

Postcolonial Interpretation of Antoinette's Identity Crisis in Wide Sargasso Sea

Ling Xiang, Yue Zang

Yunnan Minzu University School of Foreign Languages, Kunming 650000, China.

Abstract: Wide Sargasso Sea is written by the British novelist Jane Rhys. Jane Rhys and the heroine in this novel have similar origins, and both of them experiences identity crises. This article aims to explore Antoinette's identity crisis, and analyzes the novel Wide Sargasso Sea from a post-colonial perspective. First of all, this article introduces the author's growth experience and the content of Wide Sargasso Sea. Secondly, postcolonial theory is briefly introduced. Thirdly, through the analysis of the performance of Antoinette's identity crisis, that is, the main analysis is that Antoinette's identity is affected by racial conflict and patriarchy, so as to reveal the crisis of Antoinette's identity. Finally, the conclusion of this paper is that the author in Wide Sargasso Sea shows that Antoinette completely loses her identity, and does not know who she is or where she belongs. Just because of her own ethnic origin, she is always rejected and despised by others. In the end, she collapses in despair, and sets fire in an attempt to burn down the world that has made her desperate, and she also dies in the sea of fire. The tragic life of Antoinette also reflects the pain caused by the background of her time.

Keywords: Jean Rhys; Wide Sargasso Sea; Identity Crisis; Postcolonial

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the author and wide Sargasso Sea

Jean Rhys, a British novelist who was born and grew up in the Caribbean island of Dominica. From the age of 16, she was mainly resident in England, where she was sent for her education. She is best known for her novel Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), written as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. Jane Rhys has a similar background to Antoinette--- A Creole mother and Welsh father, she lived in the Dominican Republic for sixteen years before moving to England. Against this background of life, she has a deep understanding of the consequences of cultural conflicts and racial discrimination. The heroine Antoinette is one of Mixed-race whites from Martinique, one of the West Indies, never seems to make real friends in society at the time. They are ostracized by the white rulers, and they are also scorned and hated by the black people. After the social conflicts are intensified, some white rulers chose to leave, but the mixed-race white people who are born and raised in Martinique has no way to escape. Most of them still lives in the homeland where they are born and raised, and let their destiny be devastated.

1.2 Literature Review

Wide Sargasso Sea earns international acclaim for Jean Rhys and attracts great attention home and abroad. Chen Liping (2013) does ample researches on the heroine as well. She explores the nature of white identity with a focus on the identity crisis undergone by Antoinette and Rochester. Moreover, a vast number of researchers do similar studies in their master theses on the heroine's identity crisis and her arduous journey of self-identity reconstruction on the basis of Lacan's mirror stage, the modern narrative theory, and Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial theory (Huang Jing, 2008, Wang Fangyuan, 2015, Wang Qi, 2019,). Additionally, there are a variety of studies on this theme abroad. Fann Oudah Aljohani (2016) elaborates Antoinette's personality and identity crisis as a Creole girl. Some researchers also discuss Antoinette's occupation of a hybrid identity in the light of "the third space" (Khem, 2015). There are also a vast majority of researchers do the comparison of Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre, including Stephanie de Villiers (2018), Lv Weisong (2014), and Susan Lydon (2010). However, there are few scholars make a study on the perspective of post-colonialism to analyze Antoinette's identity crisis. Hence, this paper is devoted to bridging this gap, aiming to enrich the identity crisis study from a brand-new perspective.

2. Identity crisis from racial conflict--- the enemy of two communities

Antoinette, a white Creole girl, experienced a double identity barrier in the Caribbean where she was born and raised. She could neither identify with whites nor with blacks, and therefore could not establish her own identity.

2.1 White nigger in the White community

They say when trouble come close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks. (Jean Rhys, 1966: 02) However, British aristocrats from the center of the empire does not regard the descendants of European colonists in the West Indies as the same with them. They exclude Creoles, regard them as inferior and disdain to associate with them.

For Antoinette, she pins her hopes on the white aristocracy of the suzerain country, hoping to establish an identity with them. After her mother gets remarried, Antoinette is glad they are eating British food and feels like she is living like an English girl. For the sake of identity, Antoinette regards England as her ideal home. She loves British food and culture. Her favorite painting is "The Miller's Daughter" because it is a lovely English girl. She admires the looks of English girls and believes that she can only find the missing sense of belonging in the white British aristocracy, so she agrees to marry Rochester, even if she will lose all her property. Rochester says, "She often questioned me about England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made much difference. Her mind was already made up. Some romantic novel, a stray remark never forgotten, a sketch, a picture, a song, a waltz, some note of music, and her ideas were fixed" (Jean Rhys, 1966: 40). She mistakenly regards Britain as her homeland and longs to be recognized by the British society, but she ends up being imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield Manor in England and finally committed suicide. Antoinette is as mysterious and strange to Rochester as the West Indies, "Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (Jean Rhys, 1966: 25). Rochester, the white colonizer of the suzerain country, has a stereotyped prejudice against people and things on the West Indies, believing that his wife's appearance is very strange, and the people and things on the island are distinct from those in Britain. The scenery is too bright, "Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hill too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me" (Jean Rhys, 1966: 26). Rochester says that he marries Antoinette means nothing to him, he doesn't love Antoinette.

After seeing the letter, he walks past a clump of orchids, remembering that he has told his wife that the flower resembles her, but now he stops and breaks off a flower and tramples it mercilessly. He steps on the orchid into the mud, which means trampling on his wife's life and personality. Rochester considers the beauty of the West Indies to be a strange, mysterious beauty. His wife is a white woman who is different from him, an alienated colonial descendant who appears as a racial "other". As a result, Antoinette could not gain the approval of Rochester, a white aristocrat from the center of the empire. Finally, by marrying a white gentleman to change the predicament of being unidentified by the white aristocracy, it ends in failure

2.2 White cockroach in black community

In the eyes of blacks, "white Creoles are "white cockroaches", which is a contemptuous term for white Creoles by blacks. It is this title and blacks' hatred of Creoles that makes Antoinette deeply aware of her identity barrier with blacks. Tia, a little black girl has the same age as Antoinette, who used to eat together, sleep together, and bath in the same river. But "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 hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass"(Jean Rhys, 1966: 15-16). From Tia, Antoinette once sees her own reflection. By identifying with Tia, Antoinette gradually establishes a self-image. However, this mirror-image relationship that symbolizes identification is ruthlessly shattered by Tia's stone. "But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought, *Why did I scream?* I called 'Tia!' and jumped and woke."(Jean Rhys, 1966: 88)

Black people call Creoles "white cockroaches," a derogatory term. This makes Antoinette aware of her identity differences with blacks and her inability to integrate into the black community. The hostility between blacks and whites makes Antoinette unable to integrate into the black community

3. Identity crisis from patriarchy

In order to defraud £30,000, Rochester conscientiously promises his wife a sense of security, but his true nature is exposed shortly after marriage. There is no love between him and Antoinette, she is just the object of his desire. He is not surprised to see the letter falsely claiming that his wife has a family madness, as if he has been expecting it. He does not give Antoinette the right to explain. Under the influence of patriarchy, Antoinette is deprived of even the most basic right to speak. In retaliation for Antoinette, Rochester has sex with his servant, who has no regard for the feelings of his wife, and has no remorse for it. Rochester sullies Antoinette's only place of love, and

changes his wife's name to Bertha, simply because he liked the name so much, so he called Antoinette Bertha. This symbolic name is imperialism. As his wife becomes more and more depressed, Rochester invites a doctor and labels his wife crazy according to his wishes. He is unwilling to divorce his wife so as not to lose the property. He gradually dismisses the people around his wife, taking the tortured insane wife secretly from the tropics to the gloomy England, cutting her off from all acquaintances and from her own roots. Even if the wife is mad, he is not willing to give her back freedom, but imprison her in Thornfield Manor. Eventually Antoinette sets fire to the manor and throws herself into the flames. Under the dual oppression of colonialism and patriarchy, Antoinette, a white Creole, is deprived of her property, the right to speak, and freedom, and becomes a woman who gradually loses her roots and eventually becomes mad to death.

4. Conclusion

In the process of searching her own identity, Antoinette, who has a complex bloodline, completely lost herself and her own identity. She does not know who she is, where she belongs. Just because of her own ethnic origin, she is always rejected and despised by others. In the end, she collapsed in despair and set fire to the world that makes her hopeless, and she also dies in the fire. The tragic life of Antoinette reflects the pain caused by the background of her time, and truly shows the readers the hardships and contradictions in the life of the people of the ruled class during the colonial rule, which reflects the author's dissatisfaction with the exposure of the class differentiation.

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