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WIDE SARGASSO SEA and *JANE EYRE* RECONCILE at "THE THIRD SPACE"

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Abstract: The contemporary British writer Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is often studied as a rewrite of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, through which Rhys freely enters and counterattacks the colonial and patriarchal discourses. The novel's revolution, however, more lies in its challenge to the boundaries of conventional subject matter and form on both narrative and authorial layers. In other words, the novel thematially subverts the conventional discourses of 19th century Europe on the one hand and technically revises one of the canonical texts of English literature. This paper examines Rhys's work in relation to the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's conception of "the third space", in terms of both content and structure, while it reads the novel's revision of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* within this conciliatory context.

Keywords: Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, third space, Homi K. Bhabha, rewrite, Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, reconciliation

WIDE SARGASSO SEA VE *JANE EYRE*'İN "ÜÇÜNCÜ MEKAN"DA UZLAŞMASI

Öz: Çağdaş Britanyalı yazar Jean Rhys'ın *Wide Sargasso Sea* adlı romanı genellikle Charlotte Brontë'nin *Jane Eyre*'ini yeniden yazması bağlamında ele alınmıştır. Oysaki Rhys'ın *Jane Eyre* ile diyaloğu sömürgeci ve ataerkil bir toplumun özelliklerini yansıtışına meydan okumakla sınırlı değildir. *Wide Sargasso Sea*'deki temel başkaldırı adeta kalıplaşmış tema ve yapıların, çağdaş sorunları dile getirmekteki yetersizliğine yöneliktir. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, sıra dışı temasıyla bir yandan 19. Yüzyıl Avrupa'sında sıklıkla rastlanan söylemleri yıkarken bir yandan da serbest adaptasyon tekniğini seçerek tüm kültürlerde bir klasik olarak kabul görmüş bir İngiliz romanını, bu kalıpların ötesinden, yeniden tasarlamış ve yeniden yazmıştır. Bu çalışma, Rhys'ın romanını tematik ve yapısal açıdan sömürgecilik sonrası kuramcılardan Homi K. Bhabha'nın "üçüncü mekan" kavramıyla ilişkilendirerek Brontë'nin romanıyla diyaloğunu bu uzlaşmacı zemin üzerinden okumaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, üçüncü mekân, Homi K.Bhabha, yeniden yazma, Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, uzlaşma

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1. Introduction

The contemporary British writer Jean Rhys's postcolonial feminist novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be considered among the prominent works of the contemporary British narrative. The novel is usually studied as a rewrite of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, through which Rhys freely enters the mainstream discourses. However the strength of Rhys's novel more lies in its challenge to the boundaries of conventional subject matter and form on both narrative and authorial layers. In other words, the conventional discourses of 19th century Europe are subverted thematically in the novel, while one of the canonical texts of English literature is being revised. This paper examines Rhys's work in relation to the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's conception of "the third space"[1] , in terms of both content and structure, while it reads the novel's revision of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* within this conciliatory context.

In her revolutionary novel, Jean Rhys revisits the lunatic Mrs. Rochester of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, who lives in the attic. Coming from a white Caribbean (Creole) background herself, Rhys notes in her foreword that what she intended to do is "to give her a life" and thus situates the former Mrs. Rochester, the Creole Antoinette, at the center of her novel. Giving Antoinette an individual voice and a different perspective, Rhys presents what Brontë's novel leaves out. Rhys's novel is very innovative for its critical treatment to colonial and patriarchal order as well as for its status as a loose adaptation.

The novel announces its adaptive strategy in continuously juxtaposing narrative voices and perspectives provided by Antoinette Bertha and Edward Rochester. To exemplify, in part I the narrator/character young Antoinette tells the reader about her childhood and early youth. Part 2 starts with Edward Rochester's narration of his wife Antoinette Bertha Mason and their life in her native land. Narrated by Antoinette Bertha in psychosis, Part 3 echoes the chapter of *Jane Eyre* in which Bertha tries to set the house on fire.

2. Rereading Patriarchy and Colonialism

From the very beginning, *Wide Sargasso Sea* announces its subversion of patriarchy, orienting the reader with a female household including the heroine Antoinette, her mother Annette, Annette's sister Cora and their assistants Christophine and Tia. The only exception, Antoinette's brother Pierre, is depicted as a submissive and helpless figure. Another male figure introduced to the household is Mr. Mason who marries Annette and obeys their rules out of his strong love for Annette.

[1] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 41.

Part 2 which starts with a shift in the narrative voice from Antoinette's to her husband's reflects a patriarchal perspective. Edward's narration focuses on his perception of Antoinette's native land where he feels thoroughly isolated. He not only feels distanced from the island which is a female territory but also detests the land's location in savage nature. Because the island is thoroughly unlike Edward's hometown, London, and Edward fails in his attempts to adapt to the new order, he acts as an outsider. The island is "too much of everything" as Edward puts forth while London is consistently "civil" [2]. Similarly Edward is obsessed with the presence of a secret in the land and tries to uncover that. Edward's attitude towards conquering and demystifying the land is very reminiscent of the orientalist discourses which suggest the Orient is only something to explore from the perspective of the Occident [3]. In this respect Edward owns the colonialist gaze in his treatment of the land and its people, considering them as both enjoyable and scary, mysterious and primitive. Edward's following words about the land reveal his Orientalism: "It was a beautiful place-wild, untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it keeps its secret." [4] In other words, like all colonizers, Edward finds joy in asserting his superior position by intending to explore his Other, which he calls the "god-forsaken-land". [5](Rhys 1999: 96)

The binary opposites such as nature versus culture, the matriarchal versus the patriarchal, the colonizer versus the colonized, are inevitably reflected into his narration through Edward's limited understanding of the land which, similar to Antoinette and the other female inhabitants, is his Other. Antoinette and the land gradually become one in his narration and Edward becomes gradually distanced from his wife:

> *She held up the skirt of her riding habit and ran across the Street. I watched her critically. She wore a tricorne hat which became her. At least it shadowed her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all she seems to me. Long, sad, dark, alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either…*[6]

Edward Rochester's above quoted lines convey a strong feeling of superiority over Antoinette. As he observes Antoinette from a "critical" point of view, he examines Antoinette's physical appearance in implied

[2] Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, New York, London and Norton Company P, 1999, p. 95-97.
[3] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin P, 1995, p. 5.
[4] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 102.
[5] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 96.
[6] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 39.

comparison with those of English and European women. In this respect Edward's perspective can be read as both patriarchal and colonialist. Edward's relations with other female inhabitants of the land also involve patriarchal and colonial perspectives. To specify, he views both Christophine and Amelia as a part of the mysterious atmosphere, usually commodifying them and often reflecting a focalizes them with both condemnation and fear. For instance, Edward attempts to have a sexual intercourse with Amelia while he describes her physical appearance quite stereotypically, as "dark skin, thick lips"[7]. Similarly, Edward frequently owns a critical perspective toward Christophine and often complains to Antoinette about Christophine's nonstandard use of English. In other words, Edward usually places England and his English identity as the "norm" or the "standard", evaluating Others only on such comparative scale.

Associating "realness" and "truth" with his hometown, Edward can only define the reality in Antoinette's land in relation to "magic" and truth through "dream": "I was certain that everything I imagined to be truth was false. Only the magic and dream are true-the rest is a lie" [8]. According to Said, the encounter with the Other may also reveal a sense of fear [9]. Edward is afraid of the power of nature these female characters entail: "Then she cursed me comprehensively, my eyes, my mouth, every member of my body…"[10] (Edward's choice of such a strong word as "curse" parallels to his suspicious theories about the presence of magic in the land. In one of his conversations with Antoinette, Edward asks her if she was afraid of Christophine [11], which implies his own fear. In these words Edward both addresses Christophine as his Other and recognizes her different power.

3. Thematic Locations of The In-Between

"In-betweenness" or "hybridity", which Homi K. Bhabha relates to the colonial encounter in his celebrated work *The Location of Culture* [12], is probably the most problematic stage of the colonial discourse since it induces William Edward Burghardt Du Bois's conception of "double consciousness"[13] besides double vision and double voice. Antoinette being a second generation Martinique and British girl announces her hybridity through her in-between perspective. She experiences a total non-belonging

[7] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 87.
[8] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 101.
[9] Edward Said, *ibid*, p. 5-6.
[10] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 89.
[11] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 44.
[12] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 87.
[13] Du Bois, *The Souls of the Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, New York: Dover P, 1994, p. 2.

which is reflected onto her narration: "I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches".[14] She was excluded by both white and black communities which probably led to her ambiguous self-conception: "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 nigger now, and black nigger beter than white nigger."[15] Antoinette's ambivalent identity is further explored through the looking glass imagery throughout the novel. The looking glass can be taken as a signifier of Antoinette's location of self through the Other. As Du Bois suggests, the coloured self often internalizes the Other's perspective directed to himself/ herself. [16]What Du Bois calls "double consciousness" or "internalized otherness" [17] is exhibited through young Antoinette's two reflections on the coloured Tia and the English girl, Helene, respectively:

> *As I ran, I thought I will live with Tia and be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on her. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass.[18];*
>
> *"Please Helene, tell me how you do your hair, please when I grow up I want mine to look like yours."*
>
> *"It's very easy. You comb it upwards, like this and then push it a little forward, like that, and then you pin it here and here. Never too many pins."*
>
> *"Yes, but Helene, mine does not look like yours, whatever I do."[19]*

In her above conversation with her roommate Helene, Antoinette mentions the absence of any looking glass in their dorm. Much later in the novel, in psychosis, Antoinette notes her lack of any looking glass in her room. The recurrent references to looking glass, while it is not physically present, imply Antoinette's problematic location of self. Her obsession with Helene's style of hair reflects her intention to comprehend the physical difference between the English and the Creole, in front of the looking glass. Encountering both sides of the binary opposite black and white in her mirror image, Antoinette hardly reconciles with her ambiguous self reflection.

[14] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 13.
[15] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 14.
[16] Du Bois, *ibid*, p. 2.
[17] Du Bois, *ibid*, p. 2-3.
[18] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 27.
[19] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 32.

4. "The Third Space" and An Alternative Form

In its three parts, *Wide Sargasso Sea* succesfully incorporates different voices and juxtaposes alternative perspectives of young Antoinette, Edward and Antoinette Bertha Rochester, respectively. Introducing a sense of duality throughout the narrative, one being female and colonized, the other being male and colonizer, the text consistently foregrounds an in-between situation. In this respect, the text adheres to Homi K. Bhabha's suggestion of "hybridity", "ambivalance" and "multivocality" as a means of destabilizing the binary opposites. (1994: 40-43) Transcribing the whole experience in a hybrid phase where the Creole woman and the English man can coexist, the text itself signifies Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "the third space" where colonial encounter becomes "negotiatable".[20] While Antoinette and Edward's stories refute one another, the duality and relativity of their perspectives become central to the readers' attention. While the subjectivity of truth, multiplicity of voice and plurality of perspective are celebrated, the text's revolution is announced by Antoinette as "There is always the other side, always." [21] and reflects on Rhys's motivation in writing the novel:

> *I've read and re-read "Jane Eyre", of course, and I am sure that the character must be "built-up". I wrote you about that. The Creole in Charlotte Brontë's novel is a lay figure-repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive which does. She's necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry-off stage. She must be at least plausible with a past, the reason why Mr. Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, the reason why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad, even the reason she tries to set everything on fire, and eventually succeeds. … I don't see how Charlotte Brontë's mad woman could possibly convey all this. It might be done but it would not be convincing. At least I doubt it. Another "I" must talk, two others perhaps. Then the Creole's "I" will come to life.* [22]

The above lines, quoted from Rhys's letter to Selma Vaz Dias, show that the writer intends to give the lunatic, Creole Mrs. Rochester in the attic a life as well as a distinct voice. As a Creole herself, Rhys also makes it clear that the Creole subject embodies two "I"s, as a reflection of the hybrid identity. While Brontë's novel presents a pure English heroine speaking with a single voice and vision, Rhys revises the canonical *Jane Eyre* with her innovative incorporation of double voice and double vision throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea* and writes her back to the novel. In this respect Rhys's revision

[20] Homi K. Bhabha, *ibid*, s. 218.
[21] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 77.
[22] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 136-137.

reinforces Adrienne Rich's understanding of the term as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction…" [23] Responding to Rich's following lines, "We have to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us"[24] , Rhys's text resists the oppressive traditions of the past.

The adaptive choice in the narrative structure and devices demonstrate Rhys's novel's revolution in subverting the dominant discourses of patriarchy and colonialism. The novel which opens with a first person narrator, Antoinette, focalizing her own childhood, hardly provokes any trust in the reader. Since the narration is retrospective, the childish gaze is often overshadowed by the intrusions of Antoinette as an adult narrator. Furthermore, there are transitions between diegetic and extradiegetic narration blurring the omniscience of the perspective. For instance, the novel employstwo narrative voices throughout the narration. The first part being Antoinette's, the second one being Edward's with transitions from his perspective to hers and the third part being Antoinette's, the text does not follow any standard form. Furthermore, the linear progression of the novel is frequently blocked through the juxtaposition of opposing views and different visions by Antoinette and Edward.

The text is also hybrid, on the authorial layer, owing to its conscious intertextual dialogues with Brontë's novel. While the major characters are those of the 19th century English writer Charlotte Brontë's, the story and discourse are provided by the contemporary Creole writer Jean Rhys. As Rhys centralizes Antoinette Bertha Mason Rochester in her novel, her adaptive strategy is revealed in sparing her heroine two-thirds of the narration. In other words, reversing the power structures in Brontë's text, namely the perspective and the narrative voice, Rhys priviledges the formerly disadvantaged Antoinette.

Rhys's adaptive strategies in rewriting *Jane Eyre*, remind the postcolonial reader of Homi K. Bhabha's above explained understanding of "hybridity" and "third space", the neutral grounds of which provide a chance to negotiate the colonial Others. Actually, Rhys does not choose to present Antoinette as Jane's Other, locating her heroine between the coloured Tia and the English Helene. Most of the criticism on *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not focus on the significance of Helene for the novel. Helene is not only Antoinette's

[23] Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing As Re-vision". *Feminisms: A Reader*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, p. 369.
[24] Adrienne Rich, *ibid*, p. 369.

childhood friend from the dormitory, but also a metaphor for the English half of Antoinette's identity. However, Helene whom Antoinette envies for her straight hair, is more functional than other similar metaphors of Englishness such as the portrait of the blonde "Miller's Daughter" or Antoinette's second name, Bertha. Helene can also be read as a reflection of Helene Burns in *Jane Eyre*, who is depicted as Jane's dorm friend and her childhood idol, several years older than herself. In this respect the presence of Helene in both Antoinette and Jane's childhood does not set them further apart but brings them closer. Similar to Antoinette who envies Helene's hair, Jane envies Helene's beauty, being not very beautiful herself. As children, both Antoinette and Jane are raised half in dormitories and half by nannies, Christophine and Bessie. They have similar unpleasant memories of their male relatives, Sandi Cosway and John Reed. Finally, they marry the same Mr. Rochester.

The postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri C. Spivak argues that Antoinette has to become "the fictive Other" inevitably, so that Jane Eyre can become "the heroine" of English feminist canon.[25] Similarly, Serena Reavis considers the encounter between Jane and Antoinette as a "struggle", viewing both characters as "subaltern". On the other hand, she reads the dialogue between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* also as a "third space", however meant "for the enunciation of the other" [26], although she realizes the relevance of Bhabhian "ambivalence" in this context. However, Antoinette is both similar to and different from Jane since hybridity implies "being both one and the Other" while being "neither one nor the Other" at the same time. [27] Jane represents one half of Antoinette's identity, English, and the other half, Caribbean, is what Jane is not. Therefore Antoinette's hybrid self, her Creole identity, can not be considered an exact opposite of Jane Eyre just like *Wide Sargasso Sea* intends not to deconstruct but rather to revise *Jane Eyre*. Spivak also notes that Rhys articulates the situation of Creole/white Caribbean and fails to introduce an insight on the black Caribbean.[28] Spivak remarks that Christophine is depicted as a strong black female figure, she considers her presence in the text as comparatively secondary to other female characters. The following words by Christophine

[25] Gayatri C. Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and A Critique of Imperialism". *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, MA: Blackwell P, 1998, p. 844.
[26] Serena Reavis, "'Myself Yet Not Quite Myself': Jane Eyre, Wide Sargasso Sea and A Third Space of Enunciation". http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/umi-uncg-1088.pdf / 30.07.2014. (web).
[27] Homi K. Bhabha, *ibid*, p. 2.
[28] Gayatri C. Spivak, *ibid*, 1998, p. 841-844.

justifies Rhys's strategy to offer her as a coloured female figure of alternative wisdom: "Read and write I don't know. Other things I know".[29] Christophine is obviously present in the novel with the other things she knows and consciously prefers over the conventional understanding of wisdom, intellectuality. To exemplify, Christophine chooses not to alter her English despite Edward's criticism and affectively asserts her power through obeah, cooking, singing and story-telling. However, as Spivak notes, Rhys does not locate the black Caribbean Christophine at the center of her text, because as she mentions in her letter to Selma Van Dias, Rhys intends to give the Creole a life. As she chooses the genre of adaptation, Rhys wishes to build on Brontë's text instead of writing a thoroughly new text. In other words *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be considered as a "repetition without replication" or a "re- interpretation"[30] deliberately distancing itself from its source text. [31]

In this adaptive process, Rhys's text intends to deconstruct or subvert the conventional power structures, avoiding any reversal. Choosing her heroine as Antoinette but not as Christophine, and adopting the structure of adaptation which is as Julie Sanders defines it a"hybridized form" [32], Rhys offers a reconciliatory attitude in the above mentioned Bhabhian sense. Given this context, her choice to end her novel at the point where Jane Eyre starts, which Spivak also criticises, rather shows the consistency of her adaptive strategy.

5. Conclusion

Rhys's novel challenges the conventional techniques of narration and offers a new discourse. The juxtaposition of alternative narrative voices and different perspectives as well as the nonlinear progression of narration point out a noteworthy distance from the 19th century English context. The letters from Cosway which block the validity of narrations or Antoinette and Edward's stories refuting one another contribute to the relative presentation of truth and structurally enables *Wide Sargasso Sea* to offer a social critique on the conventional structures of power; namely patriarchy and colonialism. Decentralizing the conventional English character Jane Eyre and relocating Antoinette and announcing her with her full name "Antoinette Bertha Mason Rochester", Rhys emphasizes the hybrid identity of her Creole heroine.

[29] Jean Rhys, *ibid*, p. 97.
[30] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York, London: Routledge P, 2006, p. 7-8.
[31] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, London and New York: Routledge P, 2006, p. 27.
[32] Julie Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

Renaming the doubly Other'ed "lunatic" Creole in the attic and giving her a voice, Rhys decolonizes Antoinette's spirit which may be supported by Antoinette's note at the lunatic stage, in Part 3, on her soul freely traveling into their world. While on a thematic level Rhys gradually develops the story into the colonial enconter between Jane and Antoinette, she technically challanges the binary opposites defining them as self and the Other. Rhys's adaptive strategy, in accordance with Bhabhian understanding of "third space", uses the textual potential of fiction in offering a neutral space where all reflections of difference can "negotiate". That "third space" can here be addressed as the text's adaptive form itself where the past and the present, the canonized and the noncanonized can coexist.

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