evoke racist attitudes, violence and gender discrimination. This, in fact, facilitates Rochester's neo-colonialism which includes the self-profiling in order

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<sup>††</sup>For more readings about the philosophy of Double Colonialism we invite the reader to have a look at the plethora of research it comprises in order to have a rounded picture of it. Ania Loomba, Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said's seminal works are good examples to consider in this context, of course amongst many others.

to control his wife: Bertha. The latter shows no active resistance or defense against him and his subjugation in the Western text.

### **I.3. Non-naming the Self: The Ambivalence of a Mad Prisoner in Search of Freedom**

Rhys' postcolonial reaction to Brontë's novel is not only bounded to naming the female character: Bertha, but it also extends the process by giving no name to the male character: Rochester. In fact, Rhys makes the latter a nameless character in the core of her narrative. Intentionally, yet cogently, she does not endow him with any specific name which makes the character a problematic subject. He is rather referred to the readers by the following expressions: "the man", the personal pronoun "he", "husband" and "the man who hated me". In a letter to Diana Athill, Rhys confesses "I only borrowed the name Antoinette - (I carefully haven't named the man at all) and the idea of her seeming a bit mad - to an Englishman" (Raiskin 145). This can be seen as a literary technique to respond to the Western writer; not only by changing the name of her heroine, Antoinette into Bertha, but also to leave the male character, Rochester, nameless. Yet, the avid reader can easily associate him to Mr. Rochester with reference to *Jane Eyre*.

Actually, the nameless character is significant in *Wide Sargasso Sea* since he appears in the second part of the novel. This part is almost narrated by him, yet with no introduction to his background. This, again, takes the reader back to Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* who is introduced in the last chapters with no introductory background. It is argued that this method is done on purpose by the writer herself in order to strengthen her position. Being a post-colonial writer, her aim, we argue, is to do justice to her vulnerable character that, as discussed earlier, incarnates the epitome of the *Other par-excellence*. Rochester's name is denied to him because he represents the "Other" to Antoinette as Bertha is the "Other" to Rochester - the English man who has come from England to the West Indies in order to buy an heiress from the colonies. Rochester does not limit himself to exploiting a rich west-Indian woman by marrying her but he also destroys her identity by giving her another name that serves him and his culture. In other words, Antoinette has to be made into Bertha since he considers her as inferior to him, for he brought her from a territory that is up to the present time controlled by the British empire: Jamaica. Antoinette represents the female other who is doubly subjugated and dominated by the superior British male: Rochester. Through his namelessness, Rhys portrays the active resistance of Bertha. Unable to bear the dehumanization of her, the writer stripped his name from him so to incarnate the erosion of colonial history.

Equally important, the ending scene of the novel with regard to Bertha/Antoinette's fate is another commonality between the two narratives, lessening again the duality of difference and sameness and strengthening the intertextual relation. What is peculiar about Rhys' novel is that she goes as far as to draw parallelism between the centre and the periphery. The denouement of both works portrays the same tragedy of the same character i.e. death. It, thus, suggests a kind of juxtaposition between them. In both cases, the 'mad woman in the attic' is sentenced to tragic death, for she sets fire to Thornfield Hall and jumps from its roof. On the one hand, here is how Brontë reflects upon Bertha's death,

she was on the roof, where she was standing, waving her arms above the battlements, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off ... Mr Rochester ascend through the skylight on to the roof; we heard him call "Bertha" We saw him approach her; and then, ma'am, she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement" (Brontë 423)

On the other hand, here is how Rhys makes Antoinette die by keeping the exact same incident of burning down Thornfield Hall (the imperial house) and leaping from the roof. She writes,

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 (...) Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage (Rhys 116-117)

The stark contrast between the death of Bertha/Antoinette speaks volumes of the unbridgeable gap that seems to separate the two narratives. While Brontë kills her Bertha in shameful conditions, Rhys seems to crown her Antoinette with the noble crown of martyrs. In other words, unlike Brontë who seems to convey the idea that Bertha's burning down the house is an abnormal performance to justify her madness, Rhys' choice of ending the novel by leaving the same event suggests another version of Bertha's perception of life. It symbolizes the liberation of the colonized from the double chains of domination and patriarchy. It is thus a female heroic act in the sense that Bertha/Antoinette prefers to die rather than to live dehumanized. Substantially, it signals but a last possible reaction of a doomed heroic warrior to a lost battle.

## Conclusion

Albeit that the duality of sameness and difference is problematic in the sense that it goes as far as to engender psychological crisis in the formation of one's identity, it remains but an illusion that is induced in some people's minds in a similar way as the juxtaposition of the centre and the periphery colonize their thoughts. 'Decolonizing the Mind' (Thiong'o) from the confines of difference becomes then urgent in research. Literature is aesthetically the prism through which reality is projected. Fiction, for its crucial part, is especially not just a plain imagined story but also a reflective reality insofar as it reveals buried truths from within imagination; providing that it appeals to the reader's both cognitive and emotional faculties. Rhys' counter-narrative: *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) provides a critique of, and a comment on, the dehumanization of the colonized identity, culture and gender. Through this paper, we tried to show that 'Moving the Centre' (Thiong'o) is possible in the sense that the periphery can be centralized and the centre can be marginalized. The paper concludes that Rhys succeeds to create a different Antoinette from that of Brontë's Bertha. The former evidences the idea that the subaltern has the power to express her own story, to resist and to speak for her own interest; disproving the stereotypical images that are framed by the colonizer. Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* appears not only misrepresented but also silenced. This suffices Rhys to endow her with a voice, a belonging, a present and a past, a history and above all an existence. Hence,

she is not the 'inferior', the 'other', the 'mad', the 'ghost', the 'vampire' and the 'maniac'; she is simply Antoinette Cosway: a Creole who belongs to the Caribbean.

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