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# *A Language of Loneliness: Spatial Confinement and the Revolt of Textual Selves in Jean Rhys's* Wide Sargasso Sea

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# A Language of Loneliness: Spatial Confinement and the Revolt of Textual Selves in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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*Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys's 1966 novel, positions itself as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* that attempts to address a gap in the nineteenth-century narrative. Rhys's intertextual approach establishes a dialogue between the early Victorian era and the mid-twentieth century, and furthers the novel's primary concern of being an exercise in literary re-visioning. Rhys superimposes the twentieth-century imperatives of postcolonial, gender, and feminist theories onto the historically revered — yet politically contested — space of Brontë's novel. The re-visioning in *Wide Sargasso Sea* thus inscribes feminist and postcolonial concerns into the Victorian narrative and offers the text a renewed narrative conscience informed by the characters' personal, cultural, and spatial experiences. Rhys removes the obscure character of Bertha Mason from Brontë's attic in England and recasts her as Antoinette Cosway by relocating her to the Caribbean islands.

From the contemporary vantage point of enforced isolation, *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s intricate engagement with the notion of space and mobility (or lack thereof) is accentuated. This paper identifies spatial confinement and consequent isolation as recurring and determinant factors in instituting the identity and selfhood of women. Drawing upon the theoretical framework crafted by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, the present study identifies Antoinette as the product of the material and metaphorical confinement to which she is subjected. It constitutes confinement, as articulated in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as the convergence of a triadic conception of the term and argues that Rhys's depiction of Antoinette is centred on the character's material entrapment and cultural isolation, which, in turn, are emblematic of the woman writer's loneliness within a decidedly 'masculine' literary enterprise. This triadic formulation is articulated in this paper, first, by examining Antoinette's physical engagement with space as a woman, before exploring the fundamental intersectionality of the experience as a result of her Creole identity. Finally,

these feminist and postcolonial perspectives converge within the textual space, which becomes the ground where women enact their defiant revolts.

**'A Uniquely Female Tradition': Women and Spatial Sensibilities**

The motif of confinement has long been employed in women's writing as a metaphor for their emotional, psychological, and creative isolation. However, the material insularity in which the metaphor is grounded implies the limitations to physical mobility that have equally characterised the condition of women across centuries. Women's writing is replete with images of entrapment, seclusion, and delimitation, which foreground an inherent nexus between gender and spatiality. Women's experiences of physical space and place project a significant and palpable influence on their creative and critical output. Their spatial sensibilities are informed by their historic disenfranchisement within patriarchal society, which is predicated on the opposition between the 'private' and 'public' spheres. The vocabulary of separate spheres is a popular conceptual framework used to define the condition of nineteenth-century women, particularly in the Western world: while men advanced into the public sphere of workplace, power, and politics, women were consigned to the private sphere of domestic and familial values. Literary representations show how the precepts and limitations of the private sphere deprived women of their agency, which they experienced as an intense form of isolation.

Physical confinement and spatial insularity thus predictably serve as primary inspiration for women's literary metaphors about stifling forces that attempt to restrict their existence and experiences.[1] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their study of nineteenth-century women's literature, identify spatial confinement of women — whether enforced or inevitable — as the result of patriarchal authority and conditioning. They note that since women are 'trapped in so many ways in the architecture — both the houses and the institutions — of patriarchy […] they express their claustrophobic rage by enacting rebellious escapes'.[2] *Wide Sargasso Sea* chronicles a woman's 'rebellious escape' from the confines of

[1] Space plays an important role in the construction of all identities, particularly those of the marginalised; hence, such literary expressions would probably be equally true of all people within such spaces that have been coded to deprive them of power and security. This paper, however, limits its focus to the confinement and related experiences of women.

[2] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 85. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

patriarchy — both literally and figuratively. Antoinette's overwhelming feeling of entrapment fundamentally emerges from the limitations of her physical mobility, which is heightened by virtue of her restricted life as a result of her gender.

From a feminist, geocritical perspective, it can be argued that Antoinette is caught in a conspiracy between spatiality and gender, which attempts to relegate her existence within the particular spaces prescribed by patriarchy or by forces that can be isolated as 'masculine'. *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s acute spatial awareness is characteristic of its literary identity as both a reworking of a canonical Gothic text as well as a novel with a distinctive postcolonial consciousness. By incorporating gender as a variable, Rhys employs Antoinette and, by extension, her incarnation as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, to articulate the novel's nineteenth-century space from the vantage point of twentieth-century feminist discourses. The tripartite narrative structure of the novel traces a spatial trajectory across physical structures and national landscapes, contributing to an overarching sense of claustrophobia in the narrative. Antoinette's distinctly female voice brackets her husband's narrative, juxtaposing markedly different interactions between space and gender and highlighting how 'narrating response to a particular room or landscape becomes a character's major way of communicating half-conscious judgements, emotional responses, [and] cultural identity'.[3] The novel's focus on confinement suggests that women's experience of spaces as 'stifling' also traces a similar trajectory: Antoinette moves from the restrictive freedom allowed by her family's ostensibly voluntary isolation to an absolute detachment from spatial sensibilities when she is incarcerated in the attic of *Jane Eyre*'s Thornfield Hall.

Rhys retroactively dramatizes the pervasive preoccupation with imprisonment and escape that Gilbert and Gubar label as 'a uniquely female tradition' of nineteenth-century literature (p. 85). Gilbert and Gubar, of course, derive their eponymous figure of the madwoman in the attic from *Jane Eyre*. In their analysis of Brontë's text they identify this figure as the secret self of Jane, the Gothic heroine, contending that her incarceration in the attic, consequently, reflects the subliminal feelings of isolation and confinement endured by women of the nineteenth century. They note that *Jane Eyre* captures Brontë's awareness of the 'female realities within her and around her: confinement, orphanhood, starvation, rage even to madness' (p. 336). By expanding this implicit observation into her central argument in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys shifts the focus to these 'female realities', humanising the

[3] Elaine Savory, 'People in and out of Place: Spatial Arrangements in Wide Sargasso Sea', in *Jean Rhys* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 133–51 (p. 137).

canonical 'madwoman' in the process. Antoinette's character is constructed along spatial coordinates that chart her journey from Coulibri Estate, through Granbois, to England. The novel transpires in the ambivalent spaces that emerge at the juncture of domesticity and wilderness. It contrasts Antoinette's changing experience of these spaces with those of her unnamed English husband's, thereby interrogating the constructed nature of both spatiality and gender. This paper approaches spatiality and gender as two mutually dependent, socially constructed concepts, which interact to constitute individual identities. Antoinette is a victim of the White male institution that designates women's experiences within hierarchical binaries that split physical space along the oppositions of inside/outside, safety/danger, or female/male. Rhys's neo-Victorian text derives a spatial awareness from Brontë's Gothic narrative and ascribes its protagonist with fears and anxieties characteristic of the conventional entrapped heroine of the parent genre.

Gilbert and Gubar isolate motifs of confinement and related anxieties in the seemingly disparate genres of the female Gothic and novels of manners (p. 83). They note that the proliferation of constricting enclosures in women's writing of the nineteenth century is implicative of their discomfort within the spaces they inhabit and their inability to identify with these spaces. This could be interpreted as a consequence of the gendering of space; individual subjectivities are constituted through a negotiation of spatial and gender relations, which emphasise — and often reinforce — difference and hegemonic operations. In human society, the built environment embodies and physically manifests the prescriptions of social and cultural constructions that invariably favour and privilege the man. The concomitant limitations to women's access, mobility, and orientation inform their experience of physical space, which, as evidenced in their literary imaginations, is more intimate and immediate.

This overlaying of constricting patriarchal definitions makes it impossible to dissociate space from gendered connotations, thus rendering it oppressive and unaccommodating for women. Due to this pervasive gendering, physical spaces begin to exude a strangeness that evokes fear, anxiety, and despair in women. While the claim that all space is made strange for women might seem extreme, women's very awareness of leading a subjugated existence within the female body prevents them from relating to their immediate surroundings, the experience of which itself enacts confinement. In this way, regardless of the nature of the physical space, women are unable to dissociate it from an unsettling sense of strangeness. As Rhys demonstrates in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, more spatial freedom cannot be equated with more safety, since women's embodiment as the Other means that these spaces are never truly

welcoming. Correspondingly, Gilbert and Gubar describe an integral correlation between the imagery of confinement in women's writing, women's disconcerting experience of spatiality, and their consistently subservient position within overlapping social hierarchies: 'imagery of entrapment expresses the woman writer's sense that she has been dispossessed precisely because she is so thoroughly possessed — and possessed in every sense of the word' (p. 84).

Rhys's Antoinette embodies this contradiction, which is expressed primarily through her associations with the space that immediately surrounds her. She engages with spatiality through the intervening medium of her gender and, thus, experiences contradictory emotions of anxiety and security within the spaces that ensure her insularity. As a young girl in Coulibri, cut off from the rest of the community, she is plagued by recurring nightmares symbolic of her relationship with the spaces that confine her. Waking up from a spatially perplexing nightmare, in which an unknown and unfriendly person follows her through an ambiguous forest, Antoinette tries to re-orient herself by affirming the materiality of familiar spaces: 'I am safe. There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss [...] I am safe, I am safe from strangers'.[4] In her dream, Antoinette attempts to distance herself from the strange, masculine presence that has invaded her space and, upon waking, feels the desperate need to ground herself in that space. Antoinette has this dream for the first time the night that their new English neighbours from Nelson's Rest visit her mother. In addition to foreshadowing the new national presence that would soon infringe upon Antoinette's life, her dream is portentous of the male order that is about to descend onto the female-led space of her household. The safety of this space is compromised when Antoinette's mother marries Mr Mason, enacting a new, gendered order within the space and recasting Antoinette as a confined subordinate. This gendering symbolises how women's safe enclaves are often translated into enclosures for entrapment and male possession within the patriarchal order.

The house in Coulibri Estate and the surrounding Caribbean wilderness are the only places where Antoinette is able to find a semblance of autonomy. However, the security which the space affords her in relation to her gender is rendered problematic by her liminal status as a Creole woman. Antoinette's family is isolated from the rest of the community, and her further estrangement within her own family reduces her to establishing a strained communion with the spaces that shield her. She begins to seek companionship in the tangible

[4] Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 1966) p. 9. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

and material objects that make up her confines: 'I was still babyish and sure that everything was alive, not only the river or the rain, but chairs, looking-glasses, cups, saucers, everything' (p. 17). Before Annette's marriage to Mr Mason brings overt patriarchal dynamics to Coulibri, the Estate can be located outside the limits set by the oppressive binaries of gender and spatiality. Antoinette's identity as a Creole woman allows her to experience the house and the wilderness as a continuum, without any delimiting boundaries, and her spatially-oriented recollections of Coulibri mark her 'childhood as taking place in a damaged Eden'.[5] While the Biblical garden of the Estate has long grown wild since the abolition of slave labour, the fire at Coulibri leads to the complete collapse of Antoinette's Eden and, consequently, the sense of security she associated with the cloistered space. The fire is also a climactic event suggestive of the shift in Antoinette's family's status as Creoles: with Annette's marriage to Mr Mason, a white Englishman, the family is afforded a rise in power and wealth, but their reintegration into the social hierarchy means they can no longer exist undisturbed as a result of their liminality. The Black population's hatred towards Antoinette's family becomes particularly vehement after their change in circumstances, eroding Coulibri's safety and resulting in the burning down of the house and the attack upon its inhabitants, at which point they are finally driven from the community.

After the fire at Coulibri, Antoinette is ferried from one space of female confinement to another. Her perception of enclosed, insular spaces soon changes from a sense of fleeting comfort, which she had earlier linked with the familiar confines of her home, to a constricted feeling of frustration. Antoinette's identification with space changes because, with the loss of her home, she loses her agency, and her experience of space is now directed by the male figures in her life. Rhys underlines this gendering of space by briefly cloistering her protagonist within the distinctly 'female' walls of a convent. Echoing Gilbert and Gubar's observation that women are 'prisoners of their own gender' (p. 85), Rhys constructs Antoinette's life at the convent in stark contrast to the life she enjoyed at Coulibri. While ostensibly a refuge for women, the convent is depicted as a space that is complicit in the patriarchal mission of socialisation of women. Antoinette makes a crucial distinction that illustrates the paradox intrinsic to how women experience space: 'I felt bolder, happier, more free. But not so safe' (p. 33). Antoinette's initiation into the social process of gender conditioning inside the convent is, as Mona Fayad writes, 'a constant reminder that although

[5] Savory, p. 136.

the walls of the cloister, like the walls of Coulibri, form a female space which is enclosing and protective, these same walls can turn against woman by turning into a prison'.[6]

At Coulibri, Antoinette derived her notion of safety by accepting the limits of her space that she set for herself. However, as she enters a realm defined by patriarchal values, her confinement is then enforced, which necessitates rebellious and subversive actions. Yet Antoinette does not initiate these actions during her time in the convent; the changing nature of her confinement becomes clearer to her only after Mr Mason's final visit to the convent, prefigured by the realisation that she could be taken from within this space and married against her will. This realisation is marked by a recurrence of her nightmare in which she is again accompanied by a strange, hateful male figure who tries to control her movement through space. When Mr Mason exclaims that Antoinette cannot be hidden away her whole life, she wonders 'Why not?' (p. 33). By removing Antoinette from the protective enclave she has built around herself, Rhys corroborates Gilbert and Gubar's comment that 'to be hidden, to be confined, to be secret is to be secreted' (p. 83). Antoinette's rebellion after her marriage is a protest against the social limits set by the patriarchal order, which she grows to resent, since for the women of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, spatial freedom does not ensure liberation from the constricting hold of their own gender.

Antoinette's marriage of convenience to an unnamed Englishman, implied to be *Jane Eyre*'s Rochester, alters the way in which she relates to spatial insularity and isolation. The newlyweds move into Granbois, a place reminiscent of Coulibri in its seclusion and connection to nature. However, Antoinette's experience of the place is soon tainted by her husband's revulsion of it, as he begins to revile his wife and associate the house with her. When he has physical relations with one of the servants at Granbois, Antoinette feels intensely betrayed only because she has lost another 'safe' space to male violation. She vehemently confronts her husband and says, 'It's not the girl, not the girl. But I love this place and you have made into a place I hate [...] I hate it now like I hate you' (p. 97). Gilbert and Gubar note that the figure of the confined woman, whether 'enclosed', 'enshrined', or 'imprisoned', inevitably engages in a rebellion against her prescribed spatial limits as a step towards rebelling against being duty-bound within the masculine space (p. 84). Antoinette initiates this rebellion by refusing to conform to her husband's expectations, which fuels her mounting frustrations against the dynamics of gender hierarchies that are imposed onto

[6] Mona Fayad, 'Unquiet Ghosts: The Struggle for Representation in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 34 (1988), 437–52 (p. 442).

previously familiar spaces. However, she is completely severed from the comfort yielded by familiar spaces once she is forcefully displaced from the Caribbean to England and incarcerated in Thornfield Hall's cold, dark attic — the ultimate symbol of alienation and confinement.

Antoinette's anxieties against enforced confinement culminate in the burning down of Thornfield Hall, an utterly alien space symbolising masculine pride and possession. Rhys represents Antoinette's incarceration in Thornfield's attic as the total collapse of spatial security afforded to women and its burning down as a violent escape from patriarchal control. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys dramatises a distinctly feminist interpretation of space, aligning with Gilbert and Gubar's critique that Gaston Bachelard's pioneering treatise on spatiality, *The Poetics of Space,* largely accommodates the male perspective. Bachelard approaches interior space as innately 'felicitous' and specifically elevates the attic as the site of rational experience: 'Up near the roof all our thoughts are clear. In the attic it is a pleasure to see the bare rafters of the strong framework'.[7] However, Antoinette's imprisonment in the attic shows that for a woman, the same space can have debilitating implications, making rational thinking impossible and rendering protest and escape inevitable.

**'Incendiary Impulses': Postcolonial Overlapping and Intersectional Intricacies**

The material conception of confinement, which highlights the system of gender domination, can also be extended to encompass racial and cultural systems of oppression. Rhys's re-visioning of the 'madwoman' in Brontë's attic as a Creole woman reveals the postcolonial dimensions of the feminist interpretation of her incarceration. Rhys links her feminist project with the imperialist and colonial enterprise, thereby implicitly commenting upon the homogeneity of the second wave of feminist politics. This added layer of critical insight demands that the confinement and entrapment of female characters be read as emblematic of racial and ethnic subordination. Gilbert and Gubar's feminist venture in *The Madwoman in the Attic* has been critiqued by postcolonial scholars for neglecting to recognise the complex sets of differences that define literary and cultural feminism as inherently intersectional.

[7] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at how we Experience Intimate Places*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 18.

Female confinement, when examined at the juncture of violent oppression in relation to gender and race, expands the political potentialities of the enclosed space.

Susan Gubar notes that one of the criticisms levelled against their text by postcolonial critics was that '*The Attic* of [their] title should be identified as the site of the disenfranchised Third World female character on the borders of, or outside, Western civilization, not as that of the relatively privileged First World heroine' (p. xxxvi). While the 'privilege' of the White European woman, represented perhaps by Jane Eyre, does not negate their suffering at the hands of patriarchal power structure, the study of a Creole woman imprisoned in an attic in England requires that her marginality as a woman be analysed as compounded by her racial status within the Victorian colonial system.[8] The attic-bound madwoman's physical isolation is complemented by her cultural alienation and racial interstitiality that is instrumental in forging her identity as Rhys's Antoinette. Hence, from a postcolonial perspective, the motif of confinement can be approached through the intricacies of displacement, alienation, and isolation since the geopolitics of race becomes inextricably connected to gender and spatiality.

Rhys reimagines the isolation of women in the nineteenth century by writing a history for Brontë's neglected heroine that can be effectively located within the colonial history of the Caribbean islands. In her essay 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses the need to bridge the critical gulf between gender and imperialism and identifies this as a major deficiency in the argument posited by Gilbert and Gubar. Spivak reads *Wide Sargasso Sea* as '*Jane Eyre*'s reinscription', a text that does not merely glorify feminist individualism and subjectivity but remains cognizant of the imperialist paradigm within which Bertha Mason's character takes form.[9] Spivak argues that an isolationist approach that focuses on the nineteenth-century character exclusively as a victim of patriarchal oppression is a reductive exercise and amounts to an erasure of the overlapping layers of differences that stem from her identity as a White Creole. According to Spivak, such interpretations that confine Brontë's 'madwoman' within the sole purview of

[8] While Antoinette, being a White Creole, is afforded more privileges than her non-White counterparts in the Caribbean, her lack of European birth placed her at a lower rank in the racial hierarchy of the times. Antoinette faces social exclusion in the Caribbean in spite of her 'pure' European descent because she was, in Benedict Anderson's words, 'contaminated by a fatal place of birth' (p. 58). In the context of the White Creole in the Spanish Americas, Anderson notes that 'the accident of birth in the Americas consigned him to subordination [...] he was *irremediably* a creole. Yet how irrational his exclusion must have seemed!' (p. 58). See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).
[9] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 243–61 (p. 244).

women's studies are in danger of reading her account as 'the psychobiography of the militant female subject'.[10] Rhys's study of Antoinette's rebellious character as developing in response to her relationship with her English husband also positions him as a representative of the colonial enterprise. Thus, the attic space becomes an extension of the Caribbean 'othered' space upon which the English mansion exerts its superiority, and Antoinette's imprisonment translates into the colonial subjugation of 'native' subjects. The imposed insularity of Coulibri that Antoinette grows to accept by virtue of its familiarity, the alienation she feels at Granbois, and the absolute displacement and constricting limits she is forced to endure in England are spatial depictions of her experience of colonisation and its ramifications from a distinctly interstitial location.

The power and control that Antoinette's husband exerts upon his wife in order to exhibit his masculine privilege cannot be divorced from his superior position within the racial hierarchy conceived to further the colonial enterprise. The male characters of the novel engage in a callous neglect of women within controlled spaces as an exercise of their sexual and spatial dominance. It is a brutal approach towards marking difference that also manifests in the colonial powers' interaction with the land and people of the regions they sought to conquer. Antoinette's father's death is discussed by people as a consequence of his loss of control over both the plantation and women, thereby implying a parallel between men's possessiveness over the 'trophies' of their exploits. The onus of Cosway's death is also, unjustifiably, placed upon his wife Annette, whose very identity is precariously framed within the colonial and masculine paradigms: 'Emancipation troubles killed old Cosway? Nonsense — the estate was going downhill for years before that. He drank himself to death [...] And all those women! She never did anything to stop him — she encouraged him' (p. 11). Like Annette, Antoinette is also subject to systemic oppression by virtue of her gender and her race, which is rendered suspect by both the White colonisers as well as the newly emancipated slaves of the Caribbean.

Gilbert and Gubar interpret the recurring image of claustrophobic entrapment in nineteenth-century women's writing as an expression of their social confinement, the escape from which requires the creation of a 'mad double'. They note a duality between a woman's spatial limits and the limits of her literary achievement through the character of the mad double since it is 'through the violence of the double that the female author enacts her own

[10] Spivak, p. 245.

raging desire to escape male houses and male texts [...] [and] articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be contained' (p. 85). From this vantage point, Bertha Mason is often read as the mad double of Jane Eyre, transgressing the limits of enclosures that the White European woman is unable to escape.

An intersectional feminist approach that accommodates Bertha's postcolonial heritage, however, identifies Brontë's character as the mad double of her own past self who is christened Antoinette by Rhys. Rhys writes a history of confinement and isolation for Antoinette, which she posits as the stimulus that instils in her an acute craving for escaping the limits set upon her by controlling figures. Spivak observes that, in the final pages of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette enacts a violent escape from her confines precisely because she is forced to identify with 'her *self* as her Other, Brontë's Bertha'.[11] Rhys operates along Spivak's formulation of the Other within Antoinette herself and couples it with Gilbert and Gubar's notion of the mad double, thereby reconfiguring Antoinette's confinement as a means of staging an escape from a colonial and masculine space that reduces her to the Other.

Hence, in addition to Spivak's stance that Bertha, as a colonial subject, sets Thornfield Hall on fire and kills herself 'so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction', it can be argued that Rhys employs the same scenario for the emergence of a rebellious mad double.[12] Rhys's mad double confronts the anxieties, frustrations, and rage of her own past self — Antoinette. Although Gilbert and Gubar, from their 'individualistic' perspective, position Bertha as the mad double of Jane Eyre, interrogating her at the intersection of gender and race reveals that she embodies within herself 'the tension between parlor and attic, the psychic split between the lady who submits to male dicta and the lunatic who rebels' (p. 86). Rhys ends her novel with an evocative proclamation from Antoinette: 'Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do' (p. 126). Hence, the re-visioning of the 'madwoman' in *Wide Sargasso Sea* also restages the burning down of the English mansion as her final act of overt rebellion against the masculine and colonial powers and as a rejection of the imposed identity of Bertha Mason. Here, Antoinette's 'self-immolation' is not presented as a sacrifice towards the imperialist and patriarchal cause but as

[11] Spivak, p. 250.
[12] Ibid., p. 251.

the escape of a Creole woman's mad double from her constricting confines — a liberating act that serves as a release of repressed rage against her individual and institutional captors.[13]

A spatially oriented reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals that Rhys evokes the loneliness and isolation of Antoinette's past to assert that her character cannot be contained within a singular framework of domination. Antoinette's husband tries to superimpose English values and masculine demands onto the distinctly Caribbean and female space that his wife tries to demarcate for herself. The plurality of her identity as a Creole woman is in danger of being obliterated by her husband's determination 'to resolve Antoinette's ambivalence first into the singular tones of English womanhood, and second [...] into the equally singular tones of a savage Otherness'.[14] However, Antoinette's isolation and confinement solidify her interstitial positioning and heighten her own sense of ambivalence, which she tactfully employs to mark her protest.

Rhys not only writes Antoinette's protests into the actions of her character, but also allows it to direct the structure and language of her narrative. The juxtaposition of Antoinette's fragmented, disorderly narrative against her husband's attempt at a regulated, linear narrative suggests that she aims to enact her resistance even through the textual space. Antoinette's narrative self implicitly disregards notions of singular history and linear temporality, thereby destabilising powerful reference points of the patriarchal and colonial institutions.[15] Rhys's Antoinette engages in an act of reclamation of her name, language, and identity by transgressing the boundaries of her confines, which are policed by the dictums of the White male figure of authority. *Wide Sargasso Sea* reclaims Antoinette from the 'madwoman' of *Jane Eyre* by rendering her husband, Edward Rochester, nameless throughout the course of its contrapuntal reading of Brontë's classic. By narrating her own story, Antoinette reclaims the authorial power she was denied in *Jane Eyre* and re-asserts women's control over language itself.

[13] Spivak, p. 251.
[14] Laura E. Ciolkowski, 'Navigating the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43 (1997), 339–59 (p. 342).
[15] Carine Melkom Mardorossian, 'Double [De]Colonization and the Feminist Criticism of *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *College Literature*, 26 (1999), 79–95 (p. 81).

**'This Cardboard House': Textual Confinement, Resistance, and Reactions**

*Wide Sargasso Sea* portrays how the metaphorical undercurrent that is observed in women's narratives of confinement can have immediate and long-lingering historical and literary implications. Rhys's novel can be read as a fictionalisation of Gilbert and Gubar's theoretical proposition of women writers' 'anxiety of authorship'. *The Madwoman in the Attic* mounts a challenge against Harold Bloom's distinctly male-centred approach towards literary history in his theory of 'anxiety of influence'.[16] By situating the notion of confinement as her focal point, Rhys implicitly theorises that the parallels between the systemic subjugation of women and land can be extended to a gendered conception of and control over the spaces of language and literature itself. Gilbert and Gubar note that their attempt to locate a literary history for the woman writer reveals her to be an extremely lonely and isolated persona who is deprived of 'influence' since she has to induct herself into a tradition that is almost exclusively masculine and patriarchal. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the woman writer continues to retain the imagery of spatial confinement because she is trapped in a literary system that 'attempt[s] to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self — that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity' (p. 48).

The disjunction between how a woman writer defines herself and how she is constructed instils in her a more fundamental notion of 'anxiety of authorship' because the masculine literary order conspires to ensure that she is completely isolated from a credible history and lineage from which she can derive influence. Within this framework, Antoinette's isolation, alienation, and entrapment adopt a metatextual dimension, and her escape from her lonely confines becomes 'a revolt against patriarchal literary authority' in order to 'actively seek a *female* precursor'.[17] From a literary historical viewpoint, the re-visioning of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is grounded in Rhys's inscription of a past for Brontë's elusive Bertha, which can be read as a vociferous legitimisation of her actions as recorded in the English literary canon.

[16] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Bloom alludes to Valentinus, a second-century Gnostic speculator, in his prologue titled 'It was a great marvel that they were in the Father without knowing Him'. Bloom's prologue situates his theory within the paternalistic tradition by establishing the Muse as a female body upon which the male poet 'begets' his art. In their feminist critique, Gilbert and Gubar adopt a more primary approach and seek to (re)define the woman as an author in her own right.
[17] Gilbert and Gubar, p. 49.

The woman writer of the nineteenth century, and her descendants of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is engaged in a constant quest for 'sisterly precursors' as she operates on a scene governed by the patriarchal literary authority. She feels an urgent need to situate herself within a tradition that is accommodative of women's experiences or, in the absence of one, to establish it herself. Rhys dramatises this struggle through Antoinette, whose interstitiality distances her from either of the two communities and leaves her without a tradition to fall back upon. The inauguration of a new literary tradition for women is invariably coupled with an intense case of 'anxiety of authorship' since women writers have been socialised, within the patriarchal paradigm, to feel inferior to their male counterparts. Declaring and reinforcing oneself as among the founders of a literary subculture demands a self-definition based on women's autonomy and authority that is detached from the existing patriarchal tradition. Rhys accomplishes this feat through Antoinette whose rebellions set her apart from the angelic docility of Jane Eyre as well as from the monstrous madness of Bertha, who can both be read as constructs of the patriarchal formula within which the woman writer continues to be entangled.

Rhys's Antoinette attempts to break free from her physical and literary patrilineage and hopes to recover or establish anew her own matrilinear literary and communal heritage. Gilbert and Gubar continue to employ the imagery of women's confinement when they note that the semblance of literary authority enjoyed by contemporary writers is a direct consequence of the fact that 'their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture' (p. 51). This struggle to emerge from the stifling literary confines in which the women writers are enclosed entails a striving to establish meaningful connections with their literary foremothers. Antoinette materially and metaphorically embodies this struggle as she grounds herself in her familiar spaces and attempts to repair her fractured relationship with her mother in order to counter the toxicity that percolates into her life from the controlling and authoritative male figures.

Rhys's conscious integration of a strained mother-daughter relationship within her narrative signals a deliberate challenge to the metaphor of literary paternity that Gilbert and Gubar associate with the Western canon. The parallels of Rhys's fictional mother-daughter relations extend to the woman writer's desperation to seek out her lost maternal forebears through the more primary, yet similarly strained, intertextual relation between *Wide Sargasso*

*Sea* and its 'mother' text *Jane Eyre*. Gilbert and Gubar note that the predominantly masculine literary history is 'coercive, imprisoning, fever-inducing' (p. 52). It is a constant, all-pervasive presence that tries to direct and condition a woman whenever she ventures into a creative endeavour to attest her authorial power. Antoinette has had multiple overbearing paternal figures — her biological father Mr Cosway, her stepfather Mr Mason, her stepbrother Richard, and even her husband. They are Rhys's fictional equivalent of Gilbert and Gubar's 'literary fathers' who torment, manipulate, censure, and even lie to the literary woman, thereby securing a controlling hold over her creativity (p. 53).

The entrapment felt by the woman writer due to the excess of a condescending masculine presence is emphasised by the acute deprivation of an alternative. Trying to locate a matrilineage, Antoinette constructs a past for herself through her mother Annette. Antoinette, as a child, tries to resist her mother's rejection of her daughter by trying to integrate Annette into her recollections of her past. Like the women writers of the nineteenth century, Antoinette tries to derive safety and comfort by inserting herself within a favourably constructed maternal heritage. Yet, Annette's 'madness' and her perception in the eyes of the community threatens to derail Antoinette's struggle to recover such a history, which — like the literary strength of women — has been subsumed by the patriarchal order. Antoinette narrates how her mother grew increasingly distanced from her, echoing the elusiveness of literary matrilineage: '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' (p. 123). Rhys reiterates the loneliness of the woman writer in history through Antoinette who experiences a fleeting sense of belonging only in Christophine. Christophine is emblematic of the occasional lone woman who has also tried — and failed — to establish a lasting literary tradition for her successors. The precariousness of the woman writer's situation is highlighted by Antoinette as she recollects that Christophine was able to 'cover me, hide me, keep me safe. But not any longer. Not any more' (p. 121).

*Wide Sargasso Sea* traces the trajectory of the woman writer's experiences as she tries to escape the confines of a decidedly male brand of cultural imperialism. By dramatising the real struggles of a lone woman writer within the repressive limits of an unaccommodating Western literary canon, Rhys aligns her protagonist with Elaine Showalter's agenda for

women to establish 'a literature of their own'.[18] Showalter posits the need for a 'female literature' within the purview of which 'articulation of women's experience', 'autonomous self-expression', and self-definition would be of primary import.[19] *A Literature of Their Own* attempts to delineate a literary tradition for women by expounding their self-definition as its unifying critical vocabulary. Rhys's novel follows in a similar vein to arrive at Antoinette's self-definition as a Creole woman who attempts to forge an identity independent of Bertha Mason, the 'madwoman'. Showalter foregrounds the female tradition as characterised by the 'evolution of women's self-awareness' regarding their position, which is a notion that finds resonance across the fragmentary history of any under-represented and oppressed group.[20]

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys uses the changing imagery of confinement to depict this evolution within Antoinette. The figure of Antoinette cannot be completely severed from her origins in Bertha Mason. Yet, her continued confinement and the persistent feeling of cultural isolation spanning the different stages in her life are representative of the recurring patterns in women's experiences, which are invariably rendered silent in the masculine formulation of literary history. Antoinette's disruptive narrative, punctuated by instances of near-absolute material or figurative entrapment, mirrors Showalter's observation that 'each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex'.[21] Showalter's conception of the female tradition — like Antoinette's understanding of her own spatial and social confinement — is a continuing process that women are engaged in while striving for self-definition within a masculine space.

The three sections of Rhys's novel progress through the three stages of women's writing that Showalter delineates — Feminine, Feminist, and Female. Antoinette also advances through these phases through renewed understandings of her isolation. The opening section of the novel that places Antoinette at Coulibri aligns with the Feminine phase. Showalter defines this phase in women's writing by virtue of its imitation and internalisation

[18] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 4. This paper follows Showalter's formulation of the 'female' literary phase, as described in her essay 'Towards a Feminist Poetics', wherein women writers eschew all forms of dependency and view 'female experience as the source of an autonomous art' (p. 36). One of the most popular alternatives to Showalter's notion is posited by Toril Moi in her essay 'Feminist, Female, Feminine', where she defines 'femaleness' purely 'as a matter of biology' (p. 117). See Toril Moi, 'Feminist, Female, Feminine', in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 117–32.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., p. 11.
[21] Ibid.

of the values and standards of the dominant tradition.[22] Antoinette's childhood perception and acceptance of Coulibri's isolation as inevitable is influenced by the socialising forces in her life. Her 'in-betweenness' causes her to resort to imitation and internalisation of cultural and gender roles. The second phase is marked by protest, advocacy of rights, and a demand for autonomy. Antoinette's life at Granbois with her English husband reflects rebellious actions that align with the Feminist phase, which Showalter locates as a subculture in women's writing as well as in the career of a single writer. Like the woman writer, Antoinette now recognises her isolation as imposed confinement and initiates resistance and protest against the domineering male imperialist figure she distinguishes in her husband.

The final section of Antoinette's narrative can be read as a fictional rendering of Showalter's Female phase that culminates in self-discovery. Antoinette's self-discovery within *Jane Eyre*'s attic reconciles her with her Caribbean past and endows her with a lucidity that allows her to distance herself from the canonised madwoman: 'It was then that I saw her — the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her' (p. 125). The 'gilt frame' of the looking-glass accentuates Antoinette's awareness that her imprisonment extends beyond her incarceration in the attic of Thornfield Hall. Antoinette's self-discovery allows her to transgress the superficial reflection of the 'madwoman' who looks back at her and to use the looking glass to arrive at her true self that lies beyond. Rhys's portrayal of Antoinette's progress through the three stages echoes Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of the looking-glass as a metaphorical gateway towards literary autonomy (p. 16). In a subtle evocation of metatextuality, Rhys's equation of the gilt frame to the 'cardboard covers' of Brontë's novel furthers the notion of spatial confinement into the fundamental relationship between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*.[23]

Metatextual readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveal that as Antoinette arrives at her self-discovery, at the textual level, Rhys's novel itself begins to emerge beyond the gilded frames and cardboard covers of the canonical text. In the concluding section of the novel, Rhys writes with a self-reflexivity that collapses the material confines of Antoinette's attic prison into the constricting pages of the parent text that has framed her as Bertha Mason. In the final pages of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette exposes the concealed parallels between the forms of systemic oppression inflicted by the male authority within the purview of gender, race, and literary history by alluding to the canonical text as the cardboard house in which she is

[22] Showalter, p. 13.
[23] Spivak, p. 250.

trapped: '[T]heir world [...] made of cardboard [...] that has no light in it [...] I wish I could see what is behind the cardboard. They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them' (p. 118). By setting fire to the 'cardboard house', Antoinette also sets fire to the canonical bindings that had imprisoned her in its English pages as a madwoman deprived of all agency.

The metatextual consciousness that Rhys employs in the final section of her novel is a deliberate attempt to remind her readers that Antoinette's story is a response to the oppressive dynamics of the canonical text. It disturbs the readers' complacency in *Jane Eyre* by forcing them to approach the nineteenth-century text through the contrapuntal reading advanced in the prequel. It also reveals itself to be a revolt against language and literary history, which have been constructed as distinctly masculine and imperialist by brutally suppressing any emergent voice that sought to overturn its hierarchy. *Wide Sargasso Sea* ends with the implication that the Bertha of *Jane Eyre* — who makes an appearance in Rhys' final pages — escapes her cardboard house by transposing Coulibri onto Thornfield Hall, thereby also staging a revolt of female sensibilities against the domineering male, of colonised subjectivity against imperialist subjugation, and, metatextually, of the subversive prequel against the master text. Hence, Antoinette's tale of isolation, alienation, and incarceration ends with her discovery of the possibility of revolt against each of these overlapping forces that had attempted to define her. She realises that 'she was brought to "England" to overthrow The Book — to upset the hegemony of Anglo-European canonicity [...] Antoinette's final act is a political revolt staged on the level of textuality'.[24] By integrating spatial awareness with metatextual consciousness, Rhys's approach ensures that Antoinette emerges as a literary persona with a renewed perception of her potentiality as a Creole woman. Rhys's novel posits the need to develop Gilbert and Gubar's feminist poetics into a paradigm accommodative of the intersectionality that informs every inquiry into women's experiences. It is also a reiteration that in spite of the century separating the two texts, the concerns isolated from *Jane Eyre* and expounded in *Wide Sargasso Sea* remain politically significant even to the present day.

[24] Deborah A. Kimmey, 'Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: Metatextuality and the Politics of Reading in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *Women's Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal*, 34 (2005), 113–31 (p. 129).

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