

Contrasting representations of female characters in wide sargasso sea



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In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys uses her female characters predominately in a feminist style. The narrative itself is a rewriting of the literary history of *Jane Eyre* with a focus on the marginalised Bertha Mason both as a woman, a creole and in her financial status. While some female characters advocate modifying the inherited language of male oppressors, like Christophine does through her defiance against Rochester, others are subjugated by the arrival of male colonisers. These topics are explored through a range of events, symbols and metaphors.

Annette can be seen as a presentation of a female who is both assertive towards and oppressed by her male superiors. Olausson makes the argument that in Annette's adoption of feminine qualities 'such as beauty, fragility, dependency and passivity make it impossible for her to change actively their situation.' This sense of helplessness, in support of Olausson's status, is established at the start of the novel through Annette's repetition of the verb 'marooned' after her horse is poisoned. The verb, used in its past tense form, gives a sense of total isolation and marginalisation from society but also a helplessness in Annette's status with an inability to change their economic or social standing. Although, the readers narrator (Antoinette) states that 'she had hope every time she passed a looking glass.' As looking glasses are often used as symbols of identity, it may be implied that Annette's sense of self is shaped by her physical appearances. In the context of Victorian society, there was an expectation for women to adopt qualities of attractiveness while remaining sexually reserved. Sarah Strickney- Ellis stated that women have a 'high and holy duty' to look after the 'minor morals of life', referring to the need for women to suppress their base

desires. In this sense, Annette's suppression of her base desires and true identity makes her helpless against her male superiors as her false fragility make her vulnerable. In addition, as appearances are ephemeral, it may be suggested that Antoinette's sense of self is also non-permanent and therefore prefiguring her descent into madness. On the other hand, after the arrival of the 'new' colonisers, Antoinette states that 'my mother married Mr Mason'. The use of syntax here places Annette as the subject of the sentence, which indicates that she is given status and power through her married state. However, later in Part 1, the parrot Coco may be seen as a symbol of Annette's oppression. The parrot, as an exotic creature, may become emblematic of Annette's entrapment since Mason's arrival.

Antoinette says that 'after Mr Mason clipped this wings he grew very bad tempered.' The clipping of the wings by Mason may be symbolic of colonists entrapping of the native community, which in this instance is Antoinette both as a creole and as a woman. On the other hand, the 'bad tempered' nature of the parrot may reflect the social unrest caused by the arrival of the colonists and the violent nature of the colonised people. In this sense, it mirrors the aggressive behaviour of Annette towards Mason. In light of this, Olausson's statement is supported by Annette's feminine weakness results in her deterioration both mentally and physically.

Under a different interpretation, Smith states that 'Rochester's attempts to own Antoinette and force her to conform make [her] seem insane.' Through this statement, we can view the characterisation of Antoinette and the presentation of her marriage to be evidence of male subjugation by Rochester. Primarily, in the context of a Victorian law, prior to the Married

Women's Property Act 1870, Rochester has the rights to all of Antoinette's property and wealth as well as her, making her entirely dependent on him. This dependency can be seen through the portrayal of Antoinette. In Antoinette's second dream at the Convent, when she is led into the woods by a stranger, she states 'I make no effort to save myself.' This dream foreshadows the arrival of Rochester and her failure in asserting herself. Similarly, at the start of their sexual relationship, Rochester states that she had 'poor weapons, and they had not served her well'. He draws on the semantic field of military jargon, a technique which is used repeatedly through the novel, to express his need to dominate Antoinette, viewing her as a conquest. Ultimately, he does achieve this objective, using the adjective 'poor' to give Antoinette a sense of vulnerability and weakness in regards to his advances. In line with Smith's views, Rochester continues to attempt to 'own' his wife through changing her name to 'Bertha'. Names are often used to symbolically show the power of language in relation to identity, hence Rochester's attempts to alter this in order to change Antoinette's sense of selfhood. Antoinette hates the name but demurely accepts it, showing that her role is transforming into her mother's, a powerless and manhandled woman. While this subtle change in her name seems insignificant, at the end of Part 2, there is the use of the simile 'like a doll' to depict Antoinette which shows the full extent of Rochester's domination. By this point in the novel, Antoinette has become completely dependent on Rochester, shown by her likeness to an inanimate object. Although it may be argued that he's been objectifying her all along, it's debatable as to whether Rochester has complete domination of Antoinette, or whether Antoinette's doll-like exterior is only a sham, a mask to conceal her rebellious impulses. In either sense, <https://assignbuster.com/contrasting-representations-of-female-characters-in-wide-sargasso-sea/>

Antoinette's sense of selfhood is altered to the point of corruption and is therefore characterised to be helpless and vulnerable. In this sense, Smith's argument is validated in Antoinette's ending sense.

Contrastingly to these predominately vulnerable female characters, Christophine offers an 'important function' within the novel as 'powerful protector' in the eyes of Olausson. The first introduction of her powerful status is given when Antoinette says 'the talk about Christophine and obeah changed it' indicating that it is Christophine as an obeah practitioner that gives her status as a healer and witch. In the context of the time (circa 1840), the colonisers outlawed and punished the practice of obeah primarily because it gave the slave community a channel of communication. In light of this, Christophine is given her status through the power of her magic combined with an aspect of slave resistance. In her relations with Rochester, it is clear that Christophine is the dominant of the two. When they first meet, they stare at each other for a prolonged period of time and Rochester states that 'I looked away first and she smiled.' In an animalistic sense, they are attempting to establish dominance over one another, which Christophine does rather than Rochester. This may be due to Rochester's inherent sense of superiority and his dismissal of the black, lower classes however Christophine's primary dominance is contrary to the patriarchal society in which the characters are subject to. Furthermore, Christophine's advice offers insight into her values of independence. She tells Antoinette that 'women must have punks to live in this wicked world' which captures her view on feminine power. Spunks, meaning guts and courage both indicates a need for feminine strength as well as providing an example of colloquialism.

This may be seen as confronting the stereotypical feminine language by using language dominated by masculine concepts and values, reflecting a feminist technique in presenting strong female characters. In addition to this, Rochester describes that she has a 'judges voice' which gives Christophine power of judgement over Rochester's actions, elevating her status and allowing her to condemn over Rochester. On the other hand, by the end of the same confrontation, Christophine is forced to back down after being threatened with the law by Rochester. The final image Rhys presents of Christophine is that 'she walked away without looking back.' This image of finality is ambiguous as it can be interpreted in two main ways. Firstly it may be seen as a final assertion of her victory after having the last word in the conflict or it can be seen as a defeat from Christophine's perspective as Rochester's threats have left her unable to compete with him. Under this interpretation, Christophine ultimately fails in her role as 'powerful protector' as she too is subjugated by the colonising Rochester.

Overall, Rhys's blend of dependent and independent characters allows for a contrasting depiction of a women's role within the society she constructs. However, ultimately most of the female roles at the forefront of the novel are dominated by the colonisers, making the true independence of the characters questionable.