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THE 'OTHERNESS' OF THE 'OTHER' IN JEAN RHYS'S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

JEAN RHYS'IN *WIDE SARAGASSO SEA* ADLI ROMANINDA 'ÖTEKİ'NİN 'ÖTEKİLİĞİ'

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse a postcolonial novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, written by Jean Rhys, in 1966 as a counter text to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* nearly a century after. Rhys rewrites the story of Rochester's first wife Bertha, and gives her the voice she is denied. She intends to depict the 'other' side of the reality - the portrayal of a woman rebelling against the role imposed upon her, her objection to becoming a doll - like woman without any selfhood and at last her release from the repression of any kind. In the three fragmented worlds she constructs within the world of her novel, she problematizes the authorial figure shifting the reader's attention away from one narrative to the other. Rhys challenges the realistic representation with her frame of texts within texts. Her fiction is rather a 'verbal reality,' constructed by two different narrators who are experiencing the strife between self and the other. Rhys, on purpose, creates an ambiguity in her novel and opens it to question by blurring the reality and fiction. She decentralizes the Jane/Bertha structure in *Jane Eyre* and inverts the privileged and the unprivileged elements in her attempt to unveil the 'otherness' of the 'other' in race, class and genderwise. As a result of the interrelatedness of the two novels, meaning is multiple, not fixed and always in the run.

Özet

Jean Rhys, sömürge sonrası döneme ait 1966 basımlı *Wide Sargasso Sea* romanını, Charlotte Brontë'nin Viktorya Döneminde neredeyse bir yüzyıl önce yazdığı *Jane Eyre* romanına tepki olarak tekrar yazar. Amacı, Bronte'nin susturulmuş, yok sayılmış Bertha karakterinin sesini duyurmak, olanları bir de onun açısından yansıtmak istemesidir. Kendisine dayatılan toplumsal kimliğe karşı çıkan, oyuncak bebek gibi benliksiz bir kadın olmayı reddeden, en sonunda da üzerinde kurulan her çeşit baskıdan kurtulan bir kadını resmedip 'tüm gerçekliği' yansıtmak, madalyonun 'öteki' yüzünü' de göstermek istemiştir. Yazar, üç bölüme ayırdığı romanında her bölümde farklı 'ben' anlatıcılar kullanarak geleneksel anlatım tarzını sorunsallaştırır. Metin içi metin kalıbını kullanır. Yazdığı bir 'kurmaca' metindir ve bu metin kendileri de 'ben' ve 'öteki' ikilemini deneyimleyen farklı 'ben' anlatıcıların sırayla anlattıkları hikâyelerinden oluşur. Rhys, bilinçli olarak 'gerçek' ve 'kurmaca' kavramları arasında belirsizlik oluşturur. Jane/Bertha ikili karşıtlığında yapıyı bozar ve ırk, sınıf ve cinsiyet bağlamında hep 'öteki' olan Bertha'yı merkeze alarak 'öteki olma' durumunu irdeler. Sonuç olarak, iki romanın birbirleriyle olan bağlantısı dolayısıyla, okura oluşturabileceği sonsuz anlam yaratma olasılığı sunulur. Romanda anlam sabit ve tek değil, çok katmanlı ve sonsuzdur.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a retelling of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) to give voice to Jane's 'other', Bertha Mason, 'the madwoman in the attic'. Bronte lived in the Victorian England. She rejected her age's preoccupation with marriage; especially its assumption that it was the only possible future for girls (Bronte, 1843, p. 296). Having encountered the limited opportunities for the employment of women, she still found the idea of marriage for interest, wealth, position or rank, unbearable (Bronte, 1848, p.239). For her own part, as she states in her letter to Amelia Ringrose, she always preferred 'the evil of a solitary single life to the worse evil of an uncongenial married one' (Bronte, 1851, p. 245). Jane, in a way reflecting its biographical author's fears and doubts about marriage, first protests against the existing traditional female role, rejects the assumptions about male dominance and also disapproves of the society's attitude to matrimony but then marries Rochester.

Bertha, Rochester's first wife serves in Brontë's novel as the moral example of *Jane Eyre*. She is the embodiment of any oppressed woman of her age who pays the price for love and sexual commitment with the loss of self. In nineteenth century England 'male power was affirmed through an egoistic, aggressive, even violent sexuality' whereas 'female sexuality was passive and self-denying' (Moglen, 1976, p. 30). However, as Rochester tells Jane, Bertha possessed 'neither modesty, nor benevolence, nor candour, nor refinement in her mind or manners' (Brontë, 1985, p. 333). 'Her vices sprang up fast and rank', and she demonstrates 'giant propensities', being 'intemperate and unchaste' (Brontë, 1985, p. 334). It is Rochester who gives the long account of the circumstances of his marriage to Bertha: it took place in Jamaica, West Indies; it was a marriage arranged for financial reasons by his father; he undertook it for Bertha's dark sensual beauty but now he regrets what he did. Bertha is pronounced mad and he has her locked up in the attic of Thornfield Hall. On the other hand, Rochester from the beginning of their relationship insists on identifying Jane as 'unreal'. He repeatedly refers to her as 'angel', 'fairy', 'elfin', 'spirit', 'otherworldly'. From the beginning, Bertha provides Jane an example of how not to act sometimes by acting for Jane or acting like Jane. (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 359). Whenever Jane experiences anger or repression, or desires for emotional release, Bertha appears as a cautionary contrast. Indeed, we see little of her; she is in general, heard and sensed rather than seen.

Jean Rhys writes *Wide Sargasso Sea* back to *Jane Eyre* as a counter text to depict the 'other' side of the coin. As being the suppressed and the marginalized one, Brontë's Bertha renamed as Antoinette in Rhys's novel, is intended to reflect the 'all sides'. Writing this postcolonial novel, Rhys privileges Bertha in Jane/Bertha binary opposition. She decentralizes

the Jane/Bertha structure reversing the hierarchy. Inverting the privileged and the unprivileged elements, Rhys on purpose creates an ambiguity in her novel and opens it to question. In this process, the signifier (Brontë's Bertha) is reduced to the signified (Rhys's Antoinette/Bertha). As a result of the interrelatedness of the two novels, meaning is multiple, not fixed and always in the run. Rhys disrupts the characterization of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* with Antoinette/Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She claims that in her novel she writes the 'real' story from Bertha's perspective. Yet, as in the description of Patricia Waugh (1984), postmodern fiction "never imitate[s] or 'represent[s]' the world but always imitates or 'represents' the discourses which in turn constructs that world" (p. 100).

In the three fragmented parts she constructs, Rhys problematizes the authorial narrative figure. Each part of the novel is narrated by the two main characters of the novel - Antoinette and Rochester successively. Rhys challenges the realistic representation with her frame of texts within texts. Her fiction is rather a 'verbal reality' constructed by two different narrators. Part 1 is the 'verbal' reality of Antoinette. Readers are asked to follow her stream of consciousness. From the beginning of the novel, the image pattern is dualistic: there is the dichotomy between they/we; the colonizer/the colonized, male/female.

The Parliament of the United Kingdom abolishes slavery throughout most of the British Empire freeing Africans in the Caribbean and South Africa and Canada (Slavery Abolition Act 1833; Section LXIV). Rhys crucially sets her novel in 1839. The power balance between the colonizer/colonized have already started to change. The black Jamaican society, the 'other side' becomes the privileged against the white plantation owners. Consequently, with the shift of the colonial power, the status of the white people on the island turns to be problematic.

Antoinette, the main character in Rhys's novel suffers from being in an ambivalent position both in race, class, and genderwise. She is the daughter of Annette, a white Creole, and at the same time, a Martinique woman who experiences this 'in between' state of being. Neither in the white (European) nor in the black (Caribbean) world she finds a place for herself. She is seen as a threat for both. Once respected as a person of European descendent in Jamaica, after the abolishing of the Slavery Act, Annette is reduced to the status of a 'white nigger' (Rhys, 1992, p. 22). She was the wife of Mr Cosway, a white old planter aristocrat who is not only Antoinette's but also many other mixed race children's father. After his death, Annette remarries Richard Mason, another Englishman to survive not to lose her land and property but is still disapproved and looked down upon by the islanders. She wishes to leave Coulibri. Yet, Mr Mason cannot foresee the coming danger. They set fire to their house (Rhys, 1992, p. 35).

Pierre, Antoinette's brother, dies. Annette, when lost all her property and son, is left with no proper tool to survive; 'grow[s] very bad tempered', starts laughing to herself, crying (Rhys, 1992, p. 38). She is left alone, isolated and is announced as mad, 'zombie' like, seen as a threat for the 'others' who want to maintain their power within the colonial system.

Antoinette is the authorial narrating figure of the first part Rhys constructs. Reader is asked to believe in her text within the text of its author. Obviously, in the part she narrates, Antoinette undergoes a search for an answer to the age's ontological question – 'Who am I in this world?'. She is in search of an identity. Since she is looked down upon and forced to the border as the marginalized 'other', she constructs 'a' story to be within 'their ranks' (Rhys, 1992, p. 15). With this fictional 'I' she creates, Antoinette chooses to be seen as the daughter of powerful fathers - Cosway and Mason, and disassociates herself from her mother's descendancy to get rid of her mother's destiny. She suppresses her experience of exclusion. Just like when she saw her mother's horse poisoned 'she thought if [she] told no one it might not be true' (Rhys, 1992, p. 16), Antoinette, the narrator problematizes the reality setting up a new frame only to be constructed as a means to stay within the conventions so that she be approved. Rhys uses Antoinette's dream as a frame-breaking device to blur the ontological level between reality and fiction: "I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself; if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse, this must happen…I stumble over my dress and cannot get up. I touch a tree and my arms hold on to it…'Here, in here,' a strange voice said, and the tree stopped swaying and jerking" (Rhys, 1992, pp. 54-55). Her dream is abundant with sexual references. To be in 'close ranks' with the nun, the fictional version of Antoinette misleads the nun and also the reader. However, she prefers keeping the reality to herself and only says: 'I dreamt I was in Hell' (Rhys, 1992, p. 55). Virginity would keep her within the boundaries of the convent and consequently, the Victorian ideology. No matter how hard she tries to fit into some particular community, as in Derrida's deconstructive theory, running after one identity (signifier) to another (signifier), she cannot reach an internal sense of a unified whole. Her strife between self and the other never ends. Tia, the black girl is another attempt of Antoinette to fix a 'self' for herself. She thinks she could be like her: 'It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass' (Rhys, 1992, p. 41). Yet, as in Lacan's mirror stage, Antoinette misrecognizes the other as the 'me'. Her attempt of fixing a stable identity once more fails.

Part 2 is Rhys's second text within multiplicity of texts she builds in her novel. In this part Antoinette's female point of view is replaced with that of a male one. Rochester is the voice of the other side of the story. Like Antoinette, Rochester too pretends to reflect every single

detail in his narrative, but since 'there are blanks in [his] mind that cannot be filled up', 'they will never be written' (Rhys, 1992, p. 69). Being the authorial figure in the text he creates, like the censored story Antoinette narrates in Part 1, Rochester too leaves gaps and substitutes his narrated/fictional socially acceptable self with his marginalized 'other'.

Rochester is a racist, sexist, classist and a sadist man. He too is in quest for identity and is obsessed with his status in the eyes of the 'others'. In reality, similar to Antoinette, he too is marginalized being the second, less loved son of his father, and as the second lover of his wife. Similar to Mr Mason, who married Antoinette's mother for her property seeing it as a profitable bargain, Rochester too marries Antoinette for her money. She is a commodity for him whose possession passes from father to husband. Their marriage is not formed on equal footing. Antoinette is the subordinate one. Yet, he feels more like '[he] ha[s] not bought her, she has bought [him], or so she thinks.' (Rhys, 1992, p. 53). They both lie and hide their true selves from each other. They are 'dreams' –unreal to each other. Yet, Rochester is a good performer. He builds and maintains his status as the power holder in his relationship with his wife and in the patriarchal society, although he is always aware of the 'otherness' of Antoinette. For this '[he] agreed. As [he] had agreed to everything else' (Rhys, 1992, p. 60). This union with Antoinette is a good chance for him to construct a new 'self' in order to confirm his status as a male/colonizer/ Englishman.

Daniel's letter to Rochester is Daniel's contribution to Rochester's story - a new text within Rochester's text which is also a text within Rhys' text. In the account he gives to Rochester, Daniel announces both Annette and her daughter Antoinette as mad: 'She shut herself away, laughing and talking to nobody as many can bear witness. As for the little girl, Antoinette, as soon as she can walk she hide herself if she see anybody' (Rhys, 1992, p. 88). He draws a similarity between Mr Mason/Annette and Rochester/ Antoinette relationships. Antoinette's mother, when grew more unstable, had to be isolated as she tried to kill Mason who was 'bewitched' with his wife. Daniel sees that Rochester too is 'bewitched' with Antoinette. Therefore, he should mind his wife's future possible 'madness' since it could be hereditary. By telling all the 'reality' about Antoinette's mother and Antoinette herself, he indeed takes revenge on Antoinette. Daniel himself too is the 'suppressed' in Antoinette/Daniel opposition in his family circle being just one of the many illegitimate children Cosway had. He is coloured, poor, rejected and not loved by his father as in the case of Rochester.

Antoinette breaks in Rochester's narrative constructing *her* own version of reality about '[her] mother and all what happened at Coulibri and why she g[o]t sick and what they d[id] to

her' (105) because as in her words, 'There is always the other side, always' (Rhys, 1992, p. 116). However, she tells only 'a few words because words are no use' (Rhys, 1992, p. 122). When Rochester 'asked her who had taught her to aim so well', she chooses to pass it off saying: 'Oh, Sandi taught me, a boy you never met.' (Rhys, 1992, p. 80). Antoinette hide[s] the truth from him. She knows Sandi 'since long time', 'she start with Sandi' (Rhys, 1992, p. 113). Both Daniel and Amelie, his father and Richard, all knew it. That's why Daniel's construction of Antoinette as a mad woman suits Rochester more in maintaining his good name. Rochester excludes the other side of the story related with Antoinette's first love Sandi in his narration and depicts Antoinette as a woman who takes pleasure in liberating her sexuality 'as [she] like[s]' with him (Rhys, 1992, p. 113). She is so happy with his 'thirst' for her. She says: 'If I could die. Now, when I am happy... Say die and I will die. Rochester 'watche[s] her die many times. In [his] way, not in hers' (Rhys, 1992, p. 84). Sexuality verges on violence and death in their relationship. For Rochester it is 'savage desire': 'All day she'd be like any other girl, smile at herself in her looking glass (do you like this scent?), try to teach me her songs, for they haunted me' (Rhys, 1992, p. 83). Although she 'was a stranger to [him], a stranger who did not think or feel as [he] did' (Rhys, 1992, p. 85), he was still addicted to her 'exotic' beauty.

In Rochester's hidden version of himself, he goes to the extremes. He makes Antoinette totally give herself up to him in having sex with him but rejects her totally in order to dominate her. Rochester makes love with Antoinette but he has no feeling towards her. He exploits her money, property, as well as her sexual dignity, and her emotional happiness. Amelie too is subjected to his sexual violation 'behind the thin partition' (Rhys, 1992, p. 127). He hates women in general. He keeps away from Antoinette making her obsessed with him. He wants to 'break her up'. With the names he calls her 'Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antonetta', he drains her soul. Rochester even changes her French name Antoinette into an English one - Bertha. It is another notion of colonization of Antoinette by Rochester. He enjoys torturing her sadistically. Resentfully unwilling to allow her 'be' as she is, he justifies all his transgressions hiding behind Antoinette's madness and his loss of love for her. Telling her and acting like she is mad, he drives her to her mother's end. With her uncombed hair, bare feet and the bottle of rum in hand, she mirrors her mother. No matter how much Antoinette tries to be like the 'lovely English girl' in [her] favourite picture, 'The Miller's Daughter'', she is a 'slut' in his eyes: 'wearing the white dress [he] had admired … slip[ping] untidily over one shoulder... Holding her left wrist with her right hand' (Rhys, 1992, p. 115). He pities himself as a man married to a 'drunken lying lunatic-gone her mother's way' (Rhys, 1992, p. 149). To distance her from his

own heritage and himself from the taint of her family madness, using his authority, Rochester erases Antoinette's identity. Doing so, he takes revenge on her: 'She'll not laugh in the sun again. She'll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass. So pleased, so satisfied', 'She said she loved this place. This is the last she'll see of it' (Rhys, 1992, p. 150). In Rochester's narration Antoinette internalizes the image of femininity as passivity and he turns her into a ghost as he likes – something shadowy, without substance.

Part 3 is Antoinette's narration and is closely related with *Jane Eyre*. Bertha Mason is silenced, edited, kept very small; is denied completely and actually is concealed in *Jane Eyre*. Rhys writes a much more explicitly sexual novel retelling Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. While Jane in a way reflects Brontë more, Bertha mirrors Rhys more as the daughter of a Welsh doctor and a Creole mother being born at one of the Windward Islands.

In the last part Rhys constructs within her multi-layered text, she uses Antoinette's dream as a frame-breaking device and creates ambivalence between reality and fiction. Rhys prefers the timelessness to the restriction of chronology. We follow the flow of Antoinette's mind, where past and the present exist at once. In the present time, Antoinette is in England locked in the attic of Rochester's house with Grace Poole as her observer. The sight of hung tapestry in the room next evokes the memories of her mother. Then she comes back to the present. There is no looking glass or mirror like reflectors there to remind her who she is. She sees a girl wearing a 'white dress', hiding herself from her, sees some shadows and hears some voices asking to each other if they've seen 'a ghost' (Rhys, 1992, pp. 163-164). Jane's experience in Brontë's novel becomes Antoinette's memories in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Grace Poole tells her that Richard Mason came to see her. She remembers the letter she wrote to him to save her from this 'cold' and 'dark' place (Rhys, 1992, p. 164). With Grace Poole's intrusion into her narrative, Antoinette remembers that Mason didn't recognize her: He had sold her to Rochester; kept her affair with Sandi from Rochester as a secret before their marriage and deprived her of her sexual and racial identity – her 'Caribbeanness'. For this, most probably, she attacks him with a knife and 'bit his arm', especially when heard the word 'legally' (Rhys, 1992, p.165). The red dress in her dream which is associated with passion and fire functions as a mirror like reflector and makes Antoinette/Bertha recollect her past - all the colours she lost. Moving backward and forward in time, Antoinette remembers who she really 'is': 'infamous daughter of an infamous mother' (Rhys, 1992, p.167); as for Rochester - a kind of hell, fiery landscape needing to be erased from the purity and cleanness of his European world.

Antoinette's suicide is an aggressive act of self-assertion and will, a kind of reaffirmation, self-liberation, and a choice of freedom. The fire she lights is her way of indicating that she is present. She uses the fire to make people realize that she is there. It is a very subversive act against the patriarchal power. Rochester believes that Bertha cannot speak, has lost all her language. In Brontë's novel, she is described as growling and snatching away like a dog. She cannot articulate. She has to use signs. The fire, the blood is her language. Having so long being concealed and denied as the woman in margins, she comes out of her hiding place to the public domain. She speaks in a particularly violent way by burning Rochester's property. Antoinette's dream ends with her confrontation with Tia at the pool at Coulibri. She imagines 'a' Tia who beckons her asking 'You frightened?', while 'the man's voice is calling her Bertha! Bertha!' ceaselessly. She wakes up to her scream, finally 'know[ing] why [she] was brought here and what [she] h[as] to do' (Rhys, 1992, p. 171). This may link Rhys's Bertha to Brontë's Bertha. The narrator/author Antoinette/Bertha in this Part of the novel breaks the illusion of her being the victimized madwoman in the attic and implies that she herself is a fictional entity and finds her voice in Rhys's novel and is indeed not 'within' but outside of the novel and also of their 'ranks' –outside of all the male discourse.

CONCLUSION

Rhys intends to give voice to Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* with Antoinette/Bertha in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She claims that in her novel she writes the 'real' story from Bertha's perspective. Yet, 'reality' in her novel is only a linguistic construct. It is the world of fiction. Rhys treats male/female, colonizer/colonized, England/West Indies, black Jamaican society/white plantation owners as opposing texts within one narrative with the endlessly mirroring narratives of Antoinette and Rochester. Both characters are trapped within the male ideology. They are both in search for 'I'dentity. As the authorial narrating figures of the texts within texts structure of Rhys's novel, each try to stabilize the meaning of an 'I' which is only an illusion. Characters belong to the realm of fiction. They are just statements in their novelists' scripts. They both exist and do not exist. In their narratives by creating different 'selves' 'other' than themselves for their experiencing selves, they attempt to reach a unified identity running after one identity (signifier) to another (signifier). What is created in their texts is not the 'self' but the 'other.' The 'otherness' of the other gains importance in this sense. As readers, we are asked to 'play' with the novelists of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* and seek the meaning of their texts which is unstable since the strife between self and the other never ends.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Jean Rhys writes *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a counter text to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. In her novel, Rhys intends to reflect the other side of the coin, be the voice of Jane's 'other'- the 'marginalized' Bertha. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is silenced, edited, kept very small; is denied completely and actually is concealed. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys disrupts the Jane/Bertha structure in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, makes Antoinette/Bertha the main character to expose the 'otherness' of the 'other'. Her claim is that her novel represents the 'real' story from Bertha's perspective. However, 'reality' in her novel is only a linguistic construct. It is the world of fiction.

Rhys problematizes both the linear/chronological narrative order and the presence of the authorial narrating figure with her frame of texts within texts. The ontological level between reality and fiction is blurred in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Her novel is divided into three parts. Each part is narrated by Antoinette and Rochester successively. Part 1 is the 'verbal' reality of Antoinette. Readers are asked to follow her stream of consciousness. Antoinette suffers from being in an ambivalent position both in race, class, and gender wise. She is in search of an identity. Since she is forced to the border as the marginalized 'other', she constructs 'a' story to be within 'their ranks.' Yet, as in Lacan's mirror stage, she misrecognizes the other as the 'me'. Her attempt of fixing a stable identity fails.

In the second of the fragmented worlds Rhys creates, Rochester is the voice of the other side of the story. Like Antoinette, Rochester too pretends to reflect every single detail in his narrative, but he creates his narrated/fictional, socially acceptable self rather than that of his marginalized 'other'. Daniel's letter to Rochester is Daniel's contribution to Rochester's story - a new text within Rochester's text which is also a text within Rhys's text. Antoinette too breaks in Rochester's narrative constructing *her* own version of reality. Yet, in the hidden version of himself, Rochester goes to the extremes to distance Antoinette from his own heritage and himself from the taint of her family madness. Using his authority, he erases Antoinette's identity. Doing so, he takes revenge on her.

Part 3 is Antoinette's narration and is closely related with *Jane Eyre*. Rhys uses Antoinette's dream as a frame-breaking device and creates ambivalence between reality and fiction preferring the timelessness to the restriction of chronology. Jane's experience in Brontë's novel becomes Antoinette's memories in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. With Grace Poole's intrusion into her narrative, Antoinette remembers her 'Caribbeanness', who she really 'is' and

having so long being concealed and denied as the woman in margins, she comes out of her hiding place to the public domain and burns Rochester's property. This may link Rhys's Bertha to Brontë's Bertha. The narrator/author Antoinette/Bertha in this part of the novel breaks the illusion of her being the victimized madwoman in the attic and implies that she herself is a fictional entity and finds her voice in Rhys's novel and is indeed not 'within' but outside of the novel and also of their 'ranks' –outside of all the male discourse.