

Act of Survival: The Revision of Bronte's *Jane Eyre* in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Abdulaziz Alabdullah

Lecturer, Department of English, College of Arts,
University of Kuwait

Abstract

J. Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* invites us to revisit the sombre truth that women's literary works were once, and still perhaps are, misread, misjudged, misinterpreted. This has led some feminist writers to resort to 'revision' as an 'act of survival'. Revision calls for women to look back 'with fresh eyes' to redefine and reread old texts from a fresh critical angle. The present paper develops the idea, attempting to re-examine *Jane Eyre* within Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in terms of a kind of mysterious kinetics of *de já vu*. The paper will explore the idea of revision in these two important women's literary works.

Introduction

Charlotte Bronte and Jean Rhys wrote their novels in different centuries and were raised in different backgrounds. However, despite these differences they both shared the same concern for women's rights. Jean Rhys's 1966 work *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a creative response to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, a nineteenth century novel and one of the great and popular works of English Literature. The aim of this paper is to explore Rhys's response through her heroine Antoinette to Jane, the heroine of Bronte by the act of re-vision. "Re-vision is for women an act of survival" (Rich 35). In these words Adrienne Rich defines what in the past years has become an important issue for feminist criticism, and a substantial part of women's writing.

But what exactly is "re-vision" and why is it of such importance? For hundreds of years women's novels and poems have been read or misread through the eyes of patriarchal tradition; they have been made fun of or ignored, misjudged or misinterpreted; they have been dismissed as unimportant, not being concerned with "great" issues such as war and finance but with "trivial" domestic matters! Virginia Woolf was very accurate in saying that the male reader dismisses women's writing as offering "not merely a difference of view, but a view that is weak, or trivial or sentimental because it differs from his own" (Chan 86)

It has therefore become a need for women to look back "with fresh eyes" and enter the old text from a new critical direction. It is the only way through which a tradition can be established; it is a "drive to self-knowledge"; it "is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society" (Rich 35) Momsen reflects on that by saying: "Within the Caribbean regional diversity of ethnicity, class, language and religion there is an ideological unity of patriarchy, of female subordination and dependence" (1). Indeed "re-reading" women's writing has become a most important part of feminist criticism. The aim is to read the old texts in such a way as to penetrate the surface designs of works which served to "conceal or obscure deeper less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning" (Gilbert 73). Jenia Geraghty argues that "in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys shifts the perspective on *Jane Eyre* by expressing the viewpoints of the different characters in the source material, so taking a different structural approach to the first-person narrative technique employed by Bronte" (Geraghty 1).

This urge to know the writing of the past in a way we've never known it, to read it in a way we've never read it, serves to establish a female literary tradition and free women writers from their social and literary confinement.

Revising a text has in the past decade been both a critical and a creative process. By critical I mean that many essays and articles have been written on works by women, which give new light and meaning to aspects that had been ignored or distorted; essays have also been written on male authors' works in which feminists have asserted their right to say "this is surface, this falsifies reality, this degrades" (Olsen 45). Apart from that however, re-vision has assumed yet another form: that of re-writing. Women's writing had for many years been excluded from some areas that had traditionally been considered "male." Who would ever have imagined a woman writing love poems? How could a woman have written a historical document? Why would a woman want to write a science fiction novel? Why should a woman need to write new fairy tales? And why indeed need a woman re-write traditional old stories with different endings? The answer, I believe, has already been given. And so women writers have not only re-discovered the past and made it come alive in a different way, but they have also created a new present and freed themselves from the "literary confinement" that patriarchy had placed them in. Thus we now have science fiction novels and well imagined feminist utopias such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on The Edge of Time*, revisions of old fairy tales such as Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, re-visions of the New Testament such as Michelle Robert's *The Wild Girl*, and a long list of other re-visions!

One novel which has been repeatedly re-read, revised and interpreted in many ways by feminist critics is Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Elaine Showalter believes that "the significance of Bronte's use of..... female symbolism has been misread and underrated by male-oriented twentieth century criticism, and is only now beginning to be fully understood and appreciated" (112). In her opinion, Bronte, in *Jane Eyre*, depicts a complete female identity. In another essay S.Gilbert and S.Gubar consider *Jane Eyre* "a pilgrimage toward selfhood" (Gilbert 336-337); and in yet another, A.Rich feels that it's a novel of "sexual equality, spiritual and practical" (105).

Yet one of the first re-visions of *Jane Eyre* comes to us in the form of a novel. *Wide Sargasso Sea* was written by Jean Rhys in 1966 and it is, in a sense, a re-telling of Bronte's novel by the first Mrs. Rochester, the mad-woman in the attic. I said "in a sense" for a number of reasons. Initially I would like to point out that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is in no way dependent on *Jane Eyre* to justify its existence as a work of art; it exists as such in its own right and can be independently appreciated as a creation of great subtlety and skill. Secondly it should be mentioned that *Wide Sargasso Sea* coincides chronologically with Bronte's novel only in its third part where Bertha is confined to the attic of Thornfield Hall, the first and second part are the story of Antoinette

Cosway's - alias Bertha Mason's - life before she comes to England. That is why Rhys's novel has been called a "post-dated prequel" (Baer 132) of *Jane Eyre*, in which the writer has paralleled the lives of the two heroines in such an intricate and closely tied way that I believe one must read *Wide Sargasso Sea* before reading *Jane Eyre* so to establish and understand the intricate ties between the two heroines. In that sense *Wide Sargasso Sea* is indeed a re-vision of *Jane Eyre*.

A close reading of the two novels lends me to agree with Elizabeth Baer when she calls Antoinette and Jane "sisters in the patriarchy" (133) and what I have tried to do in this paper is look at the lives of the two heroines in parallel so as to prove that Jane achieves a full and healthy womanhood not through destroying Bertha, who has been called Jane's dark, sensual and sexual self, but by being aided by Bertha the older sister, the friend, the woman, in order to reach her complete womanhood. As Amy Farley explains, "in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys focuses on developing a narrative history for Brontë's character Bertha, one of few characters who are not given the opportunity to speak for themselves in *Jane Eyre*" (1).

Antoinette and Jane's lives both go through various stages which seem to coincide with their stay in a different place each time. Understandably both the novels have been seen as a pilgrimage, a life journey, a mythical progress from one place to another. Antoinette's childhood is spent at Coulibri, a house which frightens her but in which she feels more secure than anywhere else. Her schooldays are spent at a Convent in Spanish Town, Jamaica which she leaves in order to marry Rochester and live at Granbois which she says that she loved: "more than anywhere in the world. As if it were a person. More than a person" (Rhys 75). The final stage of her life-journey is spent in Thornfield. Jane spends her childhood at Gateshead, feeling miserable and lonely; she then moves on to a convent-like school, Lowood. The next stage of her journey brings her to Thornfield where she meets Mr. Rochester; but her journey does not end there: she moves on to Marsh End and her journey finally reaches completion in Ferndean.

I believe that these stages into which the two women move are significantly interrelated: as I previously mentioned Antoinette's life ends in Thornfield Hall, a symbol of patriarchy and oppression. She is locked up against her will and without any apparent reason, in a dark room at the top of the house with only one small window high up. Her impression of Thornfield is that it's a cold and dark place in which she is dying. She cannot believe that this is the England she had imagined back in the West Indies. She feels lonely, disillusioned and isolated; she's living in "their" world, not hers:

Then I open door and walk into their world.

It is as I always knew, made of cardboard...

As I walk along the passages I wish I could see what is behind the cardboard. They tell me I'm in England but I don't believe them

We lost our way to England. When? Where?

I don't remember but we lost it... This cardboard house where I walk at night is not England. (143)

England, for Antoinette is where there is "grass and olive-green water and tall trees looking into the water" (150). For Jane, Thornfield comes to mean many things. Gilbert and Gubar describe it as "the house of Jane's life, its floors and walls the architecture of her experience" (347). At first she feels that it's secluded, later she feels happy there until she associates it with her misery and it becomes a symbol of oppression and degradation which she feels she has to escape from - as indeed she does (Bronte 147). Thornfield stands for a marriage that would have imprisoned Jane's individual spirit. After she returns to Thornfield she finds the house in ruins; it is Antoinette who has ruined this house, it is Antoinette who sets Jane free of its oppression, it is Antoinette that has prevented her from setting eyes on it and living in it once again.

I would now like to leave Thornfield and go back to Coulibri in Jamaica. I believe that Rhys has connected the fire there with the fire that destroyed Thornfield in the following way. Coulibri was set on fire by the black people as an act of resistance against their oppressors - the white; in burning down Thornfield Antoinette identifies with the people who had burnt down her home: she becomes the oppressed versus the oppressor. She burns down the house as a final act of defiance against Rochester. It is one of the few moments in her life in which she becomes active and assertive - ironically it is the last! Furthermore, as I mentioned before she acts out Jane's profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the symbol of Rochester's mastery, and opens the way, as in many other instances, for the completion of Jane's pilgrimage towards selfhood.

At this point it would be useful to look at the other experiences which Antoinette and Jane have in parallel in their lives, indeed to compare their journeys through life, to see how they interrelate, so as to establish their "sisterhood." Unlike most Victorian novels, *Jane Eyre* begins with a seemingly casual remark which on the contrary is quite significant: "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day" (Bronte 39). Likewise *Wide Sargasso Sea* opens with a similar image: "the road from Spanish Town to Coulibri Estate where we lived was very bad and.... Road repairing was now a thing of

the past” (Rhys 15). Even though both novels start by presenting the impossibility, or rather the difficulty of a journey, both the heroines will go on a long and arduous one. Jane will go despite all the impediments, against all odds, and will successfully complete her journey. Antoinette will be sent on a life-long journey against her physical and mental will, which will end in her being robbed of her very identity and her freedom.

The first stage of journey is for both of them life in an educational institution in which they go when they're still girls and come out as young women. Jane left Lowood with nothing to her name in order to work and become active, change her life; as she says at one point “I longed to go where there was life and movement” (120). Antoinette once again is plucked from the convent like a flower that has just made roots and begun to grow. “This convent was my refuse” (47) she says, before her stepfather, Mr. Mason, comes to take her away: “I want you to be happy, Antoinette, secure, I've tried to arrange it” (49). The happiness and security that Mr. Mason wishes her to have is, of course, marriage. Marriage to an “English gentlemen.” Antoinette, as if she could foresee her future, is immediately overcome by a “feeling of dismay, sadness, loss.” Thus she is pulled away once again from the place she loves, and thrown into the arms of Edward Rochester.

It would be interesting to see the circumstances under which the two women meet Rochester and their relation to him since he is the first man they both meet after living a very sheltered life, and the way their relationship develops is quite significant. It would seem usual one would think for Antoinette to meet him as an equal since they were going to be married. Yet it is not so. Antoinette is used as an object by “her illegitimate half brother, Daniel Cosway, another of Mr. Cosway's illegitimate children” (7), who “sells her off” to Rochester. Rochester openly admits his indifference and his hypocrisy “... but it meant nothing to me. Nor did she, the girl I was to marry... I played the part I was expected to play. She never had anything to do with me at all” (64). When on the morning of the wedding Antoinette, desperate and crying, refuses to marry him, again being “afraid of what may happen”, he goes to her, gentle and loving. “I kissed her fervently” he says “promising her peace, happiness, safety” (66). Yet once again he reveals his hypocritical and selfish motive: “[her refusal to marry me] would indeed make a fool of me. I did not relish going back to England in the role of rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl” (65). When Antoinette helplessly accepts and they are actually getting married, her hands were “cold as ice in the hot sun” (64). Furthermore I should not fail to mention that on marrying Rochester Antoinette's whole fortune, everything she owned, was immediately transferred to his name.

Thus he became literally the “owner” of Antoinette Cosway Mason Rochester.

Jane’s meeting with Rochester is a complete reversal of Antoinette’s. She is walking on the hills one bright moonlit evening when she hears the sound of horse hooves and sees, coming out of the shadows, a “lion-like” dog, followed by “a tall steed, and on its back a rider... his figure was enveloped in a riding cloak, fur collared and steel clasped... he had a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow... his gathered eyebrows, looked ireful...” (144-5). Rochester’s image is once again, that of the dominant, powerful male figure, until a few instances later “Man and horse were down... [with] a clattering tumble... they had slipped on the sheet of ice which glazed the causeway” (144). The overpowering, patriarchal figure proves himself to be vulnerable and in need of Jane whose help he asks for in order to stand up on his feet; Jane offers her help and Rochester leaning heavily on her, admits that “necessity compels me to make you useful” (146). According to Gilbert. “Jane and Rochester begin their relationship as master and servant, prince and Cinderella, Mr. B. and Pamela, in another way they begin as spiritual equals” (790). In both cases, as is evident, it is the first encounter that determines the development of the relationship, and so Antoinette’s life is gradually but steadily crushed to pieces whereas Jane slowly but firmly builds her life as an independent woman.

It would, I think, be useful to look at the way in which Antoinette’s relationship with Rochester develops and then compare it to Jane’s relationship with him and how she resists the temptation of romantic love and surrender, which Antoinette doesn’t do (Rich 99).

Part II of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an account of the events following Antoinette’s marriage to Rochester; the journey and arrival at Granbois, the early days of sexual passion at the “idyllic” honeymoon house, and the eventual mistrust, conflict and sundering. Even though this part of the novel is centered within Rochester’s intelligence, since he is the narrator, the dialogue between him and Antoinette is extensive and this expands our focus beyond his subjective point of view.

The importance of the landscape is very soon brought to our attention. Rochester feels trapped in a way, by the beautiful, lush yet mysterious jungle, which Antoinette loves so much:

But the feeling of something unknown and
Hostile was very strong. “I feel very much
a stranger here”, I said. “I feel this place
is my enemy and on your side”. (Ryes 107)

Indeed it is this constant fear of him, fear of the place, of the people, of the extremes which exist there such as flowing light and absolute darkness, heat and cool breezes, calm and excitement that convinces him that the landscape of the Caribbean and Antoinette herself have a secret - the very same secret: passion!

I went very early to the bathing pool and stayed there for hours, unwilling to leave the river, the trees shading it, the flowers that opened at night. They were tightly shut, drooping, sheltering from the sun under thick leaves.

It was a beautiful place - wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. Antoinette kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, "What I see is nothing - I want what it hides - that is not nothing". (87)

It is the discovery of the "hidden" something that leads him to the destruction of Antoinette. In his mind natural and psychological landscape fuse together and become one. He also sees Antoinette as mysterious and beautiful; when he discovers the passion inside her, her sexuality, then he hates her and wishes to destroy her. The landscape and Antoinette make him lose control of his emotions, of his feelings, of himself; he is a person who is used to power, to being in control and cannot handle this. For him, "everything is too much" and his feeling extends to the entire natural scene: "Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (59). I would add, too much emotion, too much passion, too many feelings! In Granbois there is a dominant sensual element to nearly everything, and Rochester feels he is being initiated to some new experience in a world at once seductive, hostile and alien to his English upbringing, atmosphere deep with sensuality. His reactions of mistrust slowly transfer themselves to Antoinette, and increase as their relationship - and Antoinette herself - becomes more intensely passionate. Yet it seems that their passion is induced by the sensuousness of the environment more than by mutual response. Nevertheless to Rochester's eyes she has committed a mistake: she has released a desire in him which is powerful, obsessive and destructive; she has openly shown her desire, revealed her thoughts and feelings to him making him feel all at once maddened, impassioned and afraid of her:

... she'd laugh for a long time and never tell me why she laughed.

But at night now different, even her voice was changed. Always this talk of death. (Is she trying to tell me that is the

secret of this place? That there is no other way? She knows. She knows.). (76-7)

Antoinette gradually realises that she has become dependent on him, that he has given her something she never had, that he has released in her a passion that otherwise might have remained buried. She has given in to him completely, she has surrendered her life to him, she has placed her happiness in his hands:

“Why did you make me want to live? Why did you do that to me?

.... Then one night [she] whispered, “if I could die. Now when I am happy. Would you do that? You wouldn’t have to kill me. Say die and I will die. You don’t believe me? Then try, try, say die and watch me die.”

“Die then! Die!” I watched her die many times. In my way not in hers. In sunlight in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight... Very soon she was as eager for what’s called loving as I was - more lost and drowned afterwards. (77)

Interestingly “dying” for Rochester is equal to sexual pleasure and Antoinette’s sexual desire was a foreboding of her “death”. He now has nothing to hold him back from believing that she’s just like her mother had been. In addition to that, and perhaps more importantly, he knows that her happiness is in his hands to kill or nurture and make it grow.

His insecurity, his fear, his passion, his weakness all finally hide themselves behind and express themselves through his hatred for Antoinette and her world. As he had said himself “Desire, Hatred, Life, Death came very close in the darkness” (7). Thus Antoinette’s fears come true; when she had felt happy she had wondered, “Suppose you took this happiness away when I wasn’t looking...”, and then went on to add “I am not used to happiness. It makes me afraid” (77). That is exactly what he has done. He has torn away her happiness and confirmed her fear; he has hidden his true motives behind his hate for her and his fear of her sexuality and her emotions:

Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I’d lost before I found it... You hate me and I hate you. We’ll see who hates best. But first, first I will destroy your hatred. Now. My hate is colder, stronger and you’ll have not hate to warm yourself. You will have nothing. (140-1)

Once again he feels strong, powerful and able to set his own rules, now

that the place which prevented him from being his usual dominating self, can be left behind and his failure to adjust and his bitterness for that can be directed against the one person who was the “cause” of it all: Antoinette! “She’s mad but mine, mine” he repeats as they’re leaving Coulibri and everything it stand for. He finally retreats to England and locks his wife in the attic of Thornfield Hall, true to what he said on their departure from Coulibri:

She’ll not laugh in the sun again. She’ll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking glass... Made for loving? Yes, but she’ll have no lover, for I don’t want her and she’ll see no other. (136)

Once in Thornfield, Antoinette’s presence “is heard and sensed rather than seen” (Rich 99). It is Jane, more than anyone else, who senses her presence and seems intrigued by it. She is curiously drawn to the third floor, the attic as if she knew that there, in a small room, her “life” has been imprisoned. For it is Antoinette that warns her and gives her the chance to escape intellectual and emotional “death” and stagnation. Jane goes to the attic when she feels restless and agitated; walking “along the corridor of the third story, backward and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude of the spot” is her “sole relief” (Rhys 141). It is here that Jane hears the madwoman’s “distinct” “Tragic” and “preternatural” laugh which thrills her; it is here that Jane feels free to let her inmost feelings surface and voices what Adrienne Rich calls “Charlotte Bronte’s feminist manifesto” (141). Significantly, it is not very much longer till she meets Rochester in the manner which I earlier described and begins her struggle to stand next to him as an equal.

Rochester is so eager to possess her - body, soul and mind - that he lies to her and tries to deceive her more than once. On the other hand, Jane’s dislike of the way which he courts her increases together with her passion for him. Even at the last instance, when he intends to ask her to marry him, he makes yet another attempt to deceive her by leading her to believe that it is Blanch Ingram who he loves and is to be married to. His arrogance sets off Jane’s anger and grief which lead her to make “her most famous assertion of her own integrity” (Gilbert 353):

“Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automation? - a machine without feelings?... Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! - I have as much soul as you - and full as much heart!... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed

though the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal-as we are!". (Bronte 284)

Yet, Rochester, even though he promises Jane happiness and equality, just like he had done to Antoinette, is still deceiving her in the worst possible way, led by his incorrigible desire to possess: "I will have her, and will hold her" (284). After their betrothal he appears to forget all that has been said about equality and begins to treat her as an inferior, as a doll that he has to dress and play with. She is now his "pale little elf", his "mustard seed", the "little sunny-faced girl", a "bonny wee thing." "It is your time now, little tyrant," he says "but it will be mine presently; and when once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I'll just - figuratively speaking - attach you to a chain like this" (299). Even though Jane tries very hard and on the surface succeeds in retaining her status as an independent person and a little "girl-bride", yet she does not know that she is ready to fall into the trap of Rochester's ultimate deception.

At this point it is Antoinette-Bertha who makes herself apparent and then tries to intervene with three acts of violence, two of which are symbolic warnings to Jane.

The first is an attempt to burn Rochester in his sleep by setting fire to the curtains in the room where he is sleeping. Jane restlessly lying in her bed is aroused by Bertha's laughter, sees smoke coming from his room and rescues him. Bertha later acts again, when her half-brother Richard visits her in the attic and she tries to stab him.

Both of these acts could be seen as implicit warnings to Jane but it is on the third time that Bertha appears, that Jane is truly upset and has unsettled feelings about her forthcoming marriage. It was two days before her marriage on a night when Rochester was away from Thornfield; Jane once again could not sleep, feeling distressed by "a sense of anxious excitement" (309). When she dozed off she had a dream, in two parts, which was some kind of pre-vision of the future. She sees that there is some "insuperable obstacle" which keeps her away from Rochester, then that Rochester leaves for some far away country for many years and finally she sees Thornfield Hall as blackened ruins, "the retreat of bats and owls" (310). Upon waking from her dream Jane discovers a stranger in her room which she later describes to Rochester as "the vampire" (311). It is Bertha who has left the attic and come to her help. As Jane watches, terrified from her from her bed, Bertha takes her wedding veil, tries it on, looks at herself in the mirror and "in a gesture of warning, defiance and destruction" (Baer 146) tears it in half, throws the two halves on the floor and tramples on them. Interestingly enough she doesn't

harm Jane in any way, she just looks at her, extinguishes her candle and leaves.

I believe that this scene can only be seen as a gesture of warning from Bertha to Jane; in destroying the veil, a symbol of matrimony. Bertha warns Jane against a marriage that might destroy her as it had destroyed Antoinette. Bertha did not harm Jane because it was for her that she was acting and not against her. Yet despite the warnings and her foreboding dreams, Jane hasn't yet realised that she is still being deceived by Rochester. The instrument of her "salvation" comes from Antoinette's world, from the magical and so fearful, for Rochester, West Indies, in the face of Richard Mason who at the very last instance prevents this marriage of inequality from taking place. From the moment that Bertha's existence is revealed to Jane, the veil of mystery that had covered the attic of Thornfield is lifted and Jane finally begins to realise the dreadful mistake that she was about to make; she now learns from Antoinette's mistakes and uses her experience to help herself.

She will not have her identity and her name taken away from her, like Antoinette did when back in Coulibri Rochester decided to provide her with a dull English name, Bertha. "Berth is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else," she had said to him (111). And she was right; as she later recalls, "names matter like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass" (147). In the same way, names matter just as much to Jane and for that reason she fought so hard against being flattered and called different names and laden with jewels and fancy dresses. That person wouldn't have been her, it would have been once again, another woman, a creation of Rochester's mind, and Jane, like Antoinette would have lost her identity and her sense of herself.

Jane, through Antoinette, has also learned that unless she is absolutely equal to her future husband - even financially - she cannot be happy, she cannot marry Rochester. Antoinette had given her dowry to Rochester and in his eyes he had been bought by her. He resented this to such an extent that it played an important part in his hating her, believing her mad and locking her away. Their financial inequality and its importance is thus another thing that Bertha's presence brings to Jane's attention.

Furthermore Jane sees Bertha's present condition as a prediction of her own future if she marries Rochester. Her fear, or rather her certainty of that is evident when Rochester asks her "if you were mad, do you think I should hate you?" and she replies very straightforwardly "do indeed, sir" (328-9). As Elaine Showalter points out, she is probably right in assuming that, since as we saw earlier a significant reason for believing in Antoinette's madness was,

for Rochester, her sexual passion. Taking into consideration the “fiery emotions” that Jane has admitted of having for him, he might in due time have believed her to be mad as well (Showalter 122).

Ever since she met Rochester, Jane had had her doubts about his integrity as a character, which had been overshadowed by the love she had for him; now that Bertha’s existence and situation become known to her, all the “bits and pieces” of insecurity and doubt that she’d had in her mind begin to fall into place and form one strong feeling of fear about her future, her independence and her happiness if she stays with Rochester in Thornfield Hall. Inevitably she has to find a way to escape from Rochester and Thornfield, as patriarchal symbols that oppress her, and from her very self, that part of her which pulls her back and urges her to stay on and become a passive receiver of whatever is bestowed on her. Yet once again Antoinette/ Bertha is there to show her the way: staying and becoming mad is no solution, no way of escaping: Antoinette had once been urged to leave Rochester by Christophine and had not done so then. The only way she managed to escape was through madness, through negating the integrity of her own mind. Jane is now facing the same dilemma. As Adrienne Rich points out, in Jane “there is a strong counter pull between female self-immolation - the temptation of passive suicide - and the will and courage which are her survival tools” (103). Antoinette’s experience urges Jane to gather up all her courage - and leave. Her decision is made through a powerful dream: she will not escape through madness but through deliberation, she will do what the Mother moon is whispering to her spirit; “My daughter, flee temptation”, “Mother, I will”, Jane replies and indeed does so that very night.

Antoinette had not heeded Christophine’s warning (Rich 103). “You ask me a hard thing, I tell you a hard thing, pack up and go”.

Her mistake taught Jane a lesson, she couldn’t stay and “become nothing” to Rochester like Antoinette did, through a marriage which would simply make her “the dependent adjunct of Mr. Rochester instead of his equal” (103).

After Jane leaves to think what becomes of Antoinette Bertha? Is she there only to help Jane? Is that the only way to justify her presence? Many critics have accused Jean Rhys of creating heroines which are “born victims,” and *Wide Sargasso Sea* has often been viewed as a novel whose ending is one of “passive suicide” for the heroine. By regarding Antoinette and Jane as “sisters in the patriarchy,” by seeing Antoinette not as Jane’s dark, other self which had to be destroyed but as a woman whose last and only resort from patriarchy was madness, one cannot help but see that Antoinette’s last act is an act of triumph; triumph primarily for herself and then for Jane as well. As

Kirsty Hawthorn argues, "Antoinette commits suicide, arguably a means of escape and final grasp for her own agency and autonomy and in that way, a resolution of sorts" (3).

Her initial triumph can be attributed to Jean Rhys' cleverly laid out narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea* which is divided into three parts. In the first part Antoinette is the narrator as a young girl. In the second and central part of the novel, Rochester symbolically deprives Antoinette of her voice and becomes the narrator himself. The triumph that I spoke of is Antoinette's in the third part, the climax of the novel: even though she has been imprisoned, and confinement has confused her sense of time and reality, even though she has nothing left of her own, not even her own name, she is given voice to speak and relate her second, her ultimate triumph, her true escape.

Just like Jane she meets her destiny and finds her way to freedom in a dream which tells her what she must do. She has been given a grey wrapper to wear in the attic but she prefers the one thing that she has left to remind her of the West Indies, her red dress.

I let the dress fall on the floor and looked from the fire to the dress and from the dress to other fire... it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do. I will remember I though. I will remember quite soon now. (152-3)

Indeed, immediately after this she has her dream which will help her remember. The dream brings her back to the beginning, to Coulibri and her childhood and in it she finally rediscovers her lost identity, that part of her which had been torn away from her, that had been left back at Coulibri and Granbois in the heat and passion of the West Indies.

I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. 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. (154)

It is, of course, her own image that she sees in the mirror, and it is the way with which she is now able to reclaim herself, to become Antoinette again. Just like when she had seen Antoinette "drifting out of the window" when Rochester had imposed "Bertha" on her, now suddenly through seeing her image in the mirror she becomes the young passionate West-Indian girl of the past once again, she becomes her old self. Still in her dream she climbs up to the third story and then out on the battlements.

Then I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it... I heard the parrot call as he did when he

saw a stranger, "Que est la"? and the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha! The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones. But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought, *Why did I scream?* I called "Tia!" and jumped and woke. (155)

Antoinette's dream is a rehearsal of what will actually happen. In it, she is freed from the power of the past by identifying - as I mentioned in the beginning - with the servants and town-folk that had destroyed Coulibri. The significance of jumping to her death is twofold: it is her ultimate act of defiance against Rochester and 'the madwoman in the attic', Bertha; she refuses to be Bertha once and for all, she recovers her lost identity, she destroys the power of the past and her jump becomes one of symbolic triumph and survival, not passive suicide. Antoinette's jump to her death is also a symbolic release for Jane. Just like Coco the parrot's jump had saved Antoinette's family from the rage of the servants at Coulibri, in the same way Antoinette's jump and burning of Thornfield destroy the 'tools of authority and power' which resper-ent Rochester's physical stature and handsomeness, symbols of his pride and arrogance. Antoinette's presence, her experience and finally her strength open the way for a marriage of equals between Jane and Rochester.

When Jean Rhys was once interviewed about her novel she said:

The mad wife in *Jane Eyre* has always interested me. I was convinced that Charlotte Bronte must have something against the West Indies and I was angry about it. Otherwise, why did she take a West Indian for that horrible lunatic, for that really dreadful creature? I hadn't really formulated the idea of vindicating the mad woman in the novel but when I was rediscovered I was encouraged to do so. (Carter 5)

From what she said two things become clear: that she herself saw *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a re-vision of *Jane Eyre* and that the initial aim which she set out to achieve was to vindicate the West Indies and Bertha as a West Indian. Yet as we have seen she has done much more than that. She has not only vindicated the West Indies and 'written a life' for Bertha whom she saw as 'such a poor ghost', but she created a very strong bond of sisterhood

between the heroines of the two novels. She has made Antoinette's story one from which Jane learns, she has made Antoinette the instrument of Jane's survival and given an alternative to what Adrienne Rich calls the 'stereotypical rivalry of women' and thus forever revised our reading of Jane Eyre.

Conclusion:

After having read *Wide Sargasso Sea* in this way, how can one read *Jane Eyre* as a passionate love story with a happy ending? Bertha can no more be the mad, mean, passionate shrew who wickedly stands in the way of Jane's happiness; Rochester can no longer be the dark, tall, mysterious Byronic hero who sweeps Jane off her feet and carries her away to live happily ever after; Jane's marriage to Rochester can no longer be a surrender to 'romantic love', but is "constrained by convention in the face of love" (Hawthorn 3). Sandra Gilbert also argues that "though in one sense, Jean and Rochester begin their relationship as master and servant, prince and Cinderella, Mr. B. and Pamela, in another way they begin as spiritual equals" (Gilbert 790).

So if we consider once again the exploration of use of 're-vision', we will discover that it serves to help us see beneath the surface design of the old text and to uncover the deeper levels of meanings. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is indeed for both readers and writer, as well as for the heroine, "an act of survival".

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