

The Challenge to Patriarchy and Colonialism in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract: In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys illustrates Antoinette's experience and sufferings throughout her life. This article intends to focus on the challenge to patriarchy and colonialism in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by making a detailed analysis of the male character Rochester. This article can generally be divided into two parts. Firstly, it explores author's attempt to challenge the authority of the patriarchal society by depriving the male protagonist's right of name and exposing the ugly nature of this patriarchal mercenary. Secondly, it analyses the author's effort to subvert the authority of colonialism by deconstructing the male protagonist Rochester's identity as a white European colonist. This article argues that *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates Rhys's revolutionary subversion of the authority of patriarchy and colonialism.

Keywords: *Wide Sargasso Sea*; Rochester; Patriarchy; Colonialism

1. Introduction

Jean Rhys was born in the West Indies in 1894. As an important post-colonial writer in the 20th century, she creatively writes *Wide Sargasso Sea* as the prequel to *Jane Eyre*, reflecting the subversive characteristics of the post-colonial novel. Jean Rhys demonstrates her superb writing skills and shows her ruthless disclosure to colonialism in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, making *Wide Sargasso Sea* a companion piece to *Jane Eyre* in both ideological and artistic terms.

Foreign scholars' criticism and analysis of the book mainly focus on race relations, slavery, women status, post-colonial discourse and so on. Domestic scholars mostly discuss from the perspectives of narrative strategy, identity of the other, feminism and so on, and few of them have conducted detailed analysis of the image of Rochester. Based on the current research situation at home and abroad, this paper will make a detailed analysis of the male character Rochester, so as to explore the author's challenge to the authority of patriarchy and colonialism in this novel.

2. The challenge to patriarchy

The spearhead of this book is directed at the patriarchal society, and the whole book is full of accusations and resistances to patriarchy. First of all, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the author deprives the male protagonist's right of name. According to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis theory of self-construction, the construction of self-identity lies not in the individual itself but in others, and "others' discourse" is very important for identity construction. In "others' discourse", the name is crucial. It is his or her call to the name of "I" that makes "I" align with this name and thereby confirm the identity.^[1] So the name is the most basic status symbol of one individual. In *Jane Eyre*, the crazy woman in the attic is not called Bertha until the end of her life, and she is unknown before. Besides, Bertha is not her real name. Rochester gives this name to her and insists on calling her this new name instead of her real name Antoinette. Therefore, in *Jane Eyre*, the crazy woman is deprived of the right of name. However, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys puts Rochester in the situation of no name. In this whole book, from the beginning to the end, Rochester's name never appears. The reader can only infer that this man is Rochester through the intertextuality of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette plays a supporting role in *Jane Eyre* and her deprivation of name can make sense logically. But, as the male protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the deprivation of Rochester's name is an unconventional treatment. Actually, by erasing Rochester's name, Rhys's real intention is to deprive the basic name right of Rochester, so as to defy and subvert the patriarchy.

In order to challenge the patriarchy, Rhys not only deprives the name right of Rochester, but also tears away Rochester's hypocritical mask of personality. In Charlotte Brontë's writing, Rochester is a gentleman who breaks the prejudice of aristocratic society in pursuit of love. But in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester's selfishness and cruelty are openly revealed. In this novel, we can see that Rochester is self-centered, alienated and cruel in his heart, and he has a strong desire for control and revenge. Therefore, the positive male image in the traditional patriarchal canon is no longer exist. Although Rochester is a white British man, he has no status in his country. As the second-born son, he is marginalized and rejected by paternal patriarchy system, so he is forced to come to West Indies to find wealth. From the very beginning of Rochester's appear in this novel, he is depicted in a downcast image. He has to come to the former colony to get married in order to obtain property. Although he feels resentful for this in his heart, he can do nothing to resist it. For his newly married wife, he feels that she has bought him. As a white British man born in a patriarchal society, Rochester's male dignity has been subverted. He is no longer a man of absolute authority, but a man of low status in a foreign land. Besides, he

has no independent thinking, and he is obedient to others mind. After receiving Daniel's letter, he becomes completely distrustful of his wife, thinking that she is a mad and unruly woman. At this point, his image has changed from the initial desolation to cruelty. He is cold and violent towards his wife, making the naive Antoinette hopeless. Besides, in the dominant posture of male colonist, Rochester also renamed Antoinette with the British woman's name Bertha, denying her self-identity and rights, in order to achieve a kind of control and oppression. In this regard, Antoinette sees through the truth, "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeh too".^[2] It is Rochester's exploit, persecution and abandonment that directly cause Antoinette's madness. Thus the positive image and authority in the traditional patriarchal canon are overturned.

Moreover, Antoinette's pure and sincere love further emphasizes the ugly nature of this patriarchal mercenary. Antoinette yearns for true love. When Rochester appears, she thinks that he is the one who could let her rebirth. On the other hand, in Rochester's eyes, love and marriage are nothing more than cash cows. The so-called noble British man do not rely on his own abilities to earn wealth, but make woman as his source of money. Here, the irony effect is evident. At this time, the dignity of patriarchy is no longer exist, and the ugly face of Rochester is exposed clearly. In addition, because Rochester himself is a victim of the patriarchal inheritance system, his abjectness and ugliness are also caused by the irrational system of the patriarchal society, which also subverts the patriarchal authority from the inside.

3. The challenge to colonialism

The author attempts to challenge the authority of colonialism and hegemony by deconstructing the male protagonist Rochester's identity as a white European colonist. The first is the internal collapse of the authority of the colonist. The previous image of colonist is often brilliant, brave, powerful and full of ambitions. But Rochester, the colonist described by Rhys is humble, cowardly and hesitant. As the second son of the family, Rochester is unable to inherit property due to the British system of succession. He has to follow his father's arrangement to come to Jamaica to marry Antoinette, with the purpose of obtaining a dowry of 30,000 pounds, in order to avoid becoming poor. He is less as a colonist than as an outcast, and he is the abandoned son of his family and the British empire. This so-called noble colonist comes to the colony for money, while the rich colonial woman is extremely indifferent to money. There is a strong contrast in their need for money and their attitude towards it. The superiority and the inferiority are clearly showed. It is a heavy blow to the dignity and authority of the colonist of the empire. In addition, Antoinette once refuses to marry Rochester, and Rochester can only beg for mercy and speak good words to Antoinette in order to win her back, which also weakens the pride of the colonists. The power relationship is reversed here, and the controller becomes the controlled. Rochester don't have the initiative any more.

In addition, in West Indies, the colonist feels that the people, animals and even scenery on the island are against him, and he is disturbed all day long. He also thinks that "It seemed to me that everything round me was hostile. The telescope drew away and said don't touch me. The trees were threatening and the shadows of the trees moving slowly over the floor menaced me. The green menace. I had felt it since I saw this place. There was nothing I knew, nothing to comfort me". Therefore, we can see that in West Indies Rochester not only does not show the heroism of colonists, but because of his cowardice, he feels that the people and things around him are all enemies. His series of inner monologues deconstruct the supreme authority and superiority of European white colonists from the inside.

Besides, Rochester is also threatened by the colonial "subalterns".^[3] As a black maid in West Indies, Christophine never shows fear and concession in front of the colonist Rochester. Instead, she has been fighting with him openly and secretly. The conflict begins as soon as the two meet. Rochester describes Christophine in this way: "She looked at me steadily, not with approval, I thought. We stared at each other for quite a minute. I looked away first and she smiled to herself...". In the first eye-to-eye contest, Rochester is at a disadvantage. Christophine takes the colonist down. In a conversation with Antoinette, Rochester admits that he is indeed a little afraid of Christophine. Later, he sees an introduction about obeh witchcraft in one book, and it makes him more afraid of Christophine and he worries that she would use witchcraft to turn himself into a "zombi". The West Indian "subalterns" actually put pressure on the colonist invisibly, although Rochester is displeased and even angry, he can do nothing to change this situation. Facing with Rochester's expulsion, Christophine holds her head high, with her hand on her hips, she responds: "Who you tell me to go? This house belong to Miss Antoinette's mother, now it belongs to her. Who you tell me to go"? At this point, the authority of the colonialism is no longer exist, and the colonist Rochester can only return to Britain.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, in this novel, from the intentional depiction of the white male image Rochester, we can find Rhys's attempt to challenge the patriarchy and colonialism that exist in the real world. *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates Rhys's revolutionary subversion of the authority of patriarchy and colonialism.

References:

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[2] Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: Popular Library, 1966.

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