

The influence of slavery on human relationship



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Jean Rhys novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is one of the most important post-colonial works that examines the effect of colonialism on Jamaica. Part of this examination is the exploration of how the aftermath of slavery affects Antoinette's relations with the Afro-Caribbean people in general and in particular with two prominent Afro-Caribbean characters in the novel Tia and Christophine. Rhys examines how slavery has both beneficial and destructive effects on her relations with the Afro-Caribbean community. Rhys demonstrates how the exploitation, suppression of the Afro-Caribbean people and their lack of compensation and lack of improved living standards has generated racial tensions and fostered the development of mutual hate. Moreover, Rhys illustrates how this atmosphere of mutual hatred caused by slavery impacts Antoinette's relationship with the Afro-Caribbean population of post-colonial Jamaica. Rhys also exhibits the effect of figurative slavery on Antoinette's marriage with her husband, whose name is not initially stated, but implicitly identified as Rochester (from Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*[1]). Jean Rhys explores the after effects of slavery on Jamaica by looking at the relationship between Antoinette and the island's native Afro-Caribbean population.

The relationship explored by Rhys is characterized by racial tensions. One of the ways this conflict is portrayed by Rhys is the use of derogatory terms. Throughout the exposition of the book, which is set on the island of Jamaica, characters of both races use racial slurs to refer to each other. One example of this is when a native Afro-Caribbean girl says, "'Go away white cockroach, go away'" (Rhys. p. 7)[2] to Antoinette on her way home. The term "white cockroach" is a term used by the Afro-Caribbean people to describe

Antoinette and her family, as they are white but due to their lack of wealth not part of the white elite of Jamaica. The use of the term “cockroach” demonstrates how antagonistic the relationship is as the term cockroach connotes vermin. Furthermore the fact that it happened on Antoinette’s way home shows the ordinariness of the situation. The racial tension is also conveyed through the violence of the natives towards Antoinette and her family. This violence begins with small incidents such as violence against animals that are owned by Antoinette’s family. For instance the reader is informed by Antoinette that “they killed our horse” (Rhys. p. 18)[3]. This violence then spirals into the forceful eviction of Antoinette and her family from their estate “Coulibri” through a riot by members of the Afro-Caribbean community that set fire to their home. Antoinette’s use of a hyperbole to describe the scenery reveals the momentousness of the situation. She says, “[the] flames [are] shooting up to the sky” (Rhys. p. 20)[4]. Rhys also uses a hyperbole to mirror Antoinette’s young age, as children often use exaggerations in their language. These racial tensions portrayed by Rhys seem to portray the Afro-Caribbean population in a bad light, but in the historical context of the novel, one might argue that the anger of the Afro-Caribbean community is justified and understandable, as they suffered tremendous horrors, during the period of slavery.

The negative effects of slavery on the relationships between Antoinette and the Afro-Caribbean community are also shown by Rhys through Antoinette’s interactions with Tia. Tia was Antoinette’s only friend until an argument drove them apart. The abrupt ending of their friendship and the disappointment it caused is later outdone by Tia’s betrayal of Antoinette.

Antoinette's early relationship to Tia, after their first encounter is characterised by their mutual friendship. Antoinette says, that " Tia was my friend and I met her daily" (Rhys. p. 7) [5]. The daily routine of their relationship illustrates their close bond. However, this bond later breaks up over a petty bet of whether or not Antoinette could " turn a somersault under water" (Rhys. p. 8)[6]. A disagreement about whether or not Antoinette actually completed this somersault spirals out of control and results in the end of their friendship. This is significant as both express their feelings using racial slurs Antoinette calls Tia a " cheating nigger" (Rhys. p. 8) [7] and Tia refers to her former friend as a " white nigger" (Rhys. p. 8)[8]. The use of those very strong and pejorative racial slurs informs the reader about both of the girls' upbringing and the social acceptability of racism in post-slavery Jamaica, as it is highly unlikely that the two girls used those terms without having acquired them from their surroundings. The racism expressed by Antoinette and Tia highlights how saturated Jamaica was with race-related hate and this hate can be directly linked to slavery.

In contrast to Antoinette's relation with the Afro-Caribbean community and her interactions with Tia, which illustrate the negative effects of slavery on relationships, the connection between Antoinette and Christophine is not dominated by mutual hate and distrust, but rather by genuine affection and maternal love. Their relationship is Rhys' description of a relationship that many female slaves and children of plantation owners experienced.

Christophine, just as many other female slaves was forced to function as Antoinette's surrogate mother, as it was seen as inappropriate for upper class women, like Antoinette's mother once was, to take care of her own

child. Even though their relationship was forced upon them it resulted in a mother like bond. Rhys demonstrates the amiable aspects of their relationship especially through to what great extent Antoinette feels secure with Christophine by her side. Antoinette says that without Christophine next to her at night the “ safe feeling left” (Rhys. p. 18)[9] her. This highlights Antoinette’s dependency on Christophine and her trust in her. Rhys uses Antoinette’s relationship to Christophine to examine how slavery can lead to a mother like bond between two people from different social standings.

Wide Sargasso Sea does not only explore the impact of literal slavery as a result of colonialism but also the concept of figurative slavery in the form of a woman’s childlike dependence on her husband. The relationship between Antoinette and her husband Rochester is a vivid example of figurative slavery, as Antoinette is subordinated towards her husband who has the power to rob her of her freedom, by which he transforms Antoinette’s figurative slavery into literal slavery. This metamorphose intensifies Antoinette’s reliance on her husband. This dependency expresses itself primarily as an economic dependency. The reader is informed of this financial need through the dialogue between Antoinette and her surrogate mother Christophine. Christophine suggests Antoinette to leave Rochester to re-start her life however Antoinette tells Christophine and thereby the reader that: “‘I [Antoinette] am not rich now, I [Antoinette] have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him...that is the English law’” (Rhys. p. 68)[10]. The interaction between Christophine and Antoinette portrays the subservience of a woman on her husband and how this impacts a marriage by equipping the husband with supremacy and by entrapping the wife. A

further example of Antoinette's entrapment and figurative slavery is her name being subsumed to "Bertha". Her husband, Rochester refrains from calling her Antoinette as it reminds him of her crazed and deranged mother. This name change is an act of dominance and demonstrates his power in the relationship, as he possess the power to alter another human beings identity. The name "Bertha" is of importance as Antoinette is robbed not only of her dignity through the loss of her last name, but also of her Creole heritage. Antoinette's Creole heritage makes her unique and exotic and distinguishes her from her husband. The changing of Antoinette's name to Bertha demonstrates Rochester's inability of dealing with the exotic and different.

In conclusion, Rhys vividly examines the results of the abolition of slavery in Jamaica and how it affects the protagonist's relationship with the local Afro-Caribbean community, especially with Tia and Christophine. Tia and Christophine portray the two different possible outcomes of slavery's impact on Antoinette's relationship with the Afro-Caribbean population of post-colonial Jamaica. Whereas Tia represents the destructive impact of an environment drenched with hate generated by slavery and Christophine embodies the positive impacts of a relationship forced upon by slavery. Rhys further examines the effect of figurative slavery on Antoinette's marriage with her husband Rochester.

Citations

[1] Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea's* "Antoinette" is an exploration of the character the "Mad Creole Woman" from Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*

it is a common literary practice to refer to Antoinette’s husband as “Rochester”.

[2] Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea* London: Penguin Books Student Edition 2001

[3] *ibid.*

[4] *ibid.*

[5] *ibid.*

[6] *ibid.*

[7] *ibid.*

[8] *ibid.*

[9] *ibid.*

[10] *ibid.*