

# The Analysis of Antoinette's Tragic Fate in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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## Abstract

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is the masterpiece of British woman writer Jean Rhys. This novel is regarded as prequel of *Jane Eyre*. Antoinette is the heroine of the novel, who has a tragic fate which arises great sympathy among readers. The aim of this paper is to explore the causes that lead to her death, through analyzing the social context of her life, her growing family environment as well as her personal life path.

## Keywords

*Wide Sargasso Sea*, Tragic Fate, Antoinette, Jean Rhys

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## 1. Introduction

Jean Rhys (1890-1979) is a contemporary British writer, born in Caribbean. Her father was a Welsh doctor and her mother a white Creole—a white West Indian. Rhys got educated at the Convent School. At the age of 16, she left the island for England and lived with her aunt Clarice. She lived in England and France for the rest of her life. She went back to the island only once in 1936, but it seemed that she never found a real home and never became comfortable in her environment. She had three marriage experiences during her life. After the first marriage failed, she began living on writing. The English writer Ford Madox gave her much support and encouraged her to write. Jean Rhys' novels mostly focus on female survival and the bitter quest for identity. Her heroines have something in common. The female characters in her novels are mostly marginalized in western patriarchal society and exiled both culturally and sexually. They are often tragic heroines who love blindly and completely. Love turns quickly into business arrangements, with women inevitably dependent on men. To some extent, her novels are the portrayal of her own life. Her major works are *The Left Bank* (1927), *Postures* (1928), *After Leaving Mr. Machenzie* (1930) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). After *Good Morning, Midnight*, Jean Rhys disappeared. The publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966 ended an almost total silence. The book won the

Royal Society of Literature Award and WH Smith Literary Award, which brought Rhys to public attention after being obscure of twenty-seven years. The novel, as Rhys' best and most successful one, was named by *Times* as one of the 100 best English language novels since 1923, which helps her establish the special status of the 20th century in the history of English literature.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is divided into three parts. The first part is told in the heroine's own words. In the second the young Mr. Rochester describes his arrival in the West Indies, his marriage and its disastrous sequel. The last part is once more narrated by his wife, but the scene is England and she writes from the attic room in Thornfield Hall. Antoinette is Rochester's mad wife, who is grown in the West Indies in the 19th century. Her father died when she was young. Due to the natives of pure hatred and discrimination against whites, Antoinette's childhood was filled with lonely, poverty, anxiety and fear. After their house was destroyed and her young brother died in the fire set by the blacks, her mother was crazy. Under the arrangement of her stepfather, Antoinette married Rochester. But Rochester did not love her and he accepted the marriage just for thirty thousand pound dowry. The honeymoon had not finished, Antoinette was abandoned by her husband. Antoinette protested at first, but without success. And then falling into despair, she had alcoholism and became numb. Later, she was brought back to Britain by Rochester and imprisoned as a madman in the attic of Thornfield. Her nervous thoroughly collapsed, and finally she set fire to the house and ended her life.

## 2. Literature Review

Rhys' masterpiece, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, has become one of the most intensively studied and insistently explored English novels. It has captured the world's attention and aroused a heated discussion among the literature circle. Many critics conducted a further research on this novel. The literary value of Jean Rhys' works and the importance of the writer have been recognized by other writers and critics. A lot of critics and scholars, home and abroad, have mainly analyzed and interpreted the text from various perspectives, such as feminist criticism, postcolonial criticism, deconstructionist criticism, anthropology, psychoanalysis criticism, and archetypal criticism. C. M. Mardorossian (1999) discussed the novel from the perspective of double decolonization and feminist criticism [1]. D. Porter (1976) made a comparison between the heroines and victims of *Jane Eyre* [2]. Some put great emphasis on its writing style or pay more attention to the identity of Antoinette, while others have tried to compare the similarities and differences between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*. In addition to the above mentioned overseas studies, Chinese scholars have also contributed a lot to the study of this novel. For example, Liping Chen (2013) has focused on the identity crisis undergone by Antoinette Cosway and Edward Rochester to illustrate the phantasmatic nature of White identity [3]. Jiong Tang (2011) has analyzed the heroine of the novel from the perspective of self psychological development [4]. Deming Zhang (2006) tries to explore the same fate both individual and cultural identity through identity narrating [5]. In addition, Jing Huang (2008) has adopted the theories of Lacan's mirror image and sexual relations to explore the heroine's personalities and the reasons for her madness [6].

Taken together, up to now, although a number of studies have been conducted to explore different topics in the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, very few studies are dealt with the causes of Antoinette' tragic fate.

In this paper, we will try to explore the causes that lead Antoinette to death, through the social context of her life, her growing family environment as well as her personal characters defects.

## 3. The Social Context of Antoinette' Living

Antoinette was born in a slave-owning family in Jamaica in the nineteenth century. At that time, the West Indies abolitionist movement is surging, the uprising black slaves rise to fight their equal rights. Her father, a slaveholder, died suddenly. Antoinette and her family's lives were very hard. As a white Creole in West Island of Jamaica, the intermediate between Blacks and pure whites, the heroine Antoinette was doomed to suffer confusion of self identity. On one hand, they were marginalized by the white rulers. On the other hand, they were suffered hatred from the blacks. They became veritable social class "sandwich class". "*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 me singing, 'Go away white cockroach, go away, go away'. I walked fast, but she walked fast.... 'Nobody wants you. Go away'*" (J. Rhys, 1966) [7]. The blacks called her "white nigger" or "white cockroach", and told her "nobody wants her". It's like a curse that deeply rooted in Antoinette's heart. As the social conflicts were intensified, the white rulers chose to leave, but the native mestizo whites from Martinique had no way to go,

most of them still lived here, their homeland. Antoinette grew up in the chaos. She could not enjoy the material life of a wealthy family. She suffered the hardships and vicissitudes of life at the young age. She had no friends, either. The people around her were hostile. Since people are connected with the whole society, they have mutual influence. The role of the community is dominant and decisive. To some extent, the personal destiny is in the hands of the society. If Antoinette was not born in this drastically changed society, her fate might be completely reversed. The slavery is the root of inequality of the West Indies in the nineteenth century. The abolition of slavery is the historical trend. Antoinette, as the daughter of the declined slaveholder, is doomed to disappear with the slavery. It is not unexpected of her to become the victim of the social contradictions.

#### 4. The Growing Family Environment

Antoinette's family relationship is far more complicated than normal ones. Her birth father, Cosway, indulged in sensual pleasures, was a slaveholder. After the death of his original wife, Antoinette's father married Annette, a beauty, who was much younger than him. They gave birth to two kids, Antoinette and Pierre. After the marriage, Cosway still persisted in his bad habits and made merry all day. Consequently, he died from the slave revolution. His son, Pierre was born with cretinism which made him stumble and inarticulate. Later on, he died from a fire igniting in his farmland when slave riot spread. After her son's death, Annette suffered from a breakdown and went mad.

An indulged of father, an aborted brother and an insane mother are all Antoinette's beloved relatives. The tragic fate of the family had great influences on little Antoinette's life. Since then, the whole family was cursed, even her neighbours and servants, which tortured her emotionally. Her mother remarried Mason soon. Besides, Antoinette had a half brother called Alexander Cosway. However, they had rare contacts. Sandi, son of her brother, was even older than her. She also had an elder stepbrother called Richard Mason who played a key role in Antoinette's marriage.

In this family, Antoinette didn't get enough attention and care. Her mother devoted much of her time to the sick son, looked after him and sent for a doctor, thus paid little attention to her. "*But she pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her ... I was a little afraid of her*" (J. Rhys, 1966) [7]. Antoinette's mother was unwilling to spend time with Antoinette, so Antoinette was always alone with no friends to communicate. Compared with her mother, her stepfather Mason treated her very well. He went to the cloister from time to time, paying a visit to Antoinette and bringing her presents. On the eve of dying, he even left half of his legacy to stepdaughter and another half to his real son Richard Mason.

In general, Antoinette lost her father at an early age, she didn't have a complete family and was lacking in care and warmth. Such tragedies as brother's death and mother's insanity kept repeating in this family, which gloomed Antoinette's childhood. As the famous psychologist Freud pointed out, childhood has immeasurable influence on people's life and is source of happiness and painfulness when people become adults. Antoinette experienced too much separation between loved ones in life or death at an early age. In addition, her lack of family was a realistic source of her misfortune. Adversity coupled with misfortune gloomed her totally and nearly suffocated her.

#### 5. Antoinette's Characters Defects and the Inequality with Rochester

Antoinette didn't get love from her parents. She was a lonely girl, who had no friend. The people around her were all hostile to her, for her special identity. After she had grown up, she attempted to find some comfort in her white husband. To her, the marriage was the only way to change her present condition. She was very dependent on her husband, although she did not know him. At that time, Rochester was the backbone of her life. But Rochester accepted the marriage just for the money rather than the love. A marriage without love is doomed to be a tragedy.

Besides, the tomb of marriage between Antoinette and Rochester rests on racial inequality and gender inequality. On the one hand, Rochester is representative of the metropolitan state while Antoinette is the representative of the colony. For Antoinette, she has identity crisis. As a white Creole, Antoinette is neither treated as part of the black slave community nor accepted as part of European, a lack of belonging. And the problem of displacement and a shaky sense of one's own identity are already well established in the first part of the novel, long before the marriage takes place: "*...a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here*

before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (J. Rhys, 1966). From this, we can see that Antoinette was living in the crevice, which is one reason that she is inferior to Rochester in identity. To Rochester, he has the noble identity of being an English gentleman although he takes little possession of money. His noble status is a determining factor that he can play a leading role in marriage. Rochester regards the black people in the West Indies with great loathing. Antoinette's insanity, infidelity, and drunkenness are the result of his misguided belief that madness is in her blood and that she was part of the scheme to have him married blindly. Being a seemingly noble English gentleman, he had undesirable prejudice against Antoinette. To him, she seems to be simply another aspect of the West Indies' otherness. Rochester is not only a noble Englishman but also a colonist, while Antoinette is just a woman living on the edge of being accepted either by the black people or by the white people. They are totally different in thoughts and behaviors. Therefore, their marriage is doomed to a failure.

On the other hand, there is no gender equality between Antoinette and Rochester. Although Antoinette has a relatively amount of money, she is too weak and too dependent on men that she finally loses everything, including freedom. Throughout the story, we can find that Antoinette is virtually defenseless. She rarely protects herself, like when she visits her mother (who she knows is undependable and unloving) and goes to her mother with love, only to be rejected yet again. She has a similar episode with Rochester. Sex is Antoinette and Rochester's only form of communication and they are communicating only their lust and desire for each other, not love. Sadly, Antoinette hopes their desire for each other, which is so powerful, will develop over time into love. But Rochester is not interested in loving Antoinette. From a feminist viewpoint, it is easy to see Rochester as simply cold and cruel, but he is sorry that there is a lack of genuine communication in their relationship. Rochester is unable to love what he sees as an object, a possession. He is also unwilling to make any effort to get to know Antoinette, to understand and love her. He begins to call her "Bertha", signaling the beginning of his separating himself from her (ironically he tells Antoinette he likes to call her Bertha because it is a name dear to him). As readers, we are immediately made nervous by this new name, not only do we sense Rochester's impending erasure of Antoinette, but we associate the name Bertha with the madwoman he will lock up in the attic of Thornfield Hall. He was willing to get married to Antoinette with a purpose that he could possess her 3 thousand pounds left by her stepfather. He was the one who could sell his soul just to satisfy his greed. "*Thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. ...I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain*" (J. Rhys, 1966) [7]. So we can see that Antoinette is a typical woman who suffered from man's imperialistic power at that time. She is only regarded by her husband as a source of finance and a subordinated object, having no say in family affairs. Thus, it is extremely hard for her to break this stereotype to gain the security she has long been dying for.

## 6. Conclusion

People are often beyond the control of the fate of their own, especially for a woman who was born in the declined slave-owning family. Society, family and individual factors, all these totally determine Antoinette's tragic fate. She is a tragic figure. She gets no love from her family at the young age. Being the daughter of a slaveholder, she is cursed and hated by the blacks. She has no friends to communicate with. She is lonely. When she has grown up, marriage is the only way to change her life condition, so she has great expectation of her husband. Unfortunately, she marries a man who does not love her. Her husband is an English man. At that time, they are very different in all aspects. They have racial inequality and gender inequality. Their marriage is doomed to be a tragedy. After Antoinette finds that Rochester has an affair with her servant, she is then locked up in an attic all day and her mentality is breakdown completely. Thus, abandoned by her husband is the direct cause that makes Antoinette fall into despair and set the fire to end the life.

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