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Failure of Identity Formation in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*: A Study of Hybridity and Mimicry

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Abstract

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is considered as a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Rhys describes the life of Antoinette, the lunatic woman in Mr. Rochester's house in *Jane Eyre*, in order to delineate the psychological impact of British colonialism. Mimicry is a postcolonial term developed by Homi. K. Bhabha to describe a situation in which the colonized imitates the colonizer's behavior. Rhys's novel represents Antoinette's attempt for hybridity in conformation with English culture. However, it can be claimed that hybridity, at least in this novel, prevents the individuals from forming a stable identity. Therefore, they try to imitate the behavior of the colonizer. The present study aims to analyze Bhabha's notion of hybridity and mimicry in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in order to show that hybridity acts as a block of identity formation.

Key Words: Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bhabha, Hybridity, Resistance

Introduction

Postcolonial literature refers to the literary works related to European colonialism in nations such as India, Nigeria, and Jamaica. However, these nations were not passive, they reacted using strategies of resistance. "Protest and resistance take on an added urgency in developing countries when neoliberalism, the new guise of globalization, determines the nature of the economy a country shall have, what investment shall be undertaken and where, and what kind of development – if any – will take place within national borders" (Sethi 83). Although some natives might have justified the presence of western empires in their country, several nationalists and patriots tried to stand against the western dominance. This effort was called resistance. Bhabha defines resistance as "the refusal to satisfy the colonizer's demand" (Bhabha 141).

I. Bhabha and His Key Terms

Homi K. Bhabha is considered as one of the most postcolonial critics. Mimicry, ambivalence, unhomeliness, and hybridity are some of his key concepts. Mimicry is a behavior in which the colonized individual imitates the behavior of the colonizer in order to conform himself or herself to the social norms of the colonized culture. In fact, "mimicry as Bhabha understands it is an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, and ideas. This exaggeration means that mimicry is repetition with difference, and so it is not evidence of the colonized's servitude" (Huddart 54). Bhabha asserts that mimicry "emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which

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‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (123). Bhabha implies that this conformation and imitation is a strategy for accessing power. The colonized subject is under the pressure of being an alien in the colonizer’s eyes. Therefore, he or she tries to escape this pressure through mimicry. Hybridity refers to a relationship between the East and the West. He asserts that, “All cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the ‘Third Space of enunciation’” (37). Cultural identity is created in the clash between two cultures. Therefore, in a colonized society, the individuals are in a state of clash between their own culture and the colonizer’s culture. Although Bhabha considers hybridity as a positive force, it leads the individuals toward mimicry.

II. Mimicry and Hybridity

Wide Sargasso Sea represents the efforts of a woman trying to fit herself in a culture she does not belong to. Antoinette experiences identity crisis and personality turbulence resulting from her unhomeliness. Critics assert that she tries to conform herself with the colonizer’s norms but unsuccessful. Nor could she stay in her own culture and therefore she becomes an Other. In other words, instead of attempting to use mimicry as a tool for upsetting the norms of the colonizer, Antoinette longs for their accepted position in society and what she is unable to obtain because of her hybrid existence. Moreover, in search of a true identity, she yearns to establish herself within two opposing cultures but, ultimately, neither of them welcomes her and she turns out to be an “Other” to all”. It is true that she cannot conform herself to the western culture but the reason behind this failure refers to the situation she experiences as a child. It means that the colonization of the West Indies prevents individuals from forming a stable personality. The hybridity she experiences created a situation that cannot form a stable identity.

Bhabha discusses in *The Location of Culture* that “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority)” (4). He then asserts, “the display of hybridity – its peculiar ‘replication’ – terrorizes authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery” (4). Bhabha then claims that, “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (4). However, this can be challenged. Although mimicry can terrorize authority, it is not strong to upset the norms of the colonizers.

Rhys represents a situation in which the colonized subject tries to conform but fails to perform. In fact, the colonization disrupts the process of individuation. In other words, individuals fail to create a stable identity and build their personality on it. Therefore, they dangle in a situation through which they are not able to create a connection with their homeland and this leads to ambivalence. Bhabha maintains that mimicry results from ambivalence. It means that when an individual is not able to form an identity, he or she is unable to cling to one culture and therefore, tries to fit herself through mimicry. Antoinette is stuck in a binary situation. It means she has a powerful family under colonialism. She has to adhere to her own cultural roots yet she has to fit in the new culture. “Much attention could be given to the historical turmoil which sodrastically affects Antoinette’s early life, for it is of considerable importance to the entire social and domestic fabric of her existence” (Staley 114).

When colonizers start to dominate a land, they entangle the process of individuation of characters in discrimination and exerting the imperial power. The colonial power produces a problematic discourse in which the native individual feels ambiguous in accepting his or her own roots or the dominant culture and identity of the colonizer. In fact, the process of forming a character based on the homeland values is disrupted through the interruption of the colonial power. Individuals lose their values and lose their personality. Therefore, they commence to look for a stable identity to connect them to. Mimicry will be the fruitless effort to perform such a search. Antoinette refers to this ambiguity in part of the novel:

As it was late, I ate with them instead of by myself as usual. Myra, one of the new servants, was standing by the sideboard, waiting to change the plates. We ate English food now, beef and mutton, pies and puddings. I was glad to be like an English girl but I missed the taste of Christophine’s cooking. My stepfather talked about a plan to import labourers – coolies he called them – from the East Indies.

When Myra had gone out Aunt Cora said, 'I shouldn't discuss that if I were you. Myra is listening. (Rhys 42)

At the beginning of the novel, she hates her stepfather; however, here she shows her interest in English food yet she misses Christophine's cooking. This is a complicated and unstable situation in which an individual is not able to form a consistent self. Therefore, he or she has to perform mimicry. Accordingly, contrary to what Bhabha maintains about the power of mimicry in terrorizing the authority, it seems that mimicry is more of a strategy for the colonizers to control and exert discipline on the individuals.

Antoinette connects her mother's survival in this difficult situation to her marriage with Mr. Mason:

So I looked away from her at my favourite picture, 'The Miller's Daughter', a lovely English girl with brown curls and blue eyes and a dress slipping off her shoulders. Then I looked across the white tablecloth and the vase of yellow roses at Mr Mason, so sure of himself, so without a doubt English. And at my mother, so without a doubt not English, but no white nigger either. Not my mother. Never had been. Never could be. Yes, she would have died, I thought, if she had not met him. And for the first time I was grateful and liked him. There are more ways than one of being happy, better perhaps to be peaceful and contented and protected, as I feel now, peaceful for year and long years, and afterwards I may be saved whatever Myra says. (When I asked Christophine what happened when you died, she said, 'You want to know too much.') I remembered to kiss my stepfather goodnight. Once Aunt Cora had told me, 'He's very hurt because you never kiss him. (23)

This quotation obviously represents internal chaos and uncertainty of Antoinette. She is even alienated from her own mother, that can be the symbol of her alienation from her homeland. Furthermore, the decline of the family at the beginning of the novel symbolizes the destruction of the notion of house for her.

Decline and death are the recurrent themes in the whole structure of the novel. Pierre is Antoinette's brother and he is sick and pale until the end of the novel: "I thought, Pierre is dead. He looked dead. He was white and he did not make a sound, but his head hung back over her arm as if he had no life at all and his eyes were rolled up so that you only saw the whites (27).

The death of the horse is described as follows:

Then, one day, very early I saw her horse lying down under the frangipani tree. I went up to him but he was not sick, he was dead and his eyes were black with flies. I ran away and did not speak of it for I thought if I told no one it might not be true. But later that day, Godfrey found him, he had been poisoned. 'Now we are marooned,' my mother said, 'now what will become of us?' (6)

These scenes of death illustrate that Antoinette's unhomeliness starts at the beginning of the novel. The feeling of not belonging to any culture and the alienation she feels can be represented here. Simultaneously, hatred of white people or racism represents itself in the novel.

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 my singing, 'Go away white cockroach, go away, go away.' I walked fast, but she walked faster. 'White cockroach, go away go away. Nobody wants you. Go away. (10)

There is a tension between white and black people since the beginning of the novel. The abolishment of slavery worsens this situation for powerful families like Antoinette's family.

The situation in Coulibri starts to become dangerous. However, Mr. Mason belittles the protests and asserts that black people are too lazy to be a dangerous. Lou maintains that "Annette's marriage solidifies the power of the neocolonialists; it also intensifies the conflict between blacks and whites. Mason knows nothing about the blacks and thinks of them as ignorant, harmless children. They, however, know of his wealth, his additional estates on Antigua, and, like Christophine, they recognize the power he holds" (77).

However, this hatred and the protests of black people reach its climax when a group of slaves surround Mr. Mason:

Somebody yelled, 'But look the black Englishman! Look the white niggers!', and then they were all yelling. 'Look the white niggers! Look the damn white niggers!' A stone just missed Mannie's head, he cursed back at them and they cleared away from the rearing, frightened horses. 'Come on, for God's sake,' said Mr. Mason. 'Get to the carriage, get to the horses.' But we could not move for they pressed too close round us. Some of them were laughing and waving sticks, some of the ones at the back were carrying flambeaux and it was light as day. Aunt Cora held my hand very tightly and her lips moved but I could not hear because of the noise. And I was afraid, because I knew that the ones who laughed would be the worst. (Rhys 24)

After this protest and fight, Antoinette's house was burned by angry slaves.

But now I turned too. The house was burning, the yellow-red sky was like sunset and I knew that I would never see Coulibri again. Nothing would be left, the golden ferns and the silver ferns, the orchids, the ginger lilies and the roses, the rocking-chairs and the blue sofa, the jasmine and the honeysuckle, and the picture of the Miller's Daughter. When they had finished, there would be nothing left but blackened walls and the mounting stone. That was always left. That could not be stolen or burned. (33)

The above quote represents a harsh and difficult situation for Antoinette. In fact, the house and her brother are the symbols of her dependence on her house and hometown. These series of events have damaged the mentality and accordingly, damaged the process of individuation and personality formation. This is the main reason behind her effort to mimic.

The last part of the first section of the novel focuses on Antoinette's enrollment in religious school. Antoinette is separated from her mother and has to leave the town. She has to leave with her Aunt Cora. She is mocked and bothered at school by other girls.

Half-way up they closed in on me and started talking. The girl said, 'Look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother. Your aunt frightened to have you in the house. She send you for the nuns to lock up. Your mother walk about with no shoes and stockings on her feet, she sans culottes. She try to kill her husband and she try to kill you too that day you go to see her. She have eyes like zombie and you have eyes like zombie too. (Rhys 45)

Mr. Mason visits her every eighteenth months and brings her gifts. In one monologue, Antoinette obviously describes her uncertain feelings symbolically:

Everything was brightness, or dark. The wall, the blazing colors of the flowers in the garden, the nuns' habits were bright, but their veils, the Crucifix hanging from their waists, the shadow of the trees, were black. That was how it was, light and dark, sun and shadow, Heaven and Hell, for one of the nuns knew all about Hell and who does not. But another one knew about Heaven and the attributes of the blessed, of which the least is transcendent beauty. The very least. I could hardly wait for all this ecstasy and once I prayed for a long time to be dead. (45)

These binary adjectives show the state of her mentality. Part one of the novel ends here and part two starts. Part two focuses on her nameless marriage. Besides, this section of the novel narrates her migration and difficult life in England. Part two is narrated by Rochester, Antoinette's husband and Antoinette herself. In fact, Rochester narrates the second part mostly but he is interrupted by Antoinette. "The conflict, however, structures the overall pattern of the narrative in the intense opposition of voices and points of view. When Rochester's voice begins narrating Part II, he expresses his antagonism toward the islands and his new wife in metaphors of military conquest: "So it was all over, the advance and retreat, the doubts and hesitations" (Lou 67).

The relationship between Rochester and Antoinette is complicated in the novel and it has several ups and downs. However, due to the effort of Antoinette for conforming herself to the norms of colonialism, we see how she loses her identity in the relationship. “I am not rich now, I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him” (Rhys 110). Lou maintains this as a master-slave relationship rather than marriage. Rochester renames her as Bertha and calls her by this name. In fact, the relationship between Rochester and Antoinette represents the bigger picture of the consequences of mimicry and hybridity. “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeh too” (Rhys 117). A person’s name is his or her identity and Antoinette knows that she is losing her identity for requesting and conforming to the norms of the colonial society but she is unable to resist against transformation.

The conflict between Christophine as the native West Indian and Rochester is an important aspect of the novel. It seems that Christophine is the symbol of Antoinette’s roots of the past and her homeland. Christophine is a powerful figure in the novel and she stays their servant even after the abolishment of slavery. When Rochester behaves coldly, she asks Christophine for a love potion in order to make Rochester love her again and Christophine helps her. The duality of Christophine and Rochester is the duality of West Indies and England and it represents the difficult situation in which she is entrapped.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has focused on the notions of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence and it has attempted to explore the behavior of Antoinette and her uncertainties and dualities that she experienced. It can be concluded that colonialism creates a situation in which individuals lose their identity and they are unable to complete the individuation process. Therefore, they try to imitate the colonizer and they become alienated from their own culture and roots. However, they fail to perform the mimicry because they are in an ambivalent situation. It means that they are entangled state between two cultures and cannot establish their true identity.

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