

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

**STUDY MATERIAL FOR MA 2<sup>ND</sup> SEMESTER**

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**WRITING**

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**Module name: Jane Eyre and The Wide Sargasso Sea Lecture -7**

Topics: 1. madness, race and femininity in Rhys's novel

2. Memory, storytelling and otherness in Rhys's novel

- Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been hailed as a postcolonial-feminist masterpiece, but Rhys herself remains relatively unknown. Having grown up in Dominica, she was fascinated by the figure of Bertha Mason, the West Indian "madwoman in the attic" in *Jane Eyre*, and her revisionist account of Bertha's upbringing is a provocative prequel that raises important questions about gender and colonialism. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette, whose childhood is based on Rhys's own experiences, marries the wary young Rochester; later, convinced that she is mad, he colonizes (Anglicizes) her as Bertha in an attempt to control her identity and behaviour.
- 'Is there another side ?'  
"I said.  
'There is always the other side, always.'

'It isn't as it seems to be.'

Through woman as storyteller, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys gives the other side, the West Indian side, to Bertha Mason's life in England which we had found scantily but disturbingly in *Jane Eyre*. Jean Rhys was concerned that in Charlotte Bronte's novel, Bertha was dismissed as insane without any information being given about her past that could explain her insanity except the assumption of heredity. With *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys fills in Bertha's past in the West Indies by novelizing in Antoinette Cosway's life the story of Bertha's childhood, early adulthood and marriage, to show the circumstances that led up to her incarceration in an attic in Thornfield Hall. Antoinette Cosway, then, is Bertha Mason Rochester's West Indian self before her encounter with, and the control of her life by, the English, portrayed by her stepfather, Mr Mason, Richard Mason his son, and her husband. Father, son and husband, represent successive stages in an all mighty male power in her life.

- As Antoinette sits imprisoned in her room isolated from everyone except Grace Poole, the woman who takes care of her, she is conscious in her lucid moments that something went wrong with her life. In her effort to find out what happened, her mind reaches back into the past. She finds too that she is better able to concentrate after she has tasted the drink (gin?) that Grace kept in her room

“When she is snoring I get up and have tasted the drink without colour . . . . When I get back into bed I could remember more and think again “

Antoinette finds that she is able to have a coherent review of her past with the help of strong drink. What she had buried in her subconscious could surface because there is no conscious restraint.

- Antoinette's storytelling takes place on the level of remembering. Through her memory she retraces with brutal honesty her psychological journey from isolation to disintegration. She concentrates on her childhood experiences which reveal her futile search for love and understanding and the stages of her rejection, alienation and disintegration. As scenes unroll in her consciousness, Antoinette reviews them with care for she is in search of an explanation for her condition and her imprisonment.
- Wide Sargasso Sea is a book about being a woman, a particular type of woman, in a particular cultural environment, at a particular point in history. It is also a book about particular environment and its psycho-cultural reality. It is also a novel about the dualism life. "Blowing the lid off our cherished " absolute presuppositions", it raises questions to which there is always more than one answer, all equally relevant and provocative, as: Does Antoinette commit suicide (by fire) or does she free herself? Does she deliberately set Thornfield Hall on fire, or is it an accident or a dream? At the end of this novel, is she dreaming, or merely on the level of fantasy, predicting her own future? Does she succumb to a "nervous breakdown", a break with reality (like her mother?), is she truly "mad", or merely the victim, the evocative expression of the intense results a **dual psycho-cultural and racial identification** - a person with a black psyche trapped behind the painful mask of her white skin? (Admittedly, all of the key symbols and metaphors in the work are **dual**, at least, in content and suggestive value - for the image of the dream, the fire, the mirror, and, quintessentially, the key image mirrored in tears on the white and black girls' faces - itself a crucial focus of imagery plot in the novel.)

- Similarly, when Antoinette asks the "Martinique obeah woman", and her closest mother figure, for a love potion with which to win the love of her expatriate husband, does Christophine attempt to solve the problem of this unloving, mercenary husband by trying to poison him, thereby legally freeing her mistress emotionally and economically?
- Similarly, - on the level of structure - we can question whether Rhys's exploration of Rochester's "stream-of-consciousness", juxtaposed counter-balanced as this is with Antoinette's, merely serves to further heighten contempt for his alienated psycho-sexuality and psycho-cultural myopia, or whether serves, instead, to evoke "both sides" - the male and the female, - or alternatively, colonizer and the colonized?
- These questions represent some of the pivotal issues around which revolves basic content of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In response to these questions, all is dualism; there seems to be no single or absolute answer to any of them. Thus, Rhys opens the door open-ended universe, where anything is possible, and anyone (including ourselves) of anything. Rhys points the way to the other side - the other side of all assumptions about all aspects of reality, race, culture, sex, psycho-sexuality, sexual about sanity and madness, about love and hate, about life - and, therefore, death. However, such indeterminacy does not dilute the political aim of Rhys. She wanted to represent the other side, but absolutism in the affirmation of the other side would not be able to do away with the structures of self/other hierarchy. So she goes beyond that structure and collapses the sureness of self/other binary itself.

Acknowledgement: this is a non-profit study material, in lieu of the lectures in class suspended due to Corona outbreak and is not a fully original essay. Parts

of the argument and phrases have been derived from "JEAN RHY'S WIDE SARGASSO SEA: THE OTHER SIDE/"BOTH SIDES NOW" by PAULA GRACE ANDERSON, *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1/2, *Critical Approaches to West Indian Literature (MARCH-JUNE, 1982)*, pp. 57-65. Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.