

Eliana Ionoaia

University of Bucharest

### ***THE CREOLIZATION OF THE SELF: FROM JANE EYRE TO WIDE SARGASSO SEA***

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**Abstract:** *Rewriting of, and intertextuality with, earlier works of literature are typical Postmodernist modes of creating new texts, and identities. The re-imagining of the colonial Other as the postcolonial Self is a device used for voicing the silenced speech of the oppressed. In Jane Eyre, the Creole woman's voice is missing from the text and the space is filled by the voices of Edward Rochester and Jane Eyre, distorting her identity; however, she is allowed to speak up in the postmodern prequel of this novel. Creolization represents the process of recognizing one's identity as Creole, as an inappropriate signifier of colonial discourse and a re-imagining and re-creation of the self in a postcolonial context in which it may be heard above the communicational noise imposed by colonial discourse as the dominant mode of expression. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette's words, "There is always the other side," are a response by the author Jean Rhys, who, while employing her background as a West Indian, Creole and colonial subject, tried to correct an omission and a misreading of Creole women. The rewriting of Bertha Mason in the figure of Antoinette was an attempt to give her the voice of "the other side", of being caught between the English colonial identity and the Jamaican native. In the context of colonial mimicry, Rhys emulates the earlier text of European descent, but creates the Creole identity anew, giving voice to the muted female idiom. The "parallel history of victimization" of the Postmodern rewriting of Jane Eyre, achieved a transformation of the colonial Other into a postcolonial Self through the creolization of the self. The empowered Creole woman assumes her identity as an inappropriate signifier of colonial discourse, re-imagining the self in a postcolonial context in which it may be heard.*

Rewriting of and intertextuality with earlier works of literature are typical Postmodernist modes of creating new texts, and identities. In the case of the two novels of the title, Charlotte Brontë creates a white, middle class female identity and a Creole identity serving as a possible subconscious instance of the first one, whereas Jean Rhys rewrites *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of the Creole identity. In the first case, Bertha Mason is a symbol of the colonial Other and as such she is isolated and rejected, as Imperial England feared and psychologically "locked away" the other cultures it encountered in its conquests. In the second novel, Antoinette – a rewriting of Bertha – is an icon of Jamaican social and racial intricacies, while *Wide Sargasso Sea* constitutes a rewriting of the Self and Other in terms of postcolonialism. The colonial Other becomes the postcolonial Self through a movement of what is seen from the centre to the margin, thus the recalcitrant symbol of alterity in the first case is metamorphosed into a useful intermediary for the healing of the colonized personality.

The re-imagining of the colonial Other as postcolonial Self is a device used for voicing the silenced speech of the oppressed. The writing of the Self, intertextually, within the tradition of the Victorian novel, constitutes an acceptance of one's identity. On another level it can be construed as an undermining of and challenge to the dominant social system through a healing of the Creole identity and an atonement of the "white guilt" of the oppressors (theorized by Shelby Steele, but extant since the 1960s). In *Jane Eyre*, a silence is created where Bertha's voice should be heard; however, the Creole woman's voice is missing from the text and the space is filled by the voices of Edward Rochester and Jane Eyre. The muted voice of the Creole woman, a victim of twofold domination – on the one hand,

from the colonial social structure, and on the other hand, from the Creole male – identified as a lunatic in *Jane Eyre*, is allowed to speak up in the postmodern prequel of this novel.

Terms such as Creole, Creoleness and Creolization need to be illustrated and clarified since in the analysis of the intertextuality of the two novels they are of great relevance. Their salience resides in the character re-written and re-imagined from the Victorian to the Postmodern novel – a Creole woman, and in the transformation of the muted Other into the voiced Self through the process of Creolization. “In Praise of Creoleness”, the three authors define Creoleness as

*“the world diffracted but recomposed,”* a maelstrom of signifieds in a single signifier: a Totality. (...) It is expressing a kaleidoscopic totality, that is to say: *the nontotalitarian consciousness of a preserved diversity.* (...) Creoleness is an annihilation of false universality, of monolingualism, and of purity (Bernabé, *Chamoiseau and Confiant* 281).

Thus, Creoleness is a sign of heterogeneity within a nation and a Self, a sign of diversity which encompasses various languages and races, it acts in the absence of others, within itself (Hallward 23). Creole identity is more difficult to pinpoint since there are some debates to who qualifies as a Creole in various island cultures of the Carribean, as the following table will show:

**Table 1.1 Variation in the meaning of the word *créole***

<i>Region</i>	<i>Indigenous</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>
Martinique	+	+	-
Guadeloupe	+	+	-
Haiti	+	-	+
Réunion	+	+	+
Seychelles	+	+	+
Mauritius	+	-	+

(Chaudenson 7)

Creoleness is reached through the process of Creolization which is not limited to the Carribean or to the American continent, as it refers to plantation economies where mixed:

*populations are called to invent the new cultural designs allowing for a relative cohabitation between them.* These designs are the result of a nonharmonious (...) mix of linguistic, religious, cultural, culinary, architectural, medical, etc. practices of the different people in question. (...) it involves a double process: the adaptation of Europeans, Africans, and Asians to the New World, and the cultural confrontation of these peoples within the same space, resulting in a mixed culture called Creole (Bernabé, *Chamoiseau and Confiant* 283).

In the sense I will be employing the term, Creolization represents the process of recognizing one's identity as Creole, as an inappropriate signifier of colonial discourse and a re-imagining and re-creation of the self in a postcolonial context in which it may be heard above the communicational noise imposed by colonial discourse as the dominant mode of expression. The Creole would find it difficult to describe the dominant culture of the colonizer, nonetheless, the latter has no qualms in depicting the Creole identity in order to bring it closer to his/her experience and explain it in order to make it familiar, thus annihilating the threat it might pose to his/her dominant position. The Creole, however, proves indomitable in being portrayed and the result is an instance of misinterpretation. The Creoleness I am underscoring is that of the “difference between being English and being Anglicized; the identity between stereotypes which, through repetition, also becomes different” (Bhabha 269) constructed across traditions, languages and cultures.

The Victorian text of *Jane Eyre* illustrates “imperialism understood as England's social mission, a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (Spivak 362) which leads to a

reading of the original text as a part of the imperialist project, a worlding of rejection and silencing of the Other. This text, if taken out of its nineteenth-century context, loses its relevance. *Jane Eyre* envisages a world of white supremacy in which what is different, strange, exotic is marginalized or locked away and its existence is not even acknowledged. The threat of the unknown is assuaged not through understanding, but through rejection and misunderstanding. Bertha Mason is easily set aside as crazy without further thought or any trace of pity, due to her Creole blood. Strangeness is cast aside, but at the same time observed, not for some sort of *saecularis sapientia* or *curiositas*, but as surveillance and as a safety measure in case it might prove dangerous. The “gaze of otherness”, as Homi Bhabha terms it, is directed at the oppressed, colonized identity, whereas the colonizer’s mind formulates what Claude Lévi-Strauss termed a “science of the concrete” which classifies the unknown:

the mind requires order, and order is achieved by discriminating and taking note of everything, placing everything of which the mind is aware in a secure, refundable place, therefore giving things some role to play in the economy of objects and identities that make up an environment (Said 19).

This propensity for order of our minds leads to arbitrary and imaginary categories we hold true. Since history is created by men, “objects (...) [are] assigned roles and given meanings that acquire objective validity only *after* the assignments are made.” (Said 19) Thus, these assignments of roles and functions to everything surrounding us may have merely a fictional, subjective reality, yet be arbitrary, for those to whom we assign roles do not necessarily identify themselves with the categories we have created: the

imaginative geography of the “our land-barbarian land” variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for “us” to set up these boundaries in our own minds: “they” become “they” accordingly (Said 20).

The gaze of otherness identifies the figure of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* as a product of imperialism, a white Jamaican Creole, rendered by Brontë at the “human/animal frontier” (Spivak 366), “indeterminate” and without rights “under the spirit if not the letter of the law” (Spivak 368). In Chapter XXVI, Bertha Mason is first seen clearly:

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.

Bertha is initially seen in her lunacy and the identity imposed on her is one coined by Edward Rochester, the representative of the white dominant class. Her past is only presented through Rochester’s biased recollections; her own voice is never heard. The identity imposed on her through the name Bertha is one which is intended to control and make her known. The re-reading of *Jane Eyre* reveals an old-fashioned text “marred by stereotyping and crude imaginings” (Thorpe 179) which makes tenuous assumptions about madness as a result of the Creole blood inherent in her. These assumptions are blended with racial prejudice against “the fiery West Indian” background of Bertha (Chapter 27). The Creole blood is seen as the essence of her lunacy: “Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard” (Chapter 26).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette tells Rochester, “There is always the other side” (Rhys, 106), which leads us to believe that Antoinette is given a voice to represent the other side. Antoinette’s voice is a writing and self-portrayal of the Creole identity. The Bertha Mason character is rewritten as Antoinette Mason, né Cosway and a life is imagined for her – a life that might explain away the madness which finally becomes part of her, not through the Creole blood, but due to unmitigated circumstances which change her. Jean Rhys confessed to Elizabeth Vreeland her aspiration, even as a child, of giving Bertha Mason a life:

When I read *Jane Eyre* as a child, I thought, why should she 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 might really have been. She seemed such a poor ghost. I thought I'd try to write her a life (qtd. in Harrison 128).

Thus, Rhys's ambition is to achieve the "moral restitution to the stereotyped lunatic Creole heiress in Rochester's attic" (Thorpe 178). By giving Bertha a life as Antoinette the "white guilt" is allayed and the colonial identities of *Jane Eyre* and Edward Rochester may maintain their status in Brontë's novel, since the injustice of silencing the colonial subject has been corrected. Charlotte Brontë lived within the constraints of her period, hence she could simply point to *Jane Eyre*'s double, but she could not overcome the internalized censor who prevented her from actually "*writing*" her. Over a century later, Rhys could do so, but she was able to overcome the censor only by shaping an apparently accurate *transcription*. (Harrison 131)

Jean Rhys, as a reader of the earlier novel, responded not only to the text, but to the context in which it was placed as well. Since her background was West Indian, Creole and colonial, she tried not only to correct an omission, but also a misreading of Creole women (Harrison 128). Thus it may be construed that the rewriting of Bertha Mason in the figure of Antoinette was an attempt to give the character the voice of "the other side", of being caught between the English colonial identity and the Jamaican native. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* we perceive the initial identity of Antoinette, then violently re-written by Rochester as Bertha, as a suggestion of the politics of imperialism determining one's personal and human identity (Spivak 368). In both novels, Rochester has a tendency of renaming others according to whim. In *Jane Eyre* he renames Jane as Janet and in *Wide Sargasso Sea* he renames Antoinette as Bertha and, while under the influence of the obeah (voodoo), while making love to her he calls her Antoinette-Marionette.

If the gaze of otherness fixes Antoinette and the West Indies as passive objects, their meaning is interpreted via a representation of the colonized culture. Thus, the "West Indies is simultaneously written (...) as a projection of Europe's imaginary and the unspoken Other of Europe" (Gregg 108). The colonial status and constitutive otherness of Rhys enable her to criticize the "divisions inherent in European social structures," (Gregg 6) to question and undermine the dominant social structure and the "rigid equations for right and wrong" (Friedman 121) as well as the identity fixed as a label onto the Creole culture by opening up the initial text of *Jane Eyre* to alternative values and perspectives (Arizti 42). Creole culture is elevated from its status of Europe's imaginary and unspoken Other, into a place and status of its own. Antoinette questions the assumption that the Creole blood is to blame for her lunacy which stemmed from racial prejudice and she undermines this inference by showing that the events in her life might have easily lead to a certain mental instability exacerbated by Rochester's crushing of her spirit.

In discussing the intertextuality of the two novels, an important concept is that of colonial mimicry, seen by Homi Bhabha as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha, 266). In Bhabha's view, "mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*" (Bhabha, 267), thus the colonial Other sees the world through "the filter of western values, and [its] foundation was "exoticized"" (Bernabe, Chamoiseau and Confiant, 274). The assimilation of Europe within Creole culture leads to a portrayal of Jamaican life "with the colors of Elsewhere" (Bernabe, Chamoiseau and Confiant, 277). The three Creole writers identify in their culture the "old syndrome of the colonized: afraid of being merely his depreciated self and ashamed of wanting to be what his master is" (Bernabe, Chamoiseau and Confiant, 284), yet accepting the values of that master. In this context, Rhys emulates the earlier text of European descent, but creates the Creole identity anew, giving voice to the muted female idiom.

As an essential motif of European imaginative geography, a line is drawn between the two continents, a line between the strong and the weak, between genuine creation and inauthentic emulation, and "once the meridian of European civilization has been crossed, according to the theory, we have entered a mirror where there can only be simulations of self-discovery" (Walcott 259). The self-discovery

of Creole identity is limited by the boundaries of the initial text of *Jane Eyre*, as “*Wide Sargasso Sea* [is] pervaded by [a] strong feeling of doom and predestination, brought about precisely by its intertextual relationship with *Jane Eyre*” (Arizti 42). Edward Said illustrates imaginative geography and depicts the Orient as experienced through lenses which “shape language, perception and form of the encounter between East and West” (Said 23). Even if the ideas and concepts he proposes are employed in a discussion of the Orient, the West Indian colonial subject also fits these descriptions. The Creole is also perceived through lenses that transform his/her identity, but in this case we deal with the Creolization of the Creole and in the case of the Antilles we can only have an imagined landscape, not geography. The unfamiliar Creole identity from *Jane Eyre* is made familiar in *Wide Sargasso Sea* “not so much [as] a way of receiving new information as (...) a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things” (Said 23). Said posits that such domestications of the exotic are not reprehensible, but natural (Said 24).

As mentioned before, the intertextuality between the initial text of *Jane Eyre* and the re-imagined prequel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is pervaded by a feeling of predestination. What characterizes the second novel, apart from voicing the colonial Other into a postcolonial Self, are the constraints on Rhys’s text emerging from the fated quality of Antoinette’s life. She is to be re-written within boundaries imposed by the earlier text, and her dreams foreshadow the unfolding of the text of the novel: “the evolution of Antoinette’s dream parallels the progress of the life, the story told to us in and by the narratives that form the novel” (Harrison, 133). Whereas the first two dreams only foreshadow, but do not enlighten Antoinette as to her destiny, the result of the final dream is that she finally knows why she is in England: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (WSS, 155-56). The anger of the mad, Creole identity is placated as she accepts her destiny, while Antoinette’s comprehension of the fact that she is the ghost everyone talks about, when she sees herself in a mirror, “It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a guilt frame but I knew her” (WSS, 154), leads to an acceptance of her fate.

Antoinette understands she has been brought to England to fulfill her destiny, while the readers see her presence there as pre-scheduled by Brontë’s novel. Antoinette’s role is to be re-written by Rochester into Bertha and find her muted place in the “cardboard house” of Brontë’s novel. Antoinette correctly deduces that “where I walk at night is not England” (WSS 148), it is merely a fictive England, where she must “play out her role, act out the transformation of her “self” into the fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that *Jane Eyre* can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction” (Spivak 369). Spivak goes on to read her presence in this fictive England as an “allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer” (Spivak 369). However, the postmodern reader appreciates the alterations and adjustments brought to Antoinette/Bertha’s character, as she is no longer seen as merely an insane not-quite human creature.

It is fascinating to observe the ways in which Bertha is altered into Antoinette as techniques of voicing the muted selves of Creole women within imperial literature. In “Discourse and the Novel”, Mikhail Bakhtin “describes language as more than words, [as] a mindset, a cultural and historical expose. (...) Language lies on the borderline between self and other” (Bakhtin 282). In both *Jane Eyre* and the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, communication by reaching across worlds, across the barriers of difference their pasts have created is failed communication; however, the second text at least tries to offer a voice to Antoinette. As Brontë silences Bertha in *Jane Eyre* in order to give a complete self to the protagonist of the novel (Arizti 39-40), Rhys offers expiation to Antoinette, who is now heard before the madness sets in. The most usual mechanism for the domination and mistreatment of others is the act of silencing the oppressed:

in the long and ugly history of human exploitation, the common denominator has been the oppressor’s ability to lose sight of the victim’s particularity (...) without the freedom to tell their own stories, the oppressed become the easy prey of the oppressor who fills the silence where the words of the victimized should be heard with distorted stories that must function in untruths and generalities (Davies and Womack 64).

Bertha's voice is silenced, the gaps are filled by Rochester's biased version of events, yet in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette assumes the role of story-teller and she finally gets her story through to the reader. She is no longer the prey of the male, oppressive text. Although it might be expected, Rochester is not silenced in Rhys's text, he is allowed to give his version of events, even within this text, thus he is not a victim of Rhys's text, as Bertha was of Brontë's. Thus, "*Wide Sargasso Sea* completes a woman's sentence (...) The completed sentence is a metaphor emphasizing the relation of the woman's muted text to that of the dominant text of our culture" (Harrison 130).

What is achieved in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a "parallel history of victimisation," as Paul Ricoeur would have it, since its aim seems to be "to memorize the victims of history – the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten" (Ricoeur 10). If the general tendency of history is to celebrate the victors and ignore the victims, what is left behind, not remembered, is lost (Ricoeur 10-11). The prequel to *Jane Eyre* attempts to save those victims from oblivion and achieves a portrayal of the Creole woman, not beast-like and lunatic, but as a coherent identity which has been driven to madness.

As previously mentioned, the Creole identity and the English one are barely able to communicate across worlds since their mutually exclusive backgrounds are fixed and seen as unreal dreams: "These "dreams", Dominica and England, are blatantly opposed" (Harrison 141):

"Is it true," she said, "that England is like a dream? (...) This place London is like a cold, dark dream sometimes."  
 "Well," I answered annoyed, "that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream" (WSS 142).

The fundamental incompatibility of the two major characters (Gregg in Frickey 158) is depicted from the very beginning of their acquaintance with each other, mainly through the lack of understanding of each other's context and background. At the convent, Antoinette colours her silk roses for needlework class: "We can colour the roses as we choose and mine are green, blue and purple. Underneath I will write my name in fire red" (WSS 44), whereas, while on their way to the honeymoon house at Granbois, Rochester feels overwhelmed by the very strong colours characteristic of Dominican landscapes: "Everything was too much (...) Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red" (WSS 59). Antoinette's choice of colours for her roses is emotional rather than natural, since these colours are integral part of Dominica and Antoinette, however they are strongly rejected by Rochester, thus prefiguring his later rejection of Antoinette. Consequently, "the text underscores the crucially different formation of the Englishman and the West Indian woman" (Gregg in Frickey 158).

The dreams as well as other elements in the text foreshadow Antoinette's destruction. The crushed wreath of flowers at Granbois the first night of their honeymoon, and the orchid Rochester tramples in the mud after reading Daniel's letter are both signs of the impending crushing of Antoinette's spirit. Antoinette's destiny seems to parallel her mother's fate: marriage to an Englishman, having her spirit broken, dying twice – initially by going mad. To a certain extent, the parrot at Coulibri, who dies on fire while trying to fly away because his wings had been clipped, epitomizes Antoinette's destiny. Her own wings have been clipped by being a Creole character in a colonial novel and by being read as a colonial subject. The fire imagery of the novel, starting with the fire at Coulibri and Antoinette's writing her own name in fire red, which prefigures her tragic destiny, and the flames she is so fond of observing at Thornfield Hall, as well as the red dress in the final part of the novel seems to designate both her dreadful ending and the passion and anger lodged within her.

In conclusion, the Creolization of the Self is achieved through the transformation of the colonial Other into a postcolonial Self, a re-imagining which voices the muted speech of the oppressed. The Victorian text is full of stereotyping and a gaze of otherness directed at the oppressed Creole, while the gaps of silence left by Bertha's missing voice are filled with distorted versions of events. The Postmodern text achieves a "parallel history of victimization", thus giving a voice to Antoinette as a representative of "the other side". The empowered Creole woman assumes her identity as an inappropriate signifier of

colonial discourse, re-imagining the self in a postcolonial context in which it may be heard. The initial assumption of Creole blood as a source of Bertha's madness is resolved in Antoinette's life as a series of events leading to a tragic ending. The rewriting of Antoinette as Bertha is a result of imperialism, which determines her identity. Bertha's identity as the colonizer's imaginary and unspoken Other is questioned and undermined and she, while empowered by her newly found identity, is able to accept and fulfill her destiny. The lenses through which she is seen and interpreted according to western values are rendered useless, thus the colours of Elsewhere are no longer necessary in depicting her.

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