

# Reactions to aggression in Jean Rhy's wide Sargasso Sea



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

A vast area of the northern Atlantic Ocean houses a breed of seaweed that is addressed by the name sargassum. This portion of the northern Atlantic is known as the Sargasso Sea, notorious among passing sailors onto whose ships it is reputed to enmesh. Upon their meeting, friction is apparent between the surface of a ship's hull and the skin of a strand of sargassum, as it is between the characters presented in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The complex post-colonial mentalities of West Indian populations, both native and foreign, and the underlying cultural differences between the two led to the cultivation and display of behavioral and emotional resentment and aggression within this heterogeneous populace. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys's portrayal of the reactions that characters display to aggression from external sources is achieved through her constructive use of dialogue and introspection, in consonance with the specific and deliberate behavioral attributes she assigns to these characters.

Introspection can be defined as the "the examination or observation of one's own mental and emotional processes," the use of which was a fundamental element of the narrative style Rhys employed for this literary text. It allowed for an illustration of the thoughts and experiences of two particular characters, namely Rochester and Antoinette, by providing interchanging narration from their respective perspectives. The inclusion of introspection as a literary element in her narrative style allowed Rhys to present the emotional and mental responses that characters exhibited to various forms of aggression that they confronted. In part one of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, "The first day [she] had to go to the convent," Antoinette was targeted by a black girl and a white boy, and their reason to follow her, and subsequently "

push [Antoinette] and the books [she] was carrying," was made clear after the black girl said, "look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother." Accordingly, this particular case of harassment can be traced down to ethnic differences, supplemented by the circulation of stories about the Cosway family that made them prone to alienation by those in their community. Antoinette's reactions to the physical aggression she confronted was displayed by equipping her character with the ability to narrate this experience in the form of an introspective monologue; "I collapsed and began to cry (pg. 48)," her mind dictated, an unquestioned admittance to grieving clear evidence of the damage done to her emotional stability. She was reduced to a state through which "[she] could not answer," after being questioned by Mother St. Justine about her health, which further reflected the state of that this development put her in. Rochester, on the other hand, experienced a more subtle form of aggression; Daniel Cosway made numerous remarks disguised as personal insults, and with sexual connotations, during a conversation with Rochester, which from a psychological standpoint can be argued to be a form of aggressive behavior. He asked Rochester to "Give love to [his] sister- your wife," which was met with anger and frustration in Rochester; Rochester's reaction to Daniel's remark was presented through the direct portrayal of his mental processes, which showed that "disgust was rising in [him] like sickness. Disgust and rage."

Jean Rhys's use of dialogue in this text allowed characters the ability to vocalize the thoughts and emotions they developed in response to aggression they encountered. Part two of the novel contains a conversation between Rochester and Antoinette, where Rochester says, "I feel that this

place is my enemy and on your side (pg. 117)," in response to claims made by Antoinette, such as her inclination to believe that "[Rochester] has no right to ask questions about [her] mother and then refuse to listen to [her] answer." Narration from Rochester's perspective stated that she spoke "fiercely," suggesting that Antoinette's conduct must have remained aggressive during this conversation. Hence, the quote by Rochester provided above can be seen as a verbal response to Antoinette's aggression, depicting how Rochester felt alienated and lost, as if "this place is [his] enemy," whenever his only true companion in this foreign land turned against him. Soon, Christophine also bombards Rochester, much like Antoinette in the previous example, with claims such as his plot to "break [Antoinette] up," and reduce her to an insignificant, damaged state by allowing her desires "to make love to [him] till she drunk," diminish her independence. Unlike his earlier mentioned conversation with Antoinette, Rochester's lines show no trace of loneliness or vulnerability. In other words, the calm and unworried state of his responses in this dialogue with Christophine suggests that he didn't care about Christophine opinions on his marriage, and thus remained relatively unaffected by the aggression she presented him with.

In addition to the development of thoughts, which can then be vocally expressed, characters can also respond to aggression through body movement that would connote a specific form of emotion or feeling. Rhys's assignment of specific behavioral attributes to their respective characters allowed for these characters to present their reactions to aggression through the certain physical actions that would connote a certain emotion or feeling.

Tightened fists, quivering lips, fluttering eyelids, are all unobtrusive movements that someone can subconsciously execute and subsequently reveal the condition of their emotional and mental state. Antoinette, after her encounter with the girl and the boy that harassed her in part one of the novel, “pulled, and pulled at the bell (pg. 47)” of Mother St. Justine’s room, with her continuous knocking at the door an indicator of the shocked, hurried, and possibly traumatized state that harassment had put her in. Now, in addition to the purposeful action of pulling at Mother St. Justine’s bell, there were other minor physical behavioral attributes that her body was engaged in, such as her constant crying, the severity of which Rhys presented by writing that Antoinette “[cried] as fast as [Mother St. Justine] sponged [her] face.” The assignation of this temporary attribute to Antoinette’s character in this scenario is evidently trying to depict the burden and stress she was under because of her heritage, in addition to the damage done to her emotional wellbeing by the girl and boy she encountered.

When dealing with aggression in others, it is important to understand what kind of behavior or person makes you feel aggressive, how you should react to that aggression, and how you can control it. The story of *Wide Sargasso Sea* was built on conflicting cultures, during a time that cultivated class division. Aggression, the presentation of which and confrontation with, was inevitable given the chemistry of the characters included in the text, and hence formed an integral aspect of the text’s exploration of the human psyche.