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Reconstructing the Canon, Reimagining Identity: Jean Rhys's Revisionist Narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract:

The paper aims to study the subversions and reinterpretations in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which serves as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's celebrated novel, *Jane Eyre*, using a postmodern perspective. This study delves into analyzing the effects of these subversions on the reassessment of the literary canon. This inquiry involves analyzing Rhys' use of narrative methods, such as irony and intertextuality, to question and subvert the dominant narratives and assumptions in Brontë's work. The paper examines Rhys' deliberate undermining of binary oppositions, exploration of colonial and patriarchal power dynamics, and incorporation of different perspectives by employing the concept of rewriting within a postmodern literary context. The paper also considers how self-reflection and metafiction might emphasize the process of revising and reinterpreting. This research paper highlights the significance of understanding the revolutionary potential of postmodern literature in terms of its ability to expand and challenge established works. Finally, this analysis allows us to recognize and value the subversive qualities of the *Wide Sargasso Sea* and its position within the postmodern literary canon.

Keywords: Rewriting, Reconstructing, Canon, Postmodern, Irony, Intertextuality, Metafiction.

I

Postmodern rewriting is the act of examining and reassessing past writings using a postmodern perspective. Postmodern rewriting involves the process of questioning established interpretations, examining traditional storytelling techniques, and challenging accepted

narratives. Intertextuality is a prevalent literary strategy employed by postmodern writers to integrate allusions and connections to other literary works, thus obscuring the distinction between originality and imitation. The ability of postmodern rewriting to question and subvert firmly established literary traditions makes it remarkable in literary analysis. Postmodern writers deconstruct narratives to reveal their constructed nature and challenge the idea of a definitive, singular interpretation through critical analysis and reassessment of established literature. This approach exhibits resemblances to the postmodern worldview, which dismisses the notion of unchangeable facts and advocates for diverse viewpoints.

One of the core tenets of postmodern rewriting is the disruption of prevailing discourses or overarching narratives. Postmodern writers often subvert prevailing beliefs, power structures, and cultural conventions by transgressing traditional literary genres and reimagining historical events. They engage in this practice to emphasize the artificiality and potential partiality of these narratives, while simultaneously weakening their credibility and logical consistency. Postmodern rewriting also delves into the notion of intertextuality, which pertains to the interconnectedness of texts. References and allusions to previous works blur the distinction between an author's original creation and a derivative one. This intertextual approach encourages readers to actively interact with historical contexts while comprehending the impacts and interconnectedness of several texts. By asserting that every text is influenced by and contributes to a broader network of meanings, it challenges the concept of originality. Moreover, metafictional elements in postmodern rewriting often blur the distinction between fiction and reality. Authors may incorporate self-reflective moments in their writing to explicitly acknowledge the creation of the narrative and bring focus to the process of storytelling. This metafictional technique questions readers' preconceptions regarding the trustworthiness and impartiality of the storytelling.

Rhys is a renowned British-Caribbean author, widely recognized for her acclaimed work, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She was born on the Caribbean Island of Dominica. Subsequently, she grew up in the West Indies and later on migrated to England during her teenage years. The essence of her writing was shaped by her encounters with marginalization and dislocation, as well as her diverse racial background. In an interview, Jean Rhys revealed that the following served as the source of inspiration for developing this book:

When I read *Jane Eyre* as a child, I thought, why should she (Charlotte Brontë) 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.
(Rhys)

Wide Sargasso Sea, Jean Rhys's masterpiece, recounts the tale of Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic" in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Rhys reinterprets Bertha as Antoinette, a prosperous Creole woman from Jamaica, born under the British colonial rule. The work explores the concepts of identity, displacement, and power relations within the dominant social and racial hierarchy.

The novel is divided into three distinct sections. The initial section of the story focuses on Antoinette's formative years and portrays her seclusion and challenges to assimilating into a society that perceives her as a pariah. The second part of the novel focuses on the prospect of a union between Mr. Rochester and Antoinette. Rhys' comprehensive analysis of their relationship uncovers Antoinette's declining mental well-being and the shifting dynamics of their marriage. The last portion of the story depicts Antoinette's progressive deterioration into insanity, her transformation into the 'madwoman in the attic', and her subsequent confinement in Thornfield Hall. *Wide Sargasso Sea* sharply portrays the marginalization of colonial subjects and investigates the effects of colonialism and patriarchy on individuals and communities.

II

Irony is a literary device that subverts conventional storytelling by intentionally juxtaposing expected or planned results with what occurs. Figurative language is used to convey meaning that differs from the literal or obvious interpretation by employing words, situations, or actions. Irony can be seen in different ways, such as through dramatic, situational, and linguistic irony. Irony is subversive because it has the power to question established beliefs and upset the current social order. Irony highlights the imperfections, inconsistencies, and double standards in social, cultural, and political structures by underscoring the disparity between their perceived and true nature. By highlighting the shortcomings and discrepancies between espoused beliefs and actual implementation, it casts doubt over the authenticity of prevailing narratives.

Irony is generally used to critique society's norms and hierarchical structures. It can be employed to interrogate the legitimacy of individuals in authority, contest society conventions, and raise awareness of instances of injustice or irrationality in a specific circumstance. Irony allows readers or audiences to actively participate in analytical thought and reevaluate their preexisting beliefs by juxtaposing disparate elements. Irony carries a sense of antagonism or

disagreement in certain cases. Humour and satire serve as a medium for writers and artists to express their discontent subtly. By using humour to depict situations or individuals, authors possess the capacity to subvert established concepts or challenge repressive structures without directly confronting them. Irony functions as a form of concealment that enables the expression of dissenting viewpoints in circumstances when direct criticism may be prohibited or repressed.

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys critiques and challenges colonial ideology and repressive power structures through the use of irony as a subversive storytelling technique. Here are some instances of irony found in the book. The book delves into the biases and conflicts that were prevalent in colonial Jamaica, highlighting the racial irony present in the society. Rhys utilizes irony to underscore the inequity and irrationality of these racial establishments. Antoinette, a person of mixed racial background, experiences marginalization and is perceived as an alien by both the white colonial society and the black populace in Jamaica. This alarming situation reveals the subjective nature of racial classification and questions the idea of racial dominance.

Rhys also employs cultural irony in this novel to explore the clash between European and Caribbean civilizations. Paradoxically, Antoinette anticipates that her union with Mr. Rochester, a British man, will provide her with a feeling of acceptance in European culture. Nevertheless, her efforts to integrate are rejected, ultimately leading her to experience a sense of isolation. This irony challenges the underlying power dynamics in colonial relationships and highlights the superficial nature of cultural absorption. In his book *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study*, Thomas F. Staley references a statement made by Dennis Porter about Antoinette.

Antoinette is a passive victim and Rochester is an example of male cruelty. The whole substance and theme of *Jane Eyre* reverberate throughout the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and the reader's knowledge and understanding of *Jane Eyre* deeply enrich the experience of reading Rhys's novel. Rhys was a careful reader of *Jane Eyre* and her novel is both an appreciation and commentary upon it, but over and above this, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an independent creation of great subtlety and skill. (101)

The book contains several examples of situational irony, which emphasize the disparities between what seems to be true and what actually is. Initially, Mr. Rochester perceives Antoinette as unique and attractive, but subsequently alters his perspective due to her Creole heritage, ultimately confining her in the attic. Situational irony undermines Mr.

Rochester's authority and questions established gender norms by highlighting his dishonesty and changing perspectives.

Narrative irony is apparent in the structure and narrative decisions of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This narrative functions as a prelude to Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*, where Bertha Mason is identified as the "madwoman in the attic." In Rhys' story, Bertha is reconstructed and endowed with a human countenance, presenting a subversive alternative narrative that challenges the perception of her as a simplistic antagonist found in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. This utilization of narrative irony invites readers to scrutinize the accuracy of traditional narratives by challenging the prevailing perspective.

Rhys used sarcasm in *Wide Sargasso Sea* to highlight the conflicts, inequities, and contradictions within the novel's colonial context. Irony becomes a potent instrument for critiquing power systems, questioning cultural conventions, and promoting a more intricate comprehension of the intricate relationships of race, gender, and power by defying assumptions and challenging traditional narratives. In her introduction to the *Norton Critical Edition of Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, Judith L. Raiskin makes the following observations:

Wide Sargasso Sea was set in the 1840s in the West Indies; with an unremitting determination it rewrote the English classic, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and by shifting the focus from Jane to Bertha it challenged an array of accepted truth from the glories of Empire and English culture to the celebrations of liberal feminism. (xi)

Wide Sargasso Sea employs irony to reveal flaws in traditional storytelling and assumptions, highlighting inconsistencies and prompting readers to reassess their assumed notions. Here are some noteworthy instances in which irony contradicts these stories. Rhys challenges the conventional colonial narrative that portrays the Caribbean as a picturesque and alluring destination by employing irony. Antoinette, a white Creole woman born in Jamaica, functions as a perspective through which the story explores the intricate and conflicting aspects of colonialism. Antoinette's status as an outsider in both white European civilization and the black Jamaican community challenges the idealized perception of the Caribbean by revealing the oppressive power structures and racial biases that are the foundation of colonialism. Antoinette's initial words in the story allude to this intricate connection: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks. The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, 'because she pretty like pretty self'

Christophine said (5).”

Irony is a powerful tool for disrupting and questioning societal expectations and biases related to gender. The initial portrayal of Antoinette and Mr. Rochester's union depicts it as offering both stability and acceptance. When Mr. Rochester alters his perspective on Antoinette and dismisses her based on her Creole identity, an ironic twist occurs. This irony emphasizes the capriciousness of gender standards and demonstrates how patriarchal regulations can restrict women's experiences.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys presents an alternative narrative that challenges the portrayal of Bertha Mason as the "madwoman in the attic" in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Rhys' rendition grants agency to Bertha and delves into her past, so imbuing the character with a sense of humanity. Through the examination of narrative irony, readers are encouraged to question the fundamental assumptions of prevailing narratives and cast uncertainty on their veracity. The process necessitates a reassessment of the characters and promotes a more nuanced comprehension of their situations and motives.

The hypocrisy and inequities of the colonial system are evident through the use of irony. Rhys demonstrates the disparity between stated principles and actual practices through humorous situations and interactions. The oppressive mistreatment of Antoinette by both the black population in Jamaica and the white colonizers, for example, contradicts the notion of benevolent colonialism. This irony highlights systemic disparities and raises skepticism toward the beliefs that reinforce and maintain colonial power structures.

Irony is employed to highlight the limitations of language in articulating intricate information. Rhys uses irony to underscore the inadequacy of language in conveying the complete intricacy of human experiences by exposing a disparity between explicit statements and underlying intentions. The ironic utilization of language in this context exemplifies a broader postcolonial analysis of the colonial endeavors attempt to employ language as a means of categorizing and controlling societies.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys used irony as a means of expressing persons, objects, and ideas in a provocative and subversive fashion. Here are a few instances of the book's satirical portrayals. Antoinette's portrayal makes considerable use of irony. Being a white Creole woman in colonial Jamaica, she exemplifies the difficulties that arise when trying to define one's identity and social status. Antoinette's efforts to assimilate into European civilization and escape her marginalized state are consistently rejected, highlighting the ironic

contradictions and immaturity of colonial aspirations. At first, her marriage to Mr. Rochester seemed like it may provide her with safety and a sense of belonging. However, as time goes on, it becomes tragically ironic because it ultimately results in her being imprisoned and experiencing a decline in her mental health. Once again, the figure of Mr. Rochester is portrayed with irony. Initially, he is attracted to Antoinette's unique nature, but later on, he rejects her due to her Creole ancestry. This ironic twist undermines conventional beliefs about the power dynamics between white men and women in colonial contexts by revealing the arbitrary nature of racial biases and the adaptable perspectives of the colonizer. Antoinette describes the complex interplay between the Creole and the black individuals in the following manner: "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.' I walked fast, but she walked faster. 'White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you. Go away.' (9)"

The presence of irony is evident not just in the characters, but also in numerous symbolic occurrences. As an illustration, the fire at Thornfield Hall, which utterly devastates Antoinette's residence, functions as the pinnacle of the narrative. This event is replete with irony as it symbolizes both liberation and devastation. The fire obliterates Antoinette's current state of being imprisoned, while it also symbolizes the deprivation of her sense of self and power. It effectively captures both her desire for autonomy and the resulting consequences. Once more, the book's depiction of the natural environment has ironic elements. Although the Caribbean is often idealized as a utopia, Rhys portrays it with a hint of melancholy. The intense heat, abundant vegetation, and intricate plant life symbolize the oppressive and stifling effects of colonialism. The irony is in the juxtaposition of the romanticized notions of the Caribbean with the harsh truths of oppression, power dynamics, and the erasure of indigenous cultures.

III

In Jean Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, intertextuality and reimagining help challenge literary traditions. Rhys masterfully blends parts from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to develop a unique story that challenges its predecessor. The deliberate referencing of another text underpins *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys reimagines the characters, surroundings, and ideas of *Jane Eyre* through a postcolonial, postmodern revisionist viewpoint. Rhys challenges the colonial and patriarchal viewpoints present in Brontë's story by allowing Bertha Mason, who was

previously hushed and marginalized as the "madwoman in the attic," to express herself. Rhys urges readers to reassess *Jane Eyre* from different perspectives, so revealing the injustices experienced by Creole women in colonial Jamaica through an intertextual dialogue.

In addition, Rhys utilizes the technique of reimagining as a narrative approach to provide intricacy and sophistication to her characters and locations. Antoinette Cosway is a redesigned version of Bertha Mason, who is shown as a fully developed protagonist with a complex background and a deep inner world. Rhys's reinterpretation of the character Bertha/Antoinette serves to portray her as a relatable human being, so contradicting the prevailing notion of her as a "madwoman." This reworking delves into profound themes of identity and alienation. In addition, Rhys presents a new interpretation of the Caribbean scenery, imbuing it with metaphorical importance and emphasizing its impact on the characters' lives.

Rhys showcases the potent influence of intertextuality and literary reinterpretation in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys establishes her narrative dominance and presents a new viewpoint on well-known characters and topics by actively involving herself with a classic book such as *Jane Eyre*. By engaging in this process, Rhys not only pays tribute to the literary heritage but also broadens its scope, producing a work that is simultaneously groundbreaking and intellectually stimulating.

The intertextual relationship between Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is evident in the alteration of familiar themes and characters. This image of Bertha Mason as the "madwoman in the attic" in *Jane Eyre* is foreseen and criticized in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys gives Bertha a complex backstory and voice by reinventing her as Antoinette Cosway. This reconceptualization contests the simplistic portrayal of Bertha in *Jane Eyre* and introduces Antoinette as a multifaceted and empathetic character. Rhys analyses Antoinette's challenges, goals, and experiences in Jamaica's severe colonial environment from an opposite perspective.

Furthermore, Rhys capitalizes on the narrative voids and omissions present in *Jane Eyre* to further her own storyline in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys establishes a historical backdrop for Bertha's character and her association with Mr. Rochester by delving into Antoinette's upbringing, Creole identity, familial lineage, and descent into insanity. This further develops the characters and their motivations by filling in the gaps left by Brontë's novel.

Rhys critiques the colonial narratives of *Jane Eyre* by examining their intertextual

relationship. The author addresses Bertha's malevolence and shows how colonial power institutions marginalized and mistreated her. Rhys highlights the psychological, ethnic, and gender dynamics behind the "Madwoman in the Attic" story, as well as its preconceptions. Rhys' use of Antoinette's perspective as the story's narrator is unique. Through this intertextual strategy, readers are challenged to reassess their understanding of Brontë's narrative and examine its reliability and hidden biases. This makes readers question the patriarchal and colonial beliefs that shape Bertha's portrayal in *Jane Eyre* and the complex relationships of agency, power, and identity in both novels.

Wide Sargasso Sea, written by Jean Rhys, offers a critical and subversive perspective on Charlotte Brontë's original novel, *Jane Eyre*, by reimagining its characters and storylines. Rhys modifies established characters and elements of the plot in order to challenge dominant storylines, explore intricate topics, and amplify the perspectives of disadvantaged individuals. Rhys' adaptation focuses on the character Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*, whom she renames as Antoinette Cosway. Rhys bestows upon Bertha the ability to make independent decisions and presents her as a complex and empathetic character with aspirations, objectives, and individual obstacles. Rhys challenges the overly simplistic portrayal of Bertha as the "madwoman in the attic" by giving Antoinette a voice and encourages readers to reevaluate their initial impressions.

Rhys tells stories using shifting perspectives and unreliable narration. Rhys examines and reconstructs the story from multiple perspectives and unusual narrative methods. The novel is divided into three perspectives: Antoinette's, Mr. Rochester's, and hers again. Rhys' many perspectives cast doubt on the narrators' reliability and emphasize the subjectivity of reality and interpretation.

Rhys also creatively envisions both the Jamaican surroundings and the cultural heritage of the Caribbean to create a vivid and intricate depiction. She critically analyzes the intricate financial, racial, and cultural dimensions of colonial Jamaica and questions the commonly held idealized and romanticized views of it. Rhys challenges traditional colonial narratives and rejects the Eurocentric perspective of *Jane Eyre* by recreating the setting. Rhys clearly challenges traditional gender stereotypes in her story. Rhys challenges conventional gender stereotypes by interrogating the assumptions and societal norms linked to male and female characters. The author portrays Mr. Rochester as a complex and imperfect individual, raising questions about his power and resilience. Antoinette defies conventional norms and challenges the limitations imposed on women by colonial society. Rhys' reimagining of gender roles

provides alternative perspectives on female independence and strength, while also offering a critical analysis of patriarchal conventions. During a pivotal exchange with the unidentified Mr. Rochester, Antoinette expressed:

Do you know what you've done to me? It's not the girl, not the girl. But I loved 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 spoiled 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 and before I die I will show you how much I hate you. (94-95)

IV

In conclusion, it can be said that Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* utilizes several narrative methods that defy conventional literary norms and undermine reader anticipation. The book offers a fresh interpretation and analysis of the storyline and characters in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, providing alternative viewpoints and criticizing oppressive male-dominated and colonial relationships. Intertextuality is employed as a literary device to accomplish this objective. The presence of an untrustworthy narrator, several perspectives, and introspection contribute to the intricacy of the narrative, obscuring boundaries and questioning traditional understandings. Through questioning assumptions and extracting significance from the various elements of the story, these narrative approaches not only enhance the novel's postmodern style but also empower readers to actively engage in the process of interpretation. *Wide Sargasso Sea* promotes a more nuanced comprehension of reality, identity, power dynamics, and the intricacies of the human experience by questioning established beliefs and unsettling reader anticipations. To conclude, Anne B. Simpson's analysis of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* in her book *Territories of the Psyche: The Fiction of Jean Rhys* can be quoted:

Brontë had sensitively understood the plight of disenfranchised women and yet, as a Victorian English citizen, she had been unable to see her own Creole character, the first Mrs. Rochester, as fully human. Rhys, in contrast, created interconnected but increasingly complicating perspectives on the story of Bertha Mason. Because she opened up space for exploring the overdetermining strands of her protagonist's subjectivity, readers following the first-person narrative of Part One of *Wide Sargasso Sea* move within the Creole's mind and come to understand the elements that drive her

to her apparent madness (111)

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