



DOI: 10.1515/hssr -2016-0006

## **The White Creole in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: A Woman in Passage**

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### Abstract

Studies on Jean Rhys have been fragmentary concentrating on one or two aspects of Rhys's thematic concern with the alienation of the white creole without laying emphasis on Rhys's exploration of the Creole's identity. There has been no attempt to examine if the creole has to struggle harder and more than whites and blacks to come to terms with her personal identity until now. The answer is affirmative because the creole is a composite human being. Indeed, the white creole is the 'fruit' of a mixed union. Born into miscegenation, hybridity and creolization, the creole is physically, linguistically, socially and religiously a diverse human being. Within the scope of this paper, the term identity is used in a broad sense. The creole's personal identity refers to the different identities the Creole can have at different times and in different circumstances. Correspondingly, she must negotiate the white and black elements of her identity. The Creole must deal with the complexity of her identity through a web of tangled relationships with both whites and blacks. Read from this light, the personal identity of the creole is not "either/ or," but reluctantly "both/ and." In various ways, the creole is an 'Everyman.' The Creole undergoes an awareness, and is eventually, redefined through the image of the 'other.' Indeed, her jump toward her black friend Tia reflects Rhys's basic concern for a Caribbean society in which assimilation and personal identity must blend in a single humane goal, that is, to co-exist beyond the lines of race, gender, class and sex in order to avoid annihilation.

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Keywords

White Creole, Passage, Belonging, Becoming, Cross-Culturality, 'Otherness', Visibility.

Existing critiques of *Wide Sargasso Sea* pay little attention to Jean Rhys's concern with the issue of identity. Critics use Rhys's portrayal of the white creole to suit their particular critical points of view. Each school of Rhys criticism tries to find an underlying principle that governs the novelist's fictional intentions. In their attempts to find these principles, critics usually fragment the consciousness of the white creole because their individual biases usually limit them either to the White English or to the Black African-Caribbean sides of her identity. Until now, no critic has attempted a comprehensive study of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an exploration of the identity of the white creole as a 'Whole.' This requires a valorization of the creoleness of the subject under examination and directs the study towards an approach that takes into account the fragmented, though connected elements of the white creole identity.

In this regard, creolization offers a relational model to the white creole identity. According to Glissant, the French Martiniquan Caribbean theorist, creolization, "one of the ways of forming a complex mix, is not prompted solely by defining of identity, but also by its relation to everything possible as well— the mutual mutations generated by this interplay of relations"(Glissant, 1997:42). Creolization, Glissant asserts, brings identity into relation and not to universal claims (Glissant, 1997:42). The basic unit of study turns to be not the white creole as a separate entity whose identity clashes with a cross-cultural reality, but an interactional field within which the white creole struggles to make contact with others and articulates herself. Nothing is more fundamental in the analysis of identity than relational patterns and interactions. The following review of some of the critical literature on Rhys is intended to inform and broaden the reader's understanding of the white creole identity.

Like her white creole character in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys's personal identity hovers between Englishness, Africanness and West-Indianness. "The child Rhys was born Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams in Dominica in 1890 to a white creole mother and a free-spirited imaginative Welsh father

whom she admits to have romanticized” (*Smile Please* 72). She was brought up in the West Indies<sup>1</sup> among ‘whites’, ‘blacks’, and ‘coloureds’. In 1907, she left her warm edenic island home for mother country England. Rhys’s consciousness is, henceforth, at once West Indian and English, and the composite of all finds itself expressed in her white creole identity. She embodies both ‘white’<sup>2</sup> and ‘black,’ ‘First’ and ‘Third’ world sensibilities. This explains the pronouncement she made a few years before she died, “It is in myself [...] All. Good, evil, love, hate, life, death, beauty, ugliness” (*Smile Please* 161). With this statement, Rhys explores not only her personal identity, but also that of the protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Rhys’s personal identity as a white creole makes it difficult for critics to give a clear-cut response about her literary identity. It follows that the question of Rhys’s placement as a writer is not entirely resolved. While European and American critics place her among English writers, Caribbean critics consider her as a West Indian writer. However, critics on both sides of the Atlantic were amazed with Rhys’s craft in re-assessing the white creole’s mixed identity. Her re-assessment is meant to undermine the lies perpetrated and maintained about the creole and the West Indies. These lies are revealed in a confidence to an interviewer: “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, 1968: 5). Nevertheless, this paper does not approach *Wide Sargasso Sea* by reference to Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, but as a text standing by itself. In what is considered a stroke of genius, Rhys writes a life and an identity for the white creole. Not only does Rhys vindicate the fictional white creole, but also, in some sense, the white creole herself in real life.

Rhys renders the struggle of the white creole artistically. Antoinette Cosway’s struggle takes the form of a journey, or more accurately, of a quest. Throughout this journey, not only does the white creole struggle to survive in a cross-cultural world, but perhaps more importantly, she thrives on her creoleness to deal with the white and black sides of her identity. In “Women Versions of Creole Identity in Caribbean Fiction,” Sylvia Scherff

maintains that Rhys's novel exhibits three distinct stages of development and that each stage is centered around a particular thematic concern (Scherff, 2004: 368). Scherff uses the French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep's (1873- 1957) concept of the rites of passage and the Tripartite structure of these rites to understand the white creole's journey through life. In *Les Rites de Passage: Étude Systématique des Rites*, Gennep showed that the tripartite structure of the rites of passage is based on a topographical model that is, on the idea of transgressing boundaries (Gennep, 2004: 40). A person who transgresses boundaries is for some time in a peculiar situation in a place where boundaries meet, where different worlds come into contact.

Rites of passage, Scherff explains, consist first of the phase of separation from former conditions (Scherff, 2004: 369). They include, secondly, the marginal phase of initiation/descent, during which a person is situated between two worlds (370). Scherff elaborates on the marginal phase of Gennep's rites of passage by bringing another anthropological concept coined by Victor Turner (1920-1983) that of liminality<sup>3</sup>. Rites of passage end with a third phase, one of return, which serves to integrate the transformed person into the old or a new order. At the beginning of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette Cosway is separated "from the privileged world of the plantation system which used to secure her whiteness, and led to some place of disorientation, into ritual marginality" (Scherff, 2004: 371) where she is even inferior to blacks. As a 'liminal' passenger (Turner), Antoinette floats, so to speak, between two radically opposed worlds. Through this arrangement, Antoinette becomes an allegorical figure in search of a definite personal, social, and cultural identity. This brings to the fore the variety of responses to the characterization of the white creole in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Generally, critics are divided between praising the white creole's stubborn will to live in a tenuous cross-cultural world and criticising her passivity and tendency toward victimization. The latter see the white creole as passive and read her journey as a failure. This paper, however, rebuts the claims of critics, who see the white creole as a passive victim. Instead, this paper views the creole as an active agent, who struggles to come to terms with her identity. Though the white creole waits too long to act, at last she reconciles the seemingly opposite sides of her identity. Rhys allows her

character to deal with her identity in a subtle and complex way. Rhys, indeed, is keen at rusing with subtlety. “This is the hallmark of Antoinette or any other white creole, whose passivity and fatalism, so often commented upon by critics, is paradoxically matched by a stubborn will to live and the kind of tenacity common to survivors” (Frickey, 1990: 3). Essentially, the white creole’s interest in knowing her identity has a didactic function. In her search, the white creole teaches the readers about the multidimensional representation of truth about the self.

This paper will first praise creoleness. It will discuss the special qualities of the protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, namely, Antoinette Cosway and give a better understanding of the forces that shaped her present status: her mixed background and historical events. The second part will discuss the dynamics of locating and negotiating creoleness. It records the white creole’s stories of survival through her identification with both ‘whites’ and ‘blacks.’ Through these stories, the readers can see Antoinette in Rochester, her ‘white’ husband, in Christophine, her ‘black’ nanny, in Tia, her ‘black’ friend and even in Amélie, her ‘mulatto’ servant. What unites the white creole with ‘whites’, ‘blacks,’ and ‘coloreds’ is that she is a combination of the three. Christophine explains to Rochester that Antoinette “is not béké like you, but she is béké, and not like us either” (WSS128). Rhys, indeed, operates postcolonial meetings between the unlikes to help the creole in her journey of self-discovery. Antoinette may be flawed, but there is redemption in her defects. Both the white creole and the reader can learn extensively about the white creole identity, which is essentially an identity in motion. The two parts hinge on a full understanding of Rhys’s heterogenous vision, which is bringing uncooperative subjects together. This requires a Glissantian critical approach, which recognizes the syncreticity and the blending of Caribbean and English elements.

### **1. The Value of being a White Creole**

This section values Antoinette Cosway’s creoleness. Antoinette’s creoleness transcends the racial and national boundaries between whiteness and blackness, England and Africa, respectively. Discerning the limited understanding with which the white creole has been reviewed, this chapter pays homage to Rhys’s craft in delving into the delicate sensibilities of the white creole in the narrative of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. From the beginning of

her career, Rhys was basically concerned with the question of the white creole identity in the West Indies. Accordingly, her five novels and her short stories tend to address issues connected to the creole identity. Thus, Rhys's main concern revolves around foregrounding the value of being a female creole. The Creole makes her home in neither place: rather, she lives and continues to thrive in a linguistic space, the "white hush between two sentences" (Walcott, qtd. in Wilson, 1989:71).

In the narrative of *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys proceeds with the belief that despite the dilemmas and vicissitudes of the white creole's process of coming to terms with her creoleness, the redefinition and the opening up of Antoinette Cosway's identity to the dynamics of difference, and perhaps more importantly, to the restless mutations of hybridity and creolization can be thoroughly examined within median contexts, to use Milan Kundera's terminology, notably, the Caribbean context and its chequered history. In this respect, Rhys's text engages critically with the historically specific and dynamic location of her white creole's protagonist in the Caribbean.

Impressed by the twin experiences of slavery and plantation, the Jamaican island in the historical narrative and fictional narrative of *Wide Sargasso Sea* has a substantive imperial and (post)colonial history. The classificatory racial and national imperatives borne by such a history have an impact on identities uneasily categorized in racial terms. That is the first insight the readers get from Antoinette's statement: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (*WSS* 15). Such a situation produces the ambivalent position of the white creole among 'whites' and 'blacks' in the ethnically and racially diverse Caribbean community. In fact, the Caribbean is populated by different people, who came from two main continents, that is, Europe and Africa. Historically, Africans and Europeans entered into a pattern of forced association that encouraged cross-racial and cross-cultural interactions. Subsequent to such rich interracial, cultural and linguistic encounters is the birth of new forms of identity, like, the hybrid, mongrel identity of the white creole.

To use Derek Walcott's vase metaphor to describe such a problematic identity seems to be adequate here: "Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its

symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirloom whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles” (Nobel Prize Lecture). In his steps, the noted historian Lowell Joseph Ragatz, in his influential work *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean* (1928), argues: “Miscegenation, so contrary to Anglo-Saxon nature, resulted in the rapid rise of a race of human hybrids. Planter society was based upon whites and blacks, removed to unfamiliar scenes, and their unhappy offspring. The saddest pages of imperial history relate the heartrending attempts to effect adjustment between these discordant elements” (qtd. in Gregg, 1995:110). By means of the above mentioned quotes, the novel herein examined is about the white creole’s shifting arrangement of her fractured self and home. The white creole finds herself in an island where she must effect an adjustment between the ‘discordant’ elements of her creole identity mainly through her co-habitation with whites and blacks. In spite of the creole’s displacement and dislocation in Coulibri Estate, the island is seen here as fostering relation.

The island, therefore, plays a vital role in the process of unravelling the substance of the white creole identity mainly through her relations with ‘whites’ and ‘blacks.’ Thus, the relational understanding of hybrid creole identity insists on fragmentation rather than essence, as it brings the creole into contact with the others, or more accurately, with different human beings. The very notion of relation presupposes the acknowledgment to a greater degree of the significant and ongoing impact of migration, diaspora and transnationalism in the Caribbean.

### ***1.1. The Migrancy of the White Creole: A Dialogue Barely Begun***

When considering questions of creole identity in the Caribbean, Stuart Hall and Juan Flores have insisted on the necessity to “think diaspora.” Indeed, such an approach rejects the resolved binary constructions of the creole identity and prefers its “diasporic wandering [...] this cosmopolitan consciousness” (Said, qtd. in Chambers, 1993: 4). The white creole is, indeed, a migrant whose identity travels between different identities, races, and spaces freely. So, the white creole is inducted into an in-between state and composite culture in which the simple dualism of her ‘First’ and

'Third' worlds collapses and there emerges what Homi Bhabha calls a 'differential community,' and what Felix Guattari refers to as 'the process of heterogenesis' (qtd. in Chambers, 1993: 5).

Besides, the white creole's migrancy involves a "discontinuous state of being, a form of picking a quarrel with where she comes from and where she belongs" (Said, qtd. in Chambers, 1993: 4). However, Rhys does not provide a clear-cut response about the white creole's belonging. Antoinette is always on the run and has not really had a home base (Spivak, 1990:120). Rhys demonstrates that belonging, for the gendered and cross-racialized protagonist, is always paradoxical and contingent on time and place. The pleasure and the paradox of the white creole's exile is that she belongs wherever she is (Lamming the Epigraph to *The Pleasures of Exile*). In this sense, her origins rebuff purity, which is celebrated by genealogical fantasies. Her origins ignite her struggle for recognition of the multiple tangled roots entailed by the historical context. This engenders a series of genetic departures and returns, which undermine any fixed notion of origin in Rhys's version of the white creole identity. In the narrative of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette belongs neither to Europe nor to Africa, but to the Caribbean, to the 'Sargasso Sea.'

### 1.1.2. *The Sargasso Sea: A New Conception of Home*

Central to the expression of the white creole's tangled roots in the narrative of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the matrix metaphor of the 'sargasso sea.' Literally, the 'Sargasso Sea' is denotative of the area of water between the Americas, Europe and Africa. The "'Sargasso Sea' is so different from any other place on earth that it may well be considered a definite geographic region" (Carson, 200: 117). The Sargasso Sea is physically defined by the "floating sargassum weed" drawn "from distant coasts" (Carson, 200: 117-119). The varied origins of the Sargassum in the Sargasso stand for the origins of the white creole. Besides, the 'Sargasso Sea' witnessed the transportation of many ethnic groups to the Caribbean to work in the plantations. According to Kutzinski, "the area is a precarious community of 'exiles' grafted onto a foreign landscape of islands and coastal rimlands, an ever-shifting community of migrants" (qtd. in Arnold, 2001:12).

As an exiled subject, the white creole has been displaced. Her connections with her place of origins are severed almost immediately upon



her arrival in the plantations. Nonetheless, Antoinette's sense of dislocation drives Rhys's narrative. Like Hyacinth in John Riley's *The Unbelonging*, Antoinette digests her 'otherness,' her whiteness and performs her Caribbean identity so she can feel empowered in her new homeland in the Sargasso Sea (Perry). While all nations are, in Benedict Anderson's words, "imagined communities," this phrase has particular resonance for the home of the white creole in the narrative of Rhys. "The imagined community in the narrative of the white creole is the 'contaminated' community of the 'sargasso sea', a world imagined and inscribed from afar with racial and cultural heterogeneity where there is neither this nor that" (Kutzinski, qtd. in Arnold, 2001:12). The 'Sargasso Sea' presents Antoinette Cosway with multiple choices for choosing where to belong: to the Caribbean or to mother continent Africa, or to mother country England.

Like the Caribbean, the white creole is a child of many parents, namely, of Africa and Europe. Both the Caribbean and Antoinette, according to Kutzinski, are in a prolonged state of exile, but Antoinette still can travel, disperse and return (qtd. in Arnold 13). It is not a question about privileging one country over the other, but rather to understand that the Caribbean connects the white creole to Africa and to Europe, which are believed to be interrelational. In this regard, one can draw parallels between the Caribbean as a child named after the parents it lost (Brathwaite, 1971:17) and the white creole. The white creole can only live in a place like the 'Sargasso Sea' where her different creolized elements are allowed to co-exist. Rhys orders chaos in her protagonist's identity, then allows order by bringing the disparate fragments altogether. In that, Rhys anticipates Silvio Torres-Saillant's theory of the necessity to work with disparate fragments of a whole that is, at present, exceedingly difficult to grasp:

The scholar must develop the rare ability to tolerate impurities, to conceive of a space of in-betweenness, where things enjoy a sort of ontological elasticity that permits them to be neither this nor that. A conceptually flexible framework alone can manage to converse with the multiplicity of components that have gone into the sociocultural formation of the people of the region and can enable the comparative literary historian to delve into the underlying congruity of visibly disparate elements. (qtd. in Arnold, 2001:3)

Rhys is considered as a foremother in initiating what comes to be later called contemporary creole writing. Through the imaginative creation of the character of Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Rhys locates creoleness in a space where it enjoys “a sort of ontological elasticity,” to quote Torres-Saillant.

## 2. Locating and Negotiating Creoleness

Critics often refer to the protagonist of *WSS* as a white creole with little attention paid to the cross-racial and cultural meanings the term implies. According to Brathwaite, in Jamaica at the beginning of the nineteenth century, creole was used in the Spanish sense of *criollo*, meaning “born in, native to, committed to the area of living,” and it was used in relation to both whites and black slaves (xv). He further explains:

Creole describes a situation where the society concerned is caught up ‘in some kind of colonial arrangement’ with a metropolitan European power, on the one hand, and a plantation arrangement on the other; and where the society is multiracial, but organized for the benefit of a minority of European origin. (Brathwaite, 1971: xv)

In defining creole in this way, Brathwaite locates Antoinette’s creoleness at a cross-road between ‘whites’ and ‘blacks.’ Also, creoleness translates itself at a physical level involving creolized physical attributes.

Rochester, the white English husband, describes Antoinette, as follows: “Her eyes are too large [...]. Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either [...]. The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful” (*WSS* 56-59). Her coloured half-brother, Daniel Cosway, confirms Antoinette’s creolized beauty when he says: “Pretty face, soft skin, pretty colour—not yellow like me” (*WSS* 104). Locating Antoinette’s creoleness in an in-between position is meant to evoke the multiple consequences of colonialism and plantation system on the white creole identity translated into a duality that often confuses and baffles at the very beginning. As a person of mixed descent, Antoinette is caught in the double bind of being forced to: experience what it is to be a person of mixed heritage or to primordialize an essential identity so that she may occupy a space in

the existing racial and cultural hierarchy.

From the outset, the readers are introduced to the creole child whose identity is fragmented by racial and cultural categories. She is haunted by issues of identity throughout the novel, beginning with the fact that she is not quite white, not quite black, not quite a colonizer and not quite a colonized. Besides, visual verification of her identity is what Antoinette longs for as a small child since she looks different from the other children. This difference leaves Antoinette feeling that she does not quite fit in. Despite her difference in looks, being a white creole is an identity that Antoinette holds onto tenaciously. Antoinette, conscious that she is inextricably related to the others, prefers to hover between whiteness and blackness. She is free to align herself with essentialised notions of identity by identifying either with whites or blacks until she experiences epiphany and transforms herself through the power of creolization. In this way, the white creole has numerous identities at her disposal. More accurately, she disposes of a wider set of 'image identities.'

### ***2.1. The Creole: White Nigger/White Cockroach***

In post-emancipated Jamaica, the white creole has a set of 'image identities.' She is viewed either as a "white nigger" or as a "white cockroach." Antoinette explains these images to Rochester in the following way: "It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers" (*WSS* 85). Because white creoles and 'blacks' are more likely to share the same unprivileged economic statuses in post-emancipated Jamaica, the term 'nigger' applies for both whites and blacks. It is class that determines the white creole's racial identity. While the meaning of "white nigger" is clear from the context, the derivation of the phrase "white cockroach" is puzzling. In his compilation of Creole proverbs, John Jacob Thomas includes several labels, which illustrate that in the slave/ African derived usage, the 'colonizer' or 'master' is the 'oppressor', the bird, while the 'Negro' is the 'oppressed', the insect/cockroach (qtd. in Smith, 2002:99). Throughout the novel, Antoinette is called alternately "white cockroach" and "white nigger" with the result that she has 'image identities,' but no real identity.

Correspondingly, the white creole can pass for a white, but for a “white nigger.” To ‘blacks,’ she is a “white cockroach.” Her status as a white creole is, therefore, ambivalent. In this regard, Helen Tiffin views:

The White Creole as a double outsider condemned to self-consciousness, homelessness, a sense of inescapable difference and even deformity in the two societies by whose judgments she always condemns herself. She is ‘White nigger’ to the Europeans and ‘white cockroach’ to the Blacks.” (Tiffin, qtd. in Finch, 2008: 47-48).

Through this self-revelatory quote, and as mentioned above, the English and West Indian societies attribute “image identities” to the white creole.

As one can easily infer, the white creole is overwhelmed by racial categorization: she is neither English, nor French; neither ‘black,’ nor truly ‘white’; neither Creole, nor Caribbean. She is called everything from a ‘nigger’ to a slave-owner. Therefore, she is both and neither. Nevertheless, the study looks at Antoinette “as a compromised figure between ‘whites’ and ‘blacks,’ an identityless oxymoron—a white black” (Finch, 2008: 48). Being a ‘white’ and ‘black’ implies that the identity in question is circumstantial, interchangeable, and perhaps more importantly, relational. To put it differently, being a white creole is a shifting ‘signifier’ of a shifting identity: “So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong...” (*WSS*, 85). By uttering this statement, Antoinette Cosway unravels her status as a “variously positioned native” (Parry, qtd. in Raiskin, 1966: 98).

## ***2.2. The Creole: “A Varilyously Positioned Native”***

To convey the variousness of the white creole’s position, this paper foregrounds a locational relational Glissantian approach to the white creole’s identity. Edouard Glissant articulates the most suggestive model of creolization in relation to Rhys’s notion of the white creole multiple identity positions. Glissant conceives the white creole identity as formulated through the interrelation and interdependence of two cultural processes: “Relation<sup>4</sup>, a state of constant metamorphosis, and Antillanité, a conscious self-expression, a voicing of multiple Caribbean specificities without claiming finality or “fixing” diversity” (Glissant, 1997: 89). The

product of these cross-cultural processes is creolization: the representation of relation and the hope for realization of antillanité. To put it differently, creolization is not simply a validation of chaos,<sup>5</sup> but an acknowledgement of the need for direction and awareness within interactive processes.

As mentioned above, Rhys orders chaos in Antoinette's identity, but she allows order through a web of entangled processes of identification between the targeted subject and 'white' and 'black' objects. Antoinette's deliberate wandering between identity positions recalls Glissant's concept of "errantry": "Errantry deconstructs the notion of identity as founded upon a single origin or root and instead posits identity as rhizomatic, taking on multiple imaginative and relative forms" (Glissant, 1997: 95). Antoinette's identity turns to be "a source of pluralistic aesthetic broadening that feeds on a fluidly rhizomatic<sup>6</sup> vision of identity" (Glissant, qtd. in Coates, 2001:111-112).

"Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind relation in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the 'Other' (Glissant, 1997: 11). Glissant argues against a fixed concept of 'Being' to assert that creolization is an infinite mode of questioning and becoming" (Glissant, 1997: 160-161). Ultimately, Glissant expresses his poetics of relation in favour of a relational identity. In what is considered a stroke of genius, Rhys re-appropriates the creole's "double consciousness," using Du Bois's terminology, into the narrative voices, languages and focalization in the novel. Somewhat like Virginia Woolf's protagonist, Orlando, the many facets of Antoinette's identity can never be synthesised into a singular identity defined by one race, one space, one language, and one religion.

In this way, the "variousness" of the white creole identity's positions figures textually in its other racial, spatial, linguistic, and religious varieties as well. Rhys operates within a poetic discourse that gives equal attention to the two sides of Antoinette's identity. "Rhys deploys a rhetoric of self-figuration that incorporates the familial and the social, the concrete and the numinous, the impersonal and the personal" (Parry, qtd. in Gregg, 1995: 37) in ways that accord with Benita Parry's definition of the Creole "as ineradicably historical, occupying a diversity of positions, the site of multiple and competing identities that are never given but always achieved through social processes" (Parry, qtd. in Gregg, 1995: 37). Consequently, Antoinette's creole identity is not constituted by connection, but by

movement (Thacker, 2003:201). Through this arrangement, Rhys deliberately creolizes the historical, familial and social context of her heroine and causes her hybrid identity to 'migrate' between England and the West Indies, English and Kreole pidgin, Christianity and Obeah and, perhaps more importantly, between 'whites' and 'blacks.'

### ***2.3. Breaching the Gates: White Skin, Black Kin***

The duality that baffles Antoinette is given full exploration through her identification with separate 'white' and 'black' characters. They are credibly presented in the first place as individuals, then as representatives of two different worlds. But, at the same time, they stand for two sets of human qualities which in combination make for wholeness, for creoleness in Antoinette. Creoleness, according to the writers of *In Praise of Creoleness*, is "the interactional or transactional aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements" (287). Antoinette's identity is defined not simply as 'white' or 'black,' but as constantly negotiated or, one might say suspended between these two poles. Recalling Glissant's description of identity as a shifting space of becoming, Rhys's protagonist experiences identity as both multiple and impermanent. Accordingly, the creole identity can never be narrowed to one perspective. The reader will not understand the complexity of the white creole identity unless he/she is presented with characters, who represent the opposite sides of her identity. Therefore, the white creole enters into a dialogue with different racial groups that are believed to form the essence of her mixed identity.

In terms of spatial categorization, the white creole belongs neither to Europe nor to Africa, but to both. Antoinette shuttles between different geographical projections of her identity (Thacker, 2003: 203). This trajectory is matched in the narrative's switching between Jamaica and England. The setting of the narrative, like Antoinette's identity, moves between the West Indies and England. As already mentioned, the Jamaican island in the Caribbean connects the white creole to both mother countries, to both continents, that is, to Africa and Europe. For instance, Antoinette's mother was born in Martinique, a French colony and moves to live in Coulibri Estate, Jamaica, an English colony. For the white creole, home is here in the Caribbean and somewhere in England or Africa.

Home, for the white creole, is here and there. It is both real and unreal. That is why, Antoinette often wonders if England really exists: "Is it true that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up" (*WSS* 67). To Antoinette, England is unreal and like a dream. Christophine, her nanny, confirms the unreality of England: "England you think there is such a place" (*WSS* 92). However, for Christophine as well as Antoinette, the Caribbean is real. For Antoinette, the Jamaican island is the most beautiful place in the world: "it is not possible that there can be anywhere else so beautiful as Coulibri" (*WSS* 108).

As one can easily infer, Rhys scrutinizes the creole's notions of England and Africa and their connections to the Caribbean. Besides, the 'black' side of Antoinette's creole identity is represented by the naturally wild landscape of the Jamaican countryside, and the white side by reference to England. The switch between different spatial locations is the key to understand the identity of the white creole, which is the site of the interplay between different spaces. Collating these opposite sides together, Rhys foregrounds the spatial creoleness of her protagonist. In this regard, Jean D'Costa notes, "A reader of Rhys usually puzzles over her viewpoint looking for and against both perspectives. Her insider-outsider's treatment of England, France and the Caribbean gnaws at comfortable ethnocentrism" (D'Costa, qtd. in Frickey, 1990: 9). In his steps, Thomas Staley speaks of that special quality which sets Rhys apart from other writers: "It became clear to me from the first reading of her work that her background and culture not only set Rhys apart from her contemporary novelists, but also shaped a widely different sensibility and radical consciousness" (Staley, qtd. in Frickey, 1990:10).

As far as the white creole's religious identity is concerned, connectedness between the two sides of her mixed identity is viable and workable through the parallel between Christianity and Obeah. The Creole in *WSS* transcends the duality that baffles her through spirituality. In "Reflections of Obeah in Jean Rhys's Fiction," Elaine Campbell pays homage to a critic and writer of West Indian literature, namely, Wilson Harris, who perhaps best locates the value of creoleness in the intersection between Christianity and Obeah (qtd. in Frickey 59). Harris points out the

creole's dual ancestry, and identifies her imaginative insights as both 'white' and 'black', a combination Harris exemplifies by Christianity and Obeah (qtd. in Frickey, 1990:60). Besides, Campbell cites Harris's statement about Obeah which reflects significantly a state of mind or embarrassment in both 'black' and 'white' West Indians, "a conviction of necessary magic, necessary hell-fire or purgatory through which to re-enter 'lost' origins, 'lost' heavens, 'lost' divinity" (Harris146).

Further to Harris's statement, Campbell explains that Rhys' 'mythic' treatment of West Indian Obeah has enabled Antoinette to transcend the social barriers imposed by skin colour. Obeah allows Antoinette to erase racial barriers with a resultant free flow between the 'black' and 'white' sides of her mixed identity. While acknowledging the power of magic in the creole, critics also consider Antoinette as a Christ figure. Like Christ, in the direst and most trying of circumstances, Antoinette remains faithful to God's ability to resurrect her and allows her rebirth. After experiencing all the pain and abuse Rochester could dish out, Antoinette entrusts her life, destiny, and her creole identity to the Holy Spirit and the Spirit empowers her. Thanks to spirituality and the magic of Obeah, Antoinette is resurrected. The resurrection of the white creole is in perfect accord with magic and the will of God simultaneously. She experiences a new revelation, which is the ultimate proof of her self-acceptance as a Christian Obeah.

#### **2.4. The Creole, 'Doudou Ché': a 'Béké' à la Kreole**

Antoinette's linguistic identity is also creolized. The white creole speaks both standard English and 'Kreole' dialect. To convey this, Rhys creolizes the language of the white creole. In the narrative of *WSS*, Creole, French patois and 'Black' English creolize and carnivalize English. Each language adds a dimension to Antoinette's identity that would be lost without it. This linguistic plurality is testament to Antoinette's white creole identity, and one that opens onto a broader ethno-cultural realm manifested in a complex mix between different languages and cultures. Indeed, Rhys reclaims the patois, reworks the language and form of Standard English to help her heroine in the dynamics of negotiating her creoleness.

By means of code-switching and vernacular transcription, Rhys achieves the dual result of abrogating standard English and appropriating a dialect as



a culturally significant discourse. In this way, Rhys “operates within a polydialectal continuum with a creole base,” as Jean D’Costa argues (qtd. in Ashcroft et al, 1989: 45). Indeed, the text of the novel moves between the literary “King’s English” and the oral “Jamaican English,” sometimes in dialogue and sometimes in the middle of a narrative passage: “Adieu foulard, adieu madras, or Ma belle ka di maman li. My beautiful girl said to her mother (No it is not like that. Now listen. It is this way). She’d be silent, or angry for no reason, and chatter to Christophine in patois” (*WSS*76). This “new” use of language constitutes a local poetics that values the duality of the white creole identity.

Rhys creolizes Antoinette’s language to show that while the English language connects the creole with whiteness, the French patois and the creole dialect connect her with blackness. Her ability to speak and understand both English and Kreole make it easier for her to negotiate the ‘white’ English and ‘black’ Afro-Caribbean sides of her identity. From this vantage point, the readers value the creoleness of Antoinette since it foregrounds relational poetics, or to put it in Glissant’s terminology, a poetics of relation. Indeed, part of the gifts of being a white creole is the ability to put a creole discourse into action in a standard language. In describing the white creole identity in terms of a creolized linguistic discourse, Rhys engages with the kinds of textual ‘utopia’ which has fascinated Barthes.

The text in *WSS* provides that space “uncontaminated by doxa” (qtd. in Coates, 112) where the two main sides of Antoinette’s identity can be fully explored. Thus, *WSS* attempts to create “a rejuvenated literary language (which is neither fantastical nor realistic) through the juxtaposition, intermingling and synthesis of two traditions: the written and the oral” (qtd. in Coates, 2001: 112). It is the novel’s infusion of orality, its incorporation of songs and languages other than standard English that keeps the dynamics of negotiating creoleness constantly in motion. An instance of orality filling the pages of *WSS* with vividness is assured through Christophine’s songs:

I couldn’t always understand her patois songs [...] But she taught me the one that meant “The little ones grow old, the children leave us, will they come back?” and the one about the cedar tree flowers which only last for a day. The

music was gay but the words were sad and her voice often quavered and broke on the high note. 'Adieu.' Not adieu as we said it, but a dieu, which made more sense after all. The loving man was lonely, the girl was deserted, the children never came back. Adieu. (*WSS*, 18)

Through Christophine's songs, the readers grow familiar with the complexity of the fluid, multilingual creole linguistic and historical reality.

One is inclined to argue that creolized language is a site where the encounter between the many-sides of Antoinette's character is possible. This is a view which Young has endorsed, arguing that the creolized language model "preserves the real historical forms of cultural contact" (61). Thanks to Christophine, Antoinette understands the meanings of the songs though sung in patois and connects with her Afro-Caribbean heritage. Besides, the oral tradition performs a subversion of the colonial space, that is, the plantation. Reading the colonial past through songs and orality thus constitutes an alternative history based on creolization and points the way forward to a reinstatement of a creolized poetics at the heart of the fictional creation of the white creole character. In this respect, in his seminal essay "Lieu clos, parole ouverte," Glissant shows how the subversive strategies of the oral tradition developed an open poetics (82). Glissant argues that it was precisely the throwing-together of so many diverse cultural elements in this "Locus Solus" (82) which triggered the process of "métissage culturel," making of the plantation "un des ventres du monde" (89).

By way of concluding these connected sub-parts, Rhys poeticizes the two poles of the white creole's identity in a variety of different forms. "The most obvious form is through whiteness and blackness obfuscated by Antoinette's origin of mixed European and 'Negro' descent, through her spatial belonging to both England and Jamaica, through her belief in Christianity and Obeah, and also through her English and Kreole languages" (Spaul, 1989: 94). For Rhys as well as for Antoinette, creole identity expresses itself in two contrasting climates, two landscapes, two societies, and two ways of feeling and thinking. To put it in Nebeker's words, the creole is caught in the emotional cross-fire of contrasting cultures, conflicting religions, warring psyche - all of which are, ultimately, one and the same (Nebeker, 1981: 139). Rhys believes that the creole must

negotiate her mixed identity through her relations with others. These are exemplified within two poles, which are believed to constitute Antoinette's creole identity, namely, 'whites' and 'blacks.' It is in terms of these poles that Rhys projects her interpretation of common events by bringing out what she sees as significant for the white creole to come to terms with her mixed identity.

More significantly, the truth about the white creole identity is seldom one-sided: "So we have to accept that the other side has something to give us as well [...] So there's always the possibility of the meeting. But the meeting has to be a real one in which we understand ourselves" (Brodber *Myal* 50). Correspondingly, Rhys addresses the theme of identity from a unique vantage point, which thrives on creoleness. Accordingly, Rhys sends her creole heroine on a journey of self-examination and, henceforth, self-rediscovery. To do so, Rhys matches the form and content of her novel. *WSS* is, indeed, a Bildungsroman, that is, the story has the white creole's quest for identity at the core of its plot. As such, the story "chronicles the gropings and growth of a hybrid personality, the frequent changes in locations and relationships, and the transformations of the heroine effected thereby" (Baer, 1981: 80).

The white creole embarks on a journey to piece together the fragments of her identity. Her journey records her life from early childhood into adulthood. Besides, her journey has both physical and metaphysical dimensions. In addition to images appropriate for novels about a journey conveyed mainly through the motif of the road, Antoinette has repeated dreams of departures and arrivals (Baer, 1981:87). "Antoinette almost always travels under duress, 'voyaging' between different races, classes, religions, languages, cultures, and geographies. Against all obstacles, Antoinette is motivated to take this arduous journey" (Baer, 1981:87). At the very heart of the creole's quest is the image of the split self. Rhys foregrounds the quest of a subject-in-process, a 'thetic' subject, using Kristeva's terminology, rather than a transcendent and stable subject. The central conflict in *WSS* grows out of a crisis of identity (Erikson, 1992). The creole, unable to answer the question "Who am I?" searches for possible answers through the outside world.

In brief, it is this lack of identity which constitutes the basis of Antoinette's quest. Antoinette's psychic unease is simply figured in a set of

external tropes (Thacker, 2003: 202). Her identity shifts between past and present struggling to develop an identification of place in her memory. For Antoinette, therefore, the past becomes as real as the present, not because her life lacks change, but because she struggles to piece together the seemingly opposite poles of her identity. Correspondingly, Antoinette struggles for “integration instead of split, for feeling instead of numbness, for herself instead of mirror images. She wants to see herself in the others. She wants also to be seen. The creole struggles to perceive reality, not a reflection of it” (Comfort, 1994: 90). Aware of her predicament, Antoinette fights for life through her survival strategies.

With each new cultural encounter whether in the Coulibri Estate, the convent, with Rochester, in the attic, Antoinette keeps re-negotiating her identity to fit in and to belong. Readers unable to perceive and value Antoinette’s creoleness fail to understand the complexity of her identity. It is to *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an exploration of the possibilities of bringing wholeness to the divided self of the creole that readers respond with such a sense of personal involvement. Rhys acknowledges that each part of Antoinette’s identity must be restored if both the parts and the whole are to develop fully. This assemblage of the white creole’s different parts of identity is cast as a process that culminates in a vision of ‘wholeness’ that has the promise to deliver both social justice as well as emotional and spiritual transformation at the level of personal identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Note to the reader: The study uses the terms West Indies, Caribbean and Antilles exchangeably. This variety in labels is explained by critic Michael Dash in this way: "the writing of the Caribbean region is, perhaps, a matter of demonstrating the opacity and inexhaustibility of a world that resists systematic construction or transcendent meaning" (qtd. in Arnold, 2001: 16).

<sup>2</sup> Note to the reader: I have put quotes around the terms 'white' and 'black,' 'master' and 'slave,' 'colonizer' and colonized to indicate my hesitation in using these labels since there is an inherent racial, national, economic and socio-cultural hierarchy in such terms. The study owes this idea to Barbara Perry.

<sup>3</sup> Characteristically, liminality, in Turner's sense, is unstructured, ambivalent and paradoxical. Persons in this state or phase of life experience a crisis of identity. They are betwixt and between like passengers on their way from one world to another. Liminality is characterized by inversions and new playful combinations, by reflection and by creativity (qtd. in Scherff, 2003: 370).

<sup>4</sup> Cross-cultural movement, or a poetics of Relation, is the process by which different Caribbean realities interrelate. Cross-cultural poetics is a ceaseless dynamic in which, Glissant writes, "We are not prompted solely by the defining of our identities, but by their relation to everything possible as well- the mutual mutations generated by this interplay of relations" (1997: 89).

<sup>5</sup> The term chaos appears in Glissant's notion of le chaos-monde, as a theoretical model capable of articulating the 'double imperatives' of relational identity, in a process of dynamic negotiation (Coates 14).

<sup>6</sup> Glissant applies the notion of rhizome to the question of identity. Deleuze & Guattari first introduce the concept of the rhizome, which is an image of the in-between. It embodies a critique of mimesis and the binaries upon which such mimesis is based. As an alternative (though not necessarily an opposite) to 'aborescent' thought-systems, "neither departs nor arrives, it is always in-between, between things, an inter-being, intermezzo" (Deleuze, 1980: 36) (translation is mine).

### **Biographical note**

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