Eurasian Journal of English Language and Literature, *5*(1)-2023

Available online at https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/jell

IDENTITY, DISPLACEMENT, AND ALIENATION IN JEAN RHYS'S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA* AND *VOYAGE IN THE DARK*

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Abstract
After the abolition of colonialism, new literatures from the former colonies emerged, which challenged and questioned the identity of the colonized imposed by the colonizer, and also the identity of the colonial powers. Literature of this kind or namely the postcolonial literature thus aims to subvert the imperial literatures which are in the "centre" to make the voice of the colonized heard from the "periphery". In this regard, both Wide Sargasso Sea and Voyage in the Dark analysed in this paper are striking examples of the postcolonial literature in deconstructing the colonial image and in focusing on the subject of identity. The purpose of this paper is to analyse how the issue of identity is approached in Jean Rhys's postcolonial texts Wide Sargasso Sea and Voyage in the Dark through the study of female characters' - Antoinette and Anna- race, displacement, exile, alienation, and othering by focusing on Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity.

Keywords: Jean Rhys, Postcolonial novel, Alienation, Identity

1. Introduction

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which is often regarded as a postcolonial rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys tells the story from a different perspective- that is Bertha Mason's, the Creole madwoman in Brontë's novel. Rhys in her interview with Elizabeth Vreeland in 1979 upon the question of the idea of writing such a novel, said:

> When I read Jane Eyre as a child, I thought, why should she think Creole women are lunatics and all that? What a shame to make Rochester's first wife, Bertha, the awful madwoman, and I immediately thought I'd write the story as it might really have been. She seemed such a poor ghost. I thought I'd try to write her a life. (Vreeland, 1979, p.7).

The novel which is set in Jamaica, six years after the Emancipation Act of 1833 is divided into three parts in which the narrator shifts from Antoinette Cosway (Bertha Mason) to Mr Rochester, then to Grace Pool, and finally to Antoinette again. The first part narrated by Antoinette mainly tells the story of her childhood spent on the plantation of Coulibri estate. After her father's death, the family, Antoinette, her mother, Annette, and her sick brother Pierre are psychologically and economically devastated by the Emancipation act, and they live on the family plantation. The family is ostracized because of being former slave owners and is treated harshly by the local people.

2. Discussion

Wide Sargasso Sea, mainly focuses on the issues of identity, race, ethnicity, othering, displacement, and alienation. Identity holds great significance both as an issue highly dealt with in postcolonial studies and as a theoretical concept. It is also a very much argued fact of contemporary political life. Paul Gilroy (1997) asserts that there is an interaction between our subjective experience of the world we live in and the cultural and historical environment in which this subjectivity is formed. Most importantly, this interaction is provided by "identity". Gilroy (1997) says that the popularity of the concept stems from the different meanings it embodies. Sharing an identity means to be "bonded on the most fundamental levels: "national, 'racial', ethnic, regional, local" (p. 301). However, as a result of colonialism complications emerge when a powerful entity seeks to impose its shared beliefs or identity on a weaker one. Therefore, not only sharing the sameness but also having differences becomes determinant in the establishment of identity. At this point, it can be argued that identity is not fixed, but fluid and changing and even "hybrid". The term "hybridity" which is associated with Homi Bhabha (1994) is "a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition" (p. 162). In *Wide Sargasso Sea* this problematic issue concerning identity is very explicit since the beginning. After the Emancipation Act was passed "the old slaves came to form the landless rural proletariat while the white Creoles occupied the other cultural pole of the elite" (Mardorossian, 1999, p. 88) making the white community confront the black community. Antoinette's interaction with the black students in her school is very striking in this respect: "I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping dogs lie. One day a little girl followed me singing, 'Go away white cockroach, go away, go away'" (Rhys, 2000, p. 20). Although being a Creole herself, Antoinette feels that she is an outsider because she does not represent the majority.

Later in the second part of the book, when Antoinette talks about the ambiguity of her racial status to Mr Rochester she mentions the same song: "It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (Rhys, 2000, p. 85). Although she wants to be one of them, as a "white nigger", Antoinette feels isolated from both black and white people: "Plenty white people in Jamaica. Real white people, they got gold money. They didn't look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old-time white people nothing but white niggers now, and black nigger better than white nigger" (Rhys, 2000, p.21). While the blacks were othered in the colonial period, now the whites become the "other". "Rhys's paradoxically fixed identity as an in-between, as a mediator between two cultures, has been evoked as a justification for her or her critics' exclusive focus on the opposition between the white Creole ex-elite and the English colonizers in *Wide Sargasso Sea*" (Mardorossian, 1999, p. 86). Coming from a similar background as her character Antoinette, Rhys herself experienced the fragmentation of the society in the West Indies. She knew what it was like to be a Creole both in Dominica, her hometown and in England. England which was once the motherland, caused her to be aware of the fact that being Creole was neither accepted within the black community- the colonized- nor by the white community- the colonizer. This conflict can be clearly seen when Coulibri estate is set on fire. Antoinette

running away from the house sees Tia and her mother and runs towards them only to see the stone in Tia's hand. "I looked at her and saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass" (Rhys, 2000, p. 38). The two children, Antoinette and Tia, acknowledge both their separation and also similarity with "blood" and "tears". The effects of the stone which Tia is holding, "produce the tears and the blood that are integral to the doubled image in the 'looking-glass'" (Harrison, 1988, p.166).

Throughout the novel, Tia serves as an image of what Antoinette is not and would like to be: a black woman, not a white Creole who is accepted by neither white nor black communities. Antoinette will never have a racial identity to call her own unlike Tia and with the burning of Coulibri, she has lost the only place to which she felt that she belonged. Here, Coulibri, the plantation house also has a symbolic meaning as it was a place that incarnated slavery and oppression for the black community. This ambiguity with Antoinette's identity is further mentioned by the black servant Christophine when she tries to explain it to Mr Rochester. She cannot find the right words to explain Antoinette: "She is not *béké* [1] like you, but she is *béké*, and not like us either" (Rhys, 2000, p. 128). Here, Antoinette is struggling with a hybrid form of identity which results from the experience of an individual of a colonial origin living in the West Indies and is forced to live in the motherland, and from the changes occurring in her personality due to the interaction with the colonizer. The state of living in-between and having multiple identities leads to a form of hybridity, a contradictory state of mind where there is no longer a specific place or home, but mixed feelings over the fact that nothing is stable anymore or is the way we expect things to be. According to Bhabha (1994), hybridity is the name of "the displacement of value from symbol to sign that causes the dominant discourse to split along the axis of its power to be representative, authoritative. Hybridity represents that ambivalent 'turn' of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification - a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority" (p. 162).

Antoinette who is torn between two different identities finds herself belonging to nowhere. "Realising the dimension of her loss, Antoinette becomes a displaced person in her own country, entirely dependent on a dowry supplied by her English stepfather and at the mercy of an arranged marriage with an Englishman who has been sent to the West Indies to seek his fortune" (Howells, 1991, p. 111). As the representative of the colonial power, the first thing he exploits or he tries to Anglicize is his wife, Antoinette. His first attempt is to name her "Bertha" trying to give her a new identity:

> 'Don't laugh like that, Bertha'.
> 'My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?'
> 'Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha'. (Rhys, 2000, p. 111).

Rochester's calling Antoinette another name is his way of taking control over her entire identity, just like having legal control over her fortune when he married her. Antoinette's response to Mr Rochester is not the same when he calls her Bertha for the second time, she says "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I

[1] Béké or beke is a Creole term to describe a descendant of the early European, usually French, settlers in the French Antilles.(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B%C3%A9k%C3%A9)

know that's obeah[2] too" (Rhys, 2000, p. 121). Naming which can be considered a designating act holds great significance in terms of identity, as also put forward by Harrison "naming of self is an accession to self through distancing of language...naming of others is a means of appropriating their qualities for one's own purposes" (1988, p. 185). The importance of names is also stressed by Antoinette: "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" (Rhys, 2000, p. 147). Once again, Antoinette feels alienated after her name, which is one of the elements she forms her identity, is taken away from her.

It is also remarkable that there is a distinction between being a white person born in England and being a white person born in the West Indies. Although they are all colonizers their attitudes towards the colonized differ greatly. The unnamed Englishman, who is supposed to be Mr Rochester, being a representative of the colonial power despises everything about the land and the people for he accuses them of the situation he is in - to be married to a madwoman and to be forced to live in an unknown and uncivilized land. His hatred stems from his inability to understand and find comfort in nature as Antoinette and the other West Indian people do. He says:

> I was tired of these people. I disliked their laughter and their tears, their flattery and envy, conceit and deceit. And I hated the place.
>
> I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it. (Rhys, 2000, p. 141).

Furthermore, Mr Rochester "associates the wilderness of his surroundings with excess and danger, because he constantly contrasts it with England's landscape" (Mardorossian, 1999, p. 82). He is astonished by the strangeness of the land and feels alienated: "Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (Rhys, 2000, p. 59). Mr Mason, Antoinette's stepfather of British origin, just like Mr Rochester doesn't have positive ideas about the environment and the black community and he complains about them saying they are "too damn lazy to be dangerous" (Rhys, 2000, p. 28). However, Antoinette's ideas are more of an optimistic kind: "I wish I could tell him that out here is not at all like English people think it is" (Rhys, 2000, p. 29). Like her character, Antoinette, Jean Rhys is very positive about blackness and black people. In her interview with Elizabeth Vreeland, she says:

> I was a bit wary of the black people. I've tried to write about how I gradually became even a bit envious. They were so strong. They could walk great distances, it seemed to me, without getting tired, and carry those heavy loads on their heads. They went to the dances every night. They wore turbans. They had lovely dresses with a belt to tuck the trains through that were lined with paper and rustled when they moved (Vreeland, 1979).

[2] obia, also spelled Obeah, in west African folklore, a gigantic animal that steals into villages and kidnaps girls on the behalf of witches. In certain cultures of the Caribbean, the term denotes forms of sorcery and witchcraft, usually overpowering and extremely evil. (https://www.britannica.com/art/obia)

Throughout the novel, Antoinette being regarded as neither white nor black tries hard to establish her own identity which is shattered by the hostility of Mr Rochester towards the end of the novel. She begins to feel lost and helpless growing more dependent on her husband. In one of her conversations with Christophine, she says: "He does not love me, I think he hates me. He always sleeps in his dressing-room now and the servants know. If I get angry he is scornful and silent, sometimes he does not speak to me for hours and I cannot endure it anymore, I cannot. What shall I do?" (Rhys, 2000, p. 90). There is a significant point to be stressed here: Antoinette's identity is not only related to what she thinks of herself but is mainly and directly related to "places". The most important of these places are the Coulibri plantation and her honeymoon house. After the burning of Coulibri she is greatly influenced and with her husband's hostility and betrayal in their honeymoon house the place also loses its meaning:

> But I love this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it. It's just somewhere else where I have been unhappy, and all the other things are nothing to what has happened here. I hate it now like I hate you (Rhys, 2000, p. 121).

Antoinette's alienation deepens after Rochester takes her to England which results from her unrequited love for Rochester, her inability to communicate with him, and the feeling of displacement that has permeated her life. According to Ashcroft, Griffits and Tiffin (1995) place and displacement are crucial features of postcolonial discourse. They emphasize the fact that the place doesn't always need to be a physical landscape. In postcolonial societies, it is rather a complex interaction of language, history, and environment. "Place is thus the concomitant of difference, the continual reminder of the separation, and yet of the hybrid interpenetration of the colonizer and colonized" (Ashcroft, Griffits and Tiffin, 1995, p. 345). In the last part of the novel with the help of multi-narratives, different perspectives about Antoinette's alienation are unfolded. The change in the narrative offers a more objective view and deeper understanding of Antoinette's condition.

Antoinette's alienation firstly shows itself as disbelief. Alienated from her surrounding environment even she doesn't believe that she is in England and sees it as a cardboard place: "As I walk along the passages I wish I could see what is behind the cardboard. They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them. We lost our way to England. When? Where? I don't remember, but we lost it" (Rhys, 2000, p. 148). She again denies that she is in England when her brother visits her in the attic speaking to Grace Poole: "When we went to England,' I said. 'You fool' she said, 'this is England.' 'I don't believe it,' I said, 'and I never will believe it.'" (Rhys, 2000, p. 150).

The most significant image to portray Antoinette's alienation is the "mirror" in which she sees herself as the "other":

> There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us – hard, cold, and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I? (Rhys, 2000, p. 147).

Spivak (2011) focuses on the significance of the mirror image and interprets it as the other self of Antoinette like the image she sees in the mirror later on in Thornfield Hall. According to

Spivak (2011), Rhys makes Antoinette see her *self* as her Other, Brontë's Bertha. She further adds "No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self" (Spivak, 2011, p. 250-253). The image in the glass is a symbol of hope, hope that is absent in situations where Antoinette is stripped of her identity. As Harrison (1988) puts forward, Antoinette cannot "see" herself in *his* place, in Rochester's England. Harrison further emphasizes the fact that "what Antoinette wants to see – with some pathos- is 'herself'" (p.173). Rochester notices the significance of the mirror for Antoinette's view of her *self* and has malicious plans about destroying Antoinette's identity: "She'll not laugh in the sun again. She'll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking glass" (Rhys, 2000, 136). He mentions taking away the mirror, a tool that provides some sense of identity. Antoinette can never fully identify with herself or with England, and her struggle as a white Creole in post-emancipation Jamaica prevented a natural connection to the Caribbean. Antoinette's last attempt to recover her own identity and reject the sense of alienation is Tia. She sees Tia, her childhood friend, and jumps to her death. Here, Tia reminds Antoinette of her origin, her lost identity, and the pressure of alienation. At the end of the novel, Antoinette repels her oppressor, Rochester, by setting fire to his house just like the black community set fire to their house.

Voyage in the Dark (1982) is another novel in which Rhys deals with similar issues such as identity, displacement, and alienation. "Rhys first called the novel *Two Tunes*, signifying the double rhythms of the West Indies and England which are insistently repeated in counterpoint to each other within Anna Morgan's consciousness as a white West Indian immigrant" (Howells, 1991, p. 68). The novel consists of four parts and is narrated from the first-person point of view of the protagonist, an 18-year-old girl named Anna Morgan. She is born on a Caribbean Island but moves to London after her father dies. She tries hard to adapt to life in England but throughout the novel, she continuously compares England with her homeland which she finds warmer and more colourful. This comparison deepens her alienation and no matter how she tries she cannot go beyond being an outsider, the other. She works as a chorus girl on various tours and one day she and Maudie, her roommate and friend from the chorus, meet two men while they are walking in the street. Anna begins seeing one of the men named Walter. They begin to have an affair which is mainly based on money as Walter is a rich man.

Through several flashbacks in the novel, Anna tells Walter about her childhood experiences with her black nurse Francine and compares England with her homeland. Furthermore, her encounter with her stepmother, Hester, and the letter from her uncle also cause her to travel to the past. Anna remembers her house, and how Hester criticized her language and found it like a "nigger's talk" (Rhys, 1982, p. 65). When her relationship with Walter ends Anna is driven into much deeper isolation and alienation. Later in the novel, Anna has several boyfriends and learns that she is pregnant but she doesn't know who the father is. After having an abortion, she becomes very ill. A doctor comes and sees Anna saying "She'll be all right…Ready to start all over again in no time" which causes Anna to think of starting all over again[3] (Rhys, 1982, p.187).

Like Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Anna experiences the alienation of a white Creole woman under colonial rule. Bearing traces of Jean Rhys's life story, the protagonist of the novel Anna is stuck between being Creole and being English which is portrayed with flashbacks to her childhood days in the Caribbean. Her first impression of England is rather far from

[3] In Rhys's version, Anna dies as a result of her dangerous abortion. However, the editor of the book insisted that the ending be more optimistic for readers to accept it. (Savory, 2011, p. 90).

optimistic: "The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy. I didn't like England at first. I couldn't get used to the cold" (Rhys, 1982, p. 7). Harrison (1988) says that England, "their" world, "his" world present itself to Anna antagonistically and counters her own world [the Caribbean] successfully by trivializing her (p. 108). Howells (1991) confirms this by asserting that the reason for Anna's failure to adapt to her new environment is that she is operating out of a different symbolic order, and all that she learned through her immigrant experience is the full extent of her loss (p.70).

Shortly after indicating her first remarks on England, she dreams of herself being at home, on Market Street. The difference in her mood when she thinks of her homeland is much more colourful and cheerful: "It was funny, but that was what I thought about more than anything else - the smell of the streets and the smells of frangipani and lime juice and cinnamon and cloves, and sweets made of ginger and syrup…and the smell of the sea-breeze and the different smell of the land breeze" (Rhys, 1982, p. 7-8). As also indicated by Ledent (2011), after coming from a sunny and colourful island, the Caribbean, England strikes as a grim, grey, and foggy place for the newcomers (p. 502). This cold and dark atmosphere is prevalent throughout the novel as Anna continuously talks about the feeling of cold and dark when she talks about England where there are "dark houses frowning down" whereas the "Caribbean is always associated with bright and life-evoking colours like yellow, green or red" (Ledent, 2011, p.503).

The feeling of nostalgia that is prevalent throughout the novel contrasts with the present and the comparison between past/present, cold/heat, real/unreal and Creole/ English indicates Anna's displacement and thus alienation. The importance of place/displacement in determining one's identity is explicit in the novel, however, apart from that, there is also the role of racial identities. Savory (2011) states "throughout Rhys's texts, more intensely in some than other but always significantly, colour functions as a symbolic code" (p. 85). What Savory (2011) emphasizes is that since Rhys herself has a complex identity, her use of colour both as skin colour and painterly is idiosyncratic (p. 86). For example, in one of Anna's flashbacks or memories she says:

> I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black. I was happy because Francine was there, and I watched her hand waving the fan backwards and forwards and the beads of sweat that rolled from underneath her handkerchief. Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad. (Rhys, 1982, p. 31).

Ledent (2011) says that the multiple alienation Anna experiences as a colonial immigrant, adolescent, and woman is more explicit in her relationship with others. There is a profound wish to be loved and to belong taking the form of yearning for a different identity. Here, the desire for Blackness, according to Ledent (2011) is Anna's way of "distancing herself from her self-righteous stepmother Hester and the English values she stands for" (p. 507). Anna's stepmother Hester, who is the representative of the colonial power like Mr Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, despises Anna's sympathy for blackness. Hester says that when she was a child she tried to teach Anna "to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger" (Rhys, 1982, p. 65). Hester complains: "Impossible to get you away from the servants. That awful sing-song voice you had! Exactly like a nigger you talked and still do. Exactly like that dreadful girl Francine." (Rhys, 1982, p. 65). Hester tries to impose the ideology of racial superiority on Anna: it is inferior to be a nigger. Anna disapproves of Hester's supremacist ideology which

causes her to feel more alienated from her family and also from England. Caught between being white and black (just like Antoinette), she says "But I knew that of course she [meaning Francine] disliked me because I was white: and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white. Being white and getting like Hester, and all the things you get old and sad and everything. I kept thinking: 'No...No...No' And I knew that day that I'd started to grow old and nothing could stop it.'" (Rhys, 1982, p. 72).

Anna, as a mixture of the English and the Dominican cultures, finds it impossible to feel like she belongs to either of the two races and instead remains suspended in the void separating them. She is, in all, unable to belong to either; she is exiled in a gap between being black and being white. Edward Said (2000) defines exile as a terrible experience which is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (p. 173). However, there is also the enabling, liberating aspect of the exile's position:

> Seeing "the entire world as a foreign land" makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to…an awareness that…is contrapuntal. For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus, both the new and the old environments are vivid, and actual, occurring together contrapuntally (Said, 2000, p. 186).

Both the sense of exile and hybridity form the building blocks for Anna's sense of *self* and her identity. However, just like Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Anna's quest for her *self* continues throughout the novel. In this regard, mirrors, which are used to define the alienation of Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, are also used as an image for the search for identity in *Voyage in the Dark*. For instance, when Anna and her boyfriend are alone in the bedroom after having a nice dinner, Walter makes a move toward her upon which she gets very frustrated and shuts herself in the room. She walks up to the looking-glass on the wall and stares at herself: "It was as if I were looking at somebody else" (Rhys, 1982, p. 23) she says suggesting her questioning of self and alienation. Later, she makes a remark about the looking glass in Walter's room saying "I don't like your looking-glass…Have you ever noticed how different some looking-glasses make you look?" (Rhys, 2000, p. 37-38). The mirror here acts as an indication of her fear and alienation.

3. **Conclusion**

To conclude, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Voyage in the Dark* are novels in which issues of Creole identities and race relations, themes of displacement, and alienation are dealt with. Rhys's novels focus on the conflicts of imperialism and cultural subordination through fragmented and displaced characters such as Antoinette and Anna who are denied an identity and a place in the society. The very foundation for the hybridity Anna and Antoinette are experiencing lies in the colonial history between Europe and the Caribbean. Rhys in these novels focuses also on the sense of alienation by underlining the idea of timelessness. The past is always overlapped with the present; past and present repeat each other, making the heroines feel trapped in the sequence of time. There is also a great concern with subjectivity, especially in relation to the concept of identity. Jean Rhys points out that society constructs the subject's identity and the individual

reflects the identity which the society contributed to create. Therefore, in both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Voyage in the Dark* it can be seen that there is no fixed identity, and a hybrid identity is formed as a result of the individual's interaction with the colonizer.

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