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Decolonial Feminism in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea

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The study reads Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea through a decolonial feminist lens, arguing that Antoinette Cosway's trajectory exposes how imperial marriage law operates as an extension of colonial conquest. Situated in post-emancipation Jamaica, the novel reveals a palimpsest of racial capitalism in which Antoinette's thirty-thousand-pound dowry functions as the legal mechanism that transfers land, labour and female sexuality into English patriarchal hands. Rochester's renaming of her as "Bertha" performs the colonial imperative to overwrite local identities, while the removal of her wedding dress, jewels and finally her body to an English attic enacts the literal dispossession of a creole woman whose cultural coordinates are erased in the metropole. The paper foregrounds how intersecting racial, class and gender hierarchies render Antoinette a liminal subject, belonging neither to the Afro-Caribbean community nor to the British elite, and therefore doubly vulnerable to imperial capture.

By restoring Antoinette's childhood memories of poisoned horses, obeah women and decaying great houses, Rhys reclaims the "madwoman in the attic" as an embodied archive of resistance. Her psychological fragmentation is read not as pathology but as the somatic register of structural violence: a refusal to internalise the colonial script of white femininity and a cry against the epistemic erasure that colonial law demands. Through this re-centring of creole epistemologies and Caribbean affective economies, the novel becomes a praxis of decolonial feminism that interrogates empire at its most intimate site—marriage—while insisting on the possibility of justice grounded in local knowledge, indigenous memory and the refusal to be renamed.

Keywords: Decolonial, Feminism, colonial, Creole Womanhood, Imperial marriage.

Decolonial feminism demands a fundamental reorientation of feminist thought: it foregrounds the voices of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, Black, Indigenous and working-class women whose experiences have been historically erased by Euro-American feminist paradigms. It insists that gendered subjugation is always already braided with caste, race, class and the afterlives of empire; to speak of "patriarchy" without situating it within these co-constitutive structures is to remain trapped in colonial logic. Rejecting the universalising tropes of beauty, modernity and respectable womanhood, decolonial feminism turns to local epistemologies—oral traditions, ancestral practices, land-based cosmologies—as

sites of knowledge and resistance. As Françoise Vergès argues in A Decolonial Feminism, liberation cannot be achieved by inserting women into existing structures of colonial capitalism or right-wing nationalism; instead, those structures must be dismantled. Art, language and embodied narrative become insurgent tools that rupture Western epistemologies and open space for emancipatory solidarities rooted in place, memory and collective futurity.

Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea dramatises precisely this intersection of colonialism, racism and patriarchy. Antoinette Cosway is the creole woman who embodies what Vergès calls "the colonial wound": born into a plantocracy stripped of its unpaid labour, she is simultaneously reviled by the Afro-Caribbean majority and rejected by the British as racially suspect. Jamaica's post-emancipation landscape—charred estates, resentful labourers, crumbling great houses—materialises the economic and psychic chaos in which Antoinette is abandoned. Rochester's arrival extends this colonisation into the intimate sphere: he marries her for her dowry, renames her "Bertha" to erase her Caribbean identity, and finally imprisons her in an English attic. Her descent into madness is not an individual pathology but the foreseeable outcome of a system that first commodifies creole women and then pathologises their refusal of that commodification. Reading Antoinette through a decolonial-feminist lens reveals that her confinement is the logical terminus of a colonial patriarchy that can only secure its authority by silencing those women whose bodies and lands it has expropriated.

Decolonial feminism challenges the Eurocentric framing of madness and femininity by centering the voices of women like Antoinette, who are marginalized due to race, gender, and colonial identity. Unlike the portrayal of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, who is dehumanized and stripped of voice, Rhys reclaims Antoinette's narrative, illustrating how colonial ideologies and patriarchal domination contribute to her downfall. Feminist critics like Maria Olaussen emphasize the institutional nature of patriarchy, wherein women's dependence and silence are systemically enforced. Rhys thus subverts traditional narratives and calls for a reevaluation of how colonial histories and gender oppression are intertwined. Decolonial feminism, in this light, becomes a powerful tool to expose how madness in colonized women is not innate but socially constructed through the violence of empire and male control.

The epithets white cockroach and white nigger hurled at Antoinette crystallise the double alienation of the white Creole girl-child. They mark her as racially contaminated within the colonial taxonomy: not pure enough to claim metropolitan whiteness, yet too privileged to be folded into the Afro-Caribbean majority. In the scene where a Black girl trails Antoinette, singing Go away white cockroach, go away, the chant operates as a ritual of boundary-making that simultaneously excludes the child from the community and inscribes her body as surplus colonial matter. From a decolonial-feminist perspective, the playground taunt is not merely childhood cruelty; it rehearses the larger post-Emancipation politics of expulsion in which formerly enslaved subjects repudiate the residues of planter-class power. Antoinette's gender intensifies the injury: as a girl she is denied the compensatory masculinity that might have granted her symbolic refuge in patriarchal authority. Instead, her small, female, Creole body becomes the literal site where the violence of racialised property relations is re-enacted daily, turning the public road into a theatre of colonial shame.

Moreover, the slur white cockroach functions as a feminised form of what María Lugones calls the coloniality of gender. The insect metaphor filthy, unwanted, perpetually scuttling reduces Antoinette to a pest that must be exterminated, aligning her with the abject spaces of the plantation ruin. The fact

that it is another girl who delivers the chant underscores how colonial logics recruit even the formerly colonised into policing the boundaries of racial purity and gendered respectability. Antoinette's inability to answer or escape the refrain reveals the epistemic silencing imposed on white Creole women: they are denied the discursive tools to narrate their own liminality. Thus, the childhood episode prefigures the adult Antoinette's fate her body will remain the contested terrain upon which imperial patriarchy and post-colonial resentment negotiate the terms of belonging, ultimately sealing her within the locked attic of Jane Eyre's England.

"Let sleeping dogs lie. One day a little girl followed me singing, 'Go away white cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you. Go away." Pg. 20

Rochester's grim musing "I have sold my soul—or you have sold it"(Pg.no: 63) lays bare the contractual violence that masquerades as marriage in the colonial Caribbean. The thirty-thousand-pound dowry is not a gift but the purchase price of Antoinette's body, mobility, and legal identity. Imperial English law equips the husband with absolute rights over his wife's property and person, while Creole women already racialised as not quite white are rendered doubly exchangeable. In this transaction, the dowry converts Antoinette into a fungible asset: her sexuality is annexed for Rochester's pleasure, her inheritance is absorbed into his estate, and her subjectivity is reduced to the silence of the marriage deed. The language of "bargain" ironises the language of consent; what appears as a private vow is in fact a public conveyance authorised by colonial statute, making the conjugal bed a site where imperial and patriarchal sovereignties overlap.

> "The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her (that must be seen to). I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love… I have sold my soul—or you have sold it—and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful."(Pg.no:63)

Annette Cosway's psychic disintegration is inseparable from the sudden collapse of the colonial economy that once propped up her social identity. Emancipation strips the plantation of its unpaid labor, turning land into an unsustainable burden and eroding the material basis of white Creole femininity. Isolated on an estate that can no longer generate wealth, Annette confronts a double dispossession: the formerly enslaved community withholds the deference and labor that had defined her status, while imperial men—husband, overseers, magistrates—refuse to assume responsibility for her protection. The poisoned horse literalises this abandonment: mobility, once guaranteed by patriarchal largesse and racial privilege, is abruptly rescinded, confining her to a space that has become both economically and emotionally uninhabitable.

Within this vacuum of support, Annette's "madness" emerges as a socially intelligible response to gendered colonial betrayal rather than an inherent pathology. Her loneliness is not merely personal; it is the affective register of an entire class of women who discover that abolition dismantles not only slavery but also the fragile, racialised patriarchal contract that shielded them from the consequences of their complicity. Deprived of productive land, excluded from new labour markets, and denied recognition as either victims or agents, Annette is left to dramatise her distress in the only idiom available: hysteria, withdrawal, and eventual confinement. In this light, her mental collapse is less a private tragedy than a collective indictment of the imperial order that first instrumentalises white Creole women and then disposes of them when their usefulness expires.

> "She was so lonely that she grew away from other people. That happens. It happened to me too, but it was easier for me because I hardly remembered anything else. For her it was strange and frightening. And then she was so lovely. I used to think that every time she looked in the glass she must have hoped and pretended."(Pg.no:118)

Christophine's speech to Antoinette exposes the limits of imperial patriarchy by mobilising a distinctly Caribbean female epistemology. Drawing on networks of market talk, river-side confidences, and the collective memory of women who have watched men exchange affection for land and dowries, she diagnoses Rochester's distrust as a manufactured panic fuelled by gossip rather than truth. Her advice—leave, keep your money, and do not plead with a man who has already decided to disbelieve you—translates these oral archives into a pragmatic anti-colonial feminism that refuses to cede authority over body, labour, or narrative to either English law or local patriarchal storytelling.

In the obeah scenes that follow, Christophine's pharmacological knowledge is simultaneously courted and condemned, revealing the asymmetry of epistemic recognition under colonial rule. When Antoinette begs for a love charm, Christophine withholds it, insisting that her craft will not be instrumentalised to repair a marriage that is itself an instrument of dispossession. The men around her plantocrat, magistrate, and self-styled English gentleman—brand her practice as witchcraft precisely because it operates beyond church and statute, offering women an alternative jurisdiction over sexuality, fertility, and affect. By foregrounding this refusal, the novel positions Christophine as the text's clearest decolonial feminist voice, one who recognises that the same regime that commodified Black women now pathologises white Creole women, and who insists that liberation begins when women reclaim the authority to name their own fears and desires.

Antoinette's protest against being renamed exposes the colonial logic that rewrites Creole women as disposable figures within metropolitan narratives. Rochester's substitution of her given name with Bertha functions as an act of symbolic annexation, transforming a historically and geographically situated subject into a legal artifact whose madness, sexual threat, and eventual sequestration are pre-authored in English fiction. Once the new name is entered into the marriage documents, it circulates as transferable property, legitimising the expropriation of her lands, body, and voice. Each subsequent deployment of the imposed name repeats the initial seizure, turning language itself into an additional layer of confinement long before the attic door is locked.

> "My name is not Bertha. Why do you call me Bertha?
>
> He never calls me Antoinette now. He has found out it was my mother's name" .(Pg.no: 122-123)

In the final section of the novel the attic becomes the scene of an insurrectionary remembering. Antoinette's interior monologue reassembles sensory fragments from her Caribbean childhood—the miniature replica of her family home, the immolation of the ceiba tree—to counter the geographical and epistemic compression imposed by English domestic space. These memories do not merely restore lost origins; they weaponise them against the architecture of confinement. By mobilising imperatives directed at herself—commands to move, to recall, to open—she reclaims the grammatical authority that colonial discourse had arrogated to the planter or husband. The trajectory from the initial refusal of the imposed name to the envisioned conflagration traces an arc from epistemic resistance to material

destruction, converting the attic's enforced silence into the conditions for a radical re-narration of self and space.

Taken together, these focal points reveal Wide Sargasso Sea as a sustained decolonial-feminist indictment: the racialised slurs of childhood expose the impossible liminality of the Creole woman; Annette's madness traces the psychic cost of post-emancipation abandonment; the marriage contract unmasks dowry as legalised sexual-economic capture; Christophine's obeah and orality assert a subaltern female epistemology against imperial law; the erasure of Antoinette's name enacts the colonial prerogative to possess and silence; and the final fire reclaims colonial domestic space as a site of feminist counter-violence. Rhys thus rewrites the "madwoman in the attic" as the embodied archive of empire's intersecting violences, insisting that liberation begins only when Caribbean women seize the right to name, narrate, and burn away the structures that have defined them.

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