

Migrants from Disparate Terrains: Entangled Identities in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the changing patterns of identities among the dwellers of the two Caribbean Islands—Coulibri and Granbois—in the wake of the 1833 Emancipation Act and its implications for the multi-ethnic populace of the land in Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams’s (Jean Rhys) *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The identity on the island changes drastically for White Creole women Annette and Antoinette, according to their socio-economic state that is in constant flux. It is in the backdrop of their failed marriages with the opportunist migrant English ‘saviours’ that this paper analyses their multivalent relationship with their forcefully migrated black slaves and the natives. Disillusioned by their newly migrant spouses, they were compelled to go ‘mad’ and finally coerced to kill themselves. This tragedy of the Creole women is also intertwined with the issue of forced migration of black slaves from Africa to the West Indies since the 16th century. Gathered thus in the variegated terrain of the West Indies, the migrants from their disparate terrains could sometimes create an analogous psychic terrain like home in the West Indies and be an integral part of it; whereas a few others like the English remain outsiders forever and create a havoc in the lives of people. Such a multivalent response of the migrants from their disparate terrains to the island (the paper attempts to show) defies the individual identity of any migrants, consequently entangling their identities.

Keywords: assorted populace, migration, assimilation, failed marriage, English men, white Creole women, black slaves, Emancipation Act, entangled identities.

‘*Qui est la? Qui est la?*’ (Who is there?) Such prattle of Coco, the green parrot with clipped wings, in Coulibri estate seems to form the crux of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (first published in 1966). Amidst an assorted populace of native, migrant European, English, and

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African origin, it seems but natural for anyone in the Caribbean setting to ask—loudly and within—who one is? Who one is surrounded by? The queries incite innumerable answers of “competing, compelling voices [of French, English, Arawak, Patois, etc.] that yield insight into the lives of its black, Carib, Arawak and white Creole peoples” (Rhys 2000, ix). Moulded by its own disparate psychic and geographical terrain, each voice vies with all the other voices to be heard. The phenomenon involves imbrications of similar voices, which at times seem to result in a deafening cacophony. All voices get reduced to cacophony for English men who migrate to the Caribbean Islands for a short while in quest of fortune. One among them, Rochester, drenched completely in his native sensibilities, refuses to accept that anything else in West Indies could have an aesthetic appeal.

Like in the case of Mason, Rochester’s temporary migration to the Islands of West Indies was prompted by a contract for wealth. Ironically, while the wealth he gains offers him a social status in his home country, he views the source of wealth as humiliating. Disowned (informally) by his father, Rochester accepts Richard’s proposal to marry Antoinette as his life has “gone according to” his father’s “plans and wishes” (ibid., 63). It is with a sense of martyrdom that he says, “I agreed. As I had to everything else” (ibid., 56). Still, he would manipulate Antoinette’s initial refusal to be his wife. Her stepbrother Richard could not convince “the little fool” (Antoinette) even after “arguing for an hour” with her (ibid., 65). No sooner does he learn of Antoinette’s refusal to marry him, Rochester’s manipulative imperial self gets manifested: “I thought that this 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” (ibid., 65). What he fails to see at this point is Antoinette’s sensitive self during their previous meeting. Having witnessed her mother’s plight, she would not relate to anything that is not genuine, at least until she is convinced. But soon she gets disarmed by Rochester’s “gentle talk”, hollow promises of “peace, happiness and safety”, and overwhelming “fervent kisses” (ibid., 66). With the fervent kisses strategically used by the Englishman while inducing false promises of a happy life in the Creole girl, he turns critical of everything about her and the world that surrounds her. He would rather see an English or at least a European woman in her place. When Antoinette warmly clings to this man, he drifts apart from Antoinette gradually. Through Rochester’s first-person narrative, Rhys forcefully drives home the point that he wouldn’t ever accept this Creole woman at all: “*I watched her critically ... her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either*” (ibid., 56; emphasis added). It is Rochester’s gaze which grasps what it looks for. His introspection reveals with what haste the wedding ceremony takes place: “..... when did I begin to notice all this about my wife Antoinette? After we left Spanish Town I suppose I was married a month after I arrived in Jamaica and for nearly three weeks of that time I was in bed with fever” (ibid., 56).

Rochester’s inability to appreciate what is not English or European makes him magnify the assumed limitations of the Caribbean people. Massacre, the very name of the village where

they land after their wedding, creates in him a suspicion of concealed violence in the history of the village. Looking at the history of the West Indies, especially in the backdrop of forced migration of enslaved Africans and migration of indentured labourers, Rochester's suspicions are not baseless. The very history of the West Indies bears testimonies to the barbaric slave trade. Being one of the prime beneficiaries of the slave trade, it was an integral part of the incessantly atrocious treatment of enslaved Africans for almost four centuries. From the 16th to 19th century, it is said that 10 million to 12 million enslaved Africans were transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas by imperialistic whites, after which they were sold in the slave market. The forced exodus of enslaved Africans from their home, known as the Transatlantic Slave Trade or Atlantic Slave Trade, was a very huge chunk of the global slave trade.

The transatlantic slave trade was the *largest forced migration in history*, and undeniably one of the *most inhumane*. The extensive exodus of Africans spread to many areas of the world over a 400-year period and was unprecedented in the annals of recorded human history.

As a direct result of the transatlantic slave trade, *the greatest movement of Africans* was to Americas— with *96 percent of the captives from the African coasts arriving on cramped slave ships at ports in South America and the Caribbean islands*.

From 1501 to 1830, four Africans crossed the Atlantic for every one European, making the demographics of the Americas in that era more of an extension of the African diaspora than a European one. The legacy of this migration is still evident today, with large populations of people of African descent living throughout the Americas. (United Nations¹; emphasis added)

The brutal treatment meted out to these enslaved Africans by the White Europeans is summed up poignantly by a former slave Olaudah Equiano, an eleven-year-old boy in 1755 who was kidnapped from his home. He was purchased by the British Royal Navy, was later sold to a Quaker merchant in the Caribbean, and in 1766 bought his freedom and wrote his autobiography in 1786. It is through his own experience that Equiano offers his readers an insight into how it felt to be kidnapped from home in Africa and to survive onboard a slave trader's ship. His story of the self also refers to the kidnapping of millions of free West Africans by slave traders, who then sold them to wealthy merchants and plantation owners in South America, the Caribbean or North America. This trip across the Atlantic Ocean was known as Middle Passage. The stolen Africans (that included men, women and children) were taken on a ship for a voyage of two to five months. Up to a thousand people would have to survive such a long period "largely below deck, in quarters so tight that they could barely move. Besides being unbearably cramped, the deck had no ventilation, windows, or

way to dispose waste. Disease was rampant. Food was limited. Violence and torture were common” (Farley 2006). During their forced transportation, the cruelty to which the Africans were subjected to gets vividly reported by Equiano: “The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn to himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died.” (ibid.) In case they survived severe physical, sexual, and psychological abuse and life threats from their captors in grossly overcrowded ships; and almost continuous dangers like raids at the port by hostile tribes, unexpected epidemics, attacks by pirates or enemy ships, and bad weather—once they reached Guinea Coast/Slave Coast, they were sold to wealthy merchants and plantation owners.

Finally, while Transatlantic Slave Trade “brought enormous profits to international slave traders it exacted a terrible price in physical and emotional anguish on the part of the uprooted Africans.”²² And “it was the second of three stages of the so-called triangular trade, in which arms, textiles and wine were shipped from Europe to Africa, enslaved people from Africa to the Americas, and sugar and coffee from the Americas to Europe.”²³ It was from 1502 onwards that Spanish conquistadors forcibly took enslaved Africans to West Indies. “The biggest migration to the Caribbean was a forced migration of enslaved people of Africa through the Transatlantic Slave Trade.”²⁴ When merchants and plantation owners moved into the region, indentured servants, political dissidents, and other migrants from the British Isles provided the first plantation labour. African slaves became increasingly sought after to work in unpleasant conditions of Caribbean heat and humidity. European planters thought Africans would be more suited to the Caribbean conditions than their own countrymen, as the climate in the Caribbean resembled the climate of their (Africans) homeland in West Africa. Many of the merchants who settled in the Caribbean during the 17th and 18th centuries were involved in slave trading. In the 18th century, Britain moved soldiers and sailors to the Caribbean to defend against invasion by the competing European powers and guard against anti-slavery revolutions and protests. Formerly enslaved people came from Canada to join the West India Regiment. Later, during the post-Emancipation Act (1833) era in the 19th century, indentured labourers from India and China came. They migrated to the Caribbean to work on plantations in Jamaica, Trinidad and British Guiana. Even liberated Africans were also indentured during this period.

This notorious background to slavery in West Indies might have prompted Rochester to think of the violence in Massacre. He conveniently ignores the cruel involvement of England, one of the nations to take maximum benefit from the slave trade:

Britain was one of the most successful slave-trading countries. Together with Portugal, the two countries accounted for about 70 % of all Africans transported to the Americas. Britain was the most dominant between 1640 and 1807 and it is

estimated that Britain transported 3.1 million Africans (of whom 2.7 million arrived) to the British colonies in the Caribbean, North and South America and to other countries.⁵

But Rhys's readers are compelled to see what Rochester draws out of it. He conveniently manoeuvres the violence that might have happened in the past to grant himself a justified license to perpetrate violence against Antoinette; belittle her, and abuse her physically and emotionally. Also passes on his sense of acerbic inadequacy (induced by his discriminatory father) to everyone and everything he sees in West Indies. One finds in the novel ample instances of Rochester's bias and righteous conduct. To name a few: Antoinette's friend Caro, Caroline in Granbois, appears to him as an "old gaudy creature"; the maid Amelie's expression to him "was so full of delighted malice, so intelligent, above all so intimate." She becomes another tool for him to wreak vengeance on Antoinette. In fact, his biased mind invents a semblance and then a blood connection between them. "For a moment she looked very much like Amelie. *Perhaps they are related, I thought. It's possible, it's even probable in this damned place*" (Rhys 2000, 105; emphasis added); he describes twenty-seven years old Young Bull, thus, "A magnificent body and a foolish conceited face" (ibid., 57). Acerbated by his conceited self, he wouldn't even spare nature from his criticism: "..... the scent of the river flowers was overpoweringly strong. I felt giddy" (ibid., 69). His query to a porter also displays his condescending view of the land; "This a very wild place—not civilised. Why you come here?" (ibid., 57); "..... it seemed to me that everything round me was hostile." . . . "There was nothing I knew, nothing to comfort me" (ibid., 123). An inevitable migrant from England, Rochester assumes a civilised persona in Caribbean Islands like Conrad's Kurtz does in Africa. Though he does not literally slaughter anyone, he slaughters the very spirit of Antoinette. His portrayal of the Honeymoon Island is outrageously biased. In alien land (away from home), he finds fault with anything that is new or unknown to his English sensibility. His feeling of inadequacy manifests in his perspective:

Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me. I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks. I looked down at the coarse mane of the horse..... Dear father. The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her (That must be seen to). I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or to my brother the son you love. No begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son. I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet..... (ibid., 59; emphasis added)

All the civility that Rochester attributes to himself in this interior monologue can be likened to the cold cruelty of Alfonso II, the Duke of Ferrara, in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess." This inevitable migrant even cavils at the unique harmony of nature in the West Indies which elsewhere would have been considered aesthetics and attributes his petty thoughts to Antoinette. Being used to "millions of people, their houses and streets" and bitter cold in England, her "beautiful island *seems*" to him "quite unreal and like a dream" (ibid., 67; emphasis added). He gets upset not with the commercial angle that exists in their relationship but with him being in a disadvantageous state of being sold. All the cold civility he intended to present himself before his father and brother in England was made possible only because of the "modest competence" that he has earned "now" by his Creole wife's inheritance. Neither her beauty nor the "wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness" of the "beautiful place" (ibid., 73) would satiate his biased mind. To him, "it kept its secret" and he "wants what it hides, that is not nothing" (ibid., 73). Not that there are no redeeming aspects to this almost diabolic English man. But most of the time, they are overshadowed by his prime concern, lust for possession, typical of a coloniser.

Whatever may be their claim to civility, the English men's language and action betray their intentions: "I'll trust you if you'll trust me. Is that a bargain?" (ibid., 66); "I have not bought her, she has bought me" (ibid., 59). Rochester's façade vanishes and his true self pops up at these moments. Antoinette's early memories report Mason's casual attitude and flippant talk. Ignoring the warnings of both Annette and Aunt Cora, he talks "about a plan to import labourers—coolies he called them—from East Indies" (ibid., 30) before Myra, one of the new servants; and puts the whole family to the dangerous outrage of native black people. Migrated for a short duration from England, his incapability to grasp the gravity and impact of the Emancipation Act 1833 in the West Indian context becomes obvious in his callousness. His concern is the decline of the "big estate" Coulibri which he "got cheap" by marrying Annette. And he holds the workers responsible for its decay and that is the valid reason for him to import coolies: "But the people here won't work. They don't want to work. Look at this place—it's enough to break your heart." Aunt Cora's response to his thoughtless action is, "Hearts have been broken Be sure of that. I suppose you all know what you are doing" (ibid., 30). It is interesting to note the contrast between the English and the West Indian people at this juncture. Having claimed civility and genteel persona, neither Rochester nor Mason can relate to any black individual. The empathy that they display for the blacks is only their English strategy in dealing with their subordinates. Ironically the scheme of these English men brings down both the Creole women Annette and Antoinette—whose connection raised their status even in their home country—to an insignificant subordinate state. In spite of a sharp warning by Aunt Cora, Mason shatters Annette's already broken heart. The charming dancer that had induced envy in onlookers' hearts gets locked in and left to the mercy of black slaves. "That man who is in charge of her he take her whenever he want her" (ibid., 130). It is Bidisha (2016) who rightly points out, "In Mr. Mason the outright violence and exploitation of Mr Cosway's slave-using has mutated into a blind derision which

is no less inhumane. For Mr Mason black people are ‘like children’ and yet also pathetically slothful, ‘too lazy to be dangerous.’” In his hypocrisy, he dismisses all that Annette says, including her apprehensions about their safety in the Coulibri estate. Bidisha aptly sums up the essential picture of Mason: “. . . . a cliché of pure English, Victorian, male arrogance and colonial greed, physically white like Annette and Antoinette but *culturally alien*, ‘so sure of himself, so without a doubt English’” (ibid.; emphasis added). What Bidisha says of Mason holds good for Rochester, Richard and Fraser too. Being alien to West Indian culture, the temporary migrant English men assume cultural supremacy over the Creole women Annette and Antoinette. It was a norm for both European and Englishmen (prime beneficiaries of the Creole women’s wealth) to denigrate and ostracise Creole people all through their interim stay in West Indies. The marginalisation of the Creole women, in particular, owes to their invariable creolisation. The English law denied inheritance of ancestral property to the Creole women that were married to Englishmen, whereas their English husbands inherited Creole women’s ancestral property. The lives of Creole in the current (post-Emancipation Era) homeland West Indies were unlike that of their ancestors who led lives of pomp. The post Emancipation Era brought back the exuberance and the grandeur that their ancestors enjoyed at the cost of black slaves. They turned ‘white niggers’ to the black people, and were looked down upon by white European people that belonged to nations from where their forefathers migrated. Miscegenated in birth, hybridised and creolised, the Creole in the Caribbean context imbibed diverse cultural approaches to life. If this enriched their lives with a sort of coerced assimilation, the very assimilation makes their individual identities (selves) problematic. A daughter of Martinique mother in the West Indies, Antoinette has white skin which makes her a ‘*beke*’. That is not all about her. Multiple aspects contribute to the making of her as an individual, but then the same multiple factors obliterate her individual self which could have made her life valid in the social realm in which she lives. Imen Mzoughi’s observation in “The White Creole in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea: A Woman in Passage*” is noteworthy in this regard: “As one can easily infer, the white Creole is overwhelmed by racial categorisation: she is neither English, nor French; neither ‘black’, nor truly ‘nigger’ to a slave-owner. Therefore she is both and neither” (Mzoughi 2016). Made already vulnerable by these multivalent facets, Creole women were further crippled and confounded by legislation induced by the saviours of black slaves. While Emancipation Act liberated black slaves—Rhys demonstrates through her Creole women—it allowed an alternative way of exploitation. This time Creole women become their victims. The two Creole women in the novel present the case with identical circumstances. Their plight is no better than the bird with clipped wings.

Like the wings of parrot Coco are clipped and its movement is restricted to the cage and ultimately left to die pathetically, Mason clips the spirit of white Creole Annette by his recurring dismissal of her thoughts, gradually relegates her to nothingness and to the death of her spirit which is rightly noted by Antoinette who speaks of two deaths to her ignorant English husband. The burning of Coco, the parrot and her son, Pierre in the fire that burnt the Coulibri estate collapses Annette’s world. If the former’s burning is believed to bring ill luck, the latter’s

manifests ill-luck to Annette. Mr. Mason's promises of taking Pierre to England for treatment to make him normal prove hollow. Through young Antoinette's observation, his material concerns during the crisis are made obvious:

I saw that Mr. Mason, his face crimson with heat, seemed to be dragging her along and she was holding back, struggling. I heard him say, 'It's impossible, too late now.'

'Wants her jewel case?' Aunt Cora said.

'Jewel case? Nothing so sensible,' bawled Mr Mason. 'She wanted to go back for her damned parrot. I won't allow it.' She did not answer, only fought him silently, twisting like a cat and showing her teeth. (Rhys 2000, 33)

Betrayal to Annette means nothing to Mr. Mason. Now tied to the wrong man, her condition is no better than that of the parrot with clipped wings. Between conceited Mr. Mason and hateful white Creoles and black former slaves, Annette is like between Scylla and Charybdis. Neither would allow any sanity to her and invariably she had to resort to the only abode she was left with, that is insanity. What else was left for white Creoles other than what Mr. Luttrell (of Nelson's Rest Estate) did to himself? "One calm evening he shot his dog, swam out to the sea and was gone for always" (ibid., 1). *Wide Sargasso Sea* also addresses the crises of White Creoles in the post-Emancipation Act Era that wreaked havoc in their lives. The turmoil in their lives is sharply contrasted with the "calm evening". The transitory phase left very few options for both the blacks and the White Creoles. For the Cosways, the home at Coulibri ceases to be a haven anymore after the implementation of the Emancipation Act. Along with the Act, the English promised compensation. Mr. Luttrell, the first to grow tired of waiting long for compensation, commits suicide leaving neighbour Annette in all the more desperation. Antoinette's early crisp comment in parenthesis sums up their vulnerable plight: "My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed— all belonged to the past" (ibid., 1). Like the landscape, the lives of humans on Caribbean Island form a collage of diverse ethnicities but perfectly blend with their background. Immigrants from disparate terrains—White Creoles who migrated as colonisers, forcibly migrated African slave descendants and native Caribs and Arawaks—each being assimilated with the other, form the indispensable core of the Caribbean Islands. In spite of the post-Emancipation unrest, each ethnic group displays an idiosyncrasy of its own and carves a niche for itself in the Caribbean Islands. For instance, Annette, the white Creole and her only confidante Christophine, "blacker—blue black" (ibid., 18) "blacker than most" (ibid., 61) are Martinique; Christophine's only friend and Tia's mother "Mailotte was not a Jamaican" (ibid., 18). Jamaica is the Spanish Town, and the White Creoles there have a thorough dislike for Martinique, the French settlers. Other blacks on the Island feel scared of obeah (a belief system, characterised by the use of magic rituals to ward off misfortune or to cause harm, among black people chiefly of the British West Indies

and the Guianas) that Christophine performs. Brown-skinned Amelie though feels sorry for Rochester, deep in her heart, she feels sorry for Antoinette too. Baptiste, a “tall dignified” man who initially was all civility to Rochester, was born on the Honeymoon Island; Sandy, Mulatto cousin of Antoinette saves her from blacks and teaches her boyish but graceful tricks of throwing stones into the pond; yellow coloured Daniel, claims himself to be a Cosway tarnishes her image, blackmails Rochester. Interestingly, each one of them, irrespective of one’s race, grasps the inner thoughts of the other. Annette’s apprehensions after Cosway’s death about their safety originate from her almost intuitive knowledge of black slaves’ contempt for them. Why wouldn’t they? Unlike Annette’s antecedents, their antecedents did not migrate to the West Indies by choice. Agonising memory of the forced migration of black slaves to the West Indies could never be obliterated. In spite of this, for security, Annette would rather rely on Christophine (a black and a Martinique) than on any White Creole. One sees more camaraderie between them than a master-slave relationship. After Annette’s death—both metaphorical and literal—the only person Antoinette can trust is Christophine. A free woman, Christophine is on the Honeymoon Island but binds herself with genuine love and loyalty for Antoinette and thus turns a maternal figure to Antoinette. Both of them need no verbal communication to understand and stand by each other. Another analogous relation to this mistress-slave relation can be drawn (during the post-Civil War period in the rural American South) from Georgian Flannery O’Connor’s delineation of the master-slave relationship in some of her short stories like “The Geranium” and “Judgment Day”. Old Dudley, the protagonist of “The Geranium”, feels more connected to his slave Rabie in the South than to his daughter in New York who took her father to New York more to fulfil her duty than for love for her father. “Judgment Day”, supposed to be the revised version of “The Geranium”, narrates the story of Tanner. If Dudley’s daughter does her ‘duty’ grudgingly, Tanner’s daughter performs her ‘duty’ for the sake of her father’s pension cheques. At home in the South, after asserting his superiority over his black slave Coleman initially, Dudley realises that Coleman is not a “bad Nigger”. Gradually her father Tanner sees a companion in Coleman and he knows that Coleman understands him better than anyone. Like Georgian writer Flannery O’Connor, who counters the North American criticism of the practice of inhuman slavery among Southerners through the depiction of her life experiences in her literary works, Jean Rhys, through her delineation of the relationship between white Creole masters and black slaves in her fiction, responds to the judgmental English perspective. Both North American anti-slavery advocates and righteous English people in their own lives kept black people at a distance and never treated them as their equals. Whereas in Southern America and the West Indies, as O’Connor and Rhys note from their life experiences, a humane and compassionate connection existed between white masters and black slaves in spite of the practice of slavery. Several instances in Rochester’s narrative provide ample evidence: While he appears to be “young and handsome with a kind word for all, black, white, also coloured” (ibid., 81) people on the Honeymoon Island, he hides a hideous contempt for them deep within, and his actions reveal his true self. His seemingly simple question to Antoinette is, “Why do you hug and kiss Christophine?” She responds with a counter-question, “Why

not?" Rochester admits that he "would not", "could not" (ibid., 76) hug and kiss them. Inadvertently, he admits to his wife the truth that he is incapable of the human warmth which is so natural to Antoinette. In another instance, when vexed by his indifference and on Amelie's provocation, Antoinette fights with her, Rochester addresses Amelie as 'child' though he knew well that there was nothing like a child's nature in Amelie. Later, in Antoinette's absence, he sleeps with Amelie, and the very next morning views her as "Another complication..... And her skin was darker, her lips thicker than I thought" (ibid., 115); extreme ingratitude for the one who "was so gay, so natural and something of this gaiety she must have given to" him for he "had not one moment of remorse" (ibid., 115); on yet another instance, he is contemptuous of Baptiste's smile: "It was as if he'd put his service mask on the savage reproachful face I had seen" (ibid., 88); young giggling Hilda appears to him as a 'stupid little girl.' (ibid., 75) Contrary to this English man's cold, rude comments, Antoinette's compassionate perception impresses one. As soon as she reaches Granbois, one must note that she is her most natural self and effortlessly gets connected to the world around, though none of the people she gets along well with (either in Coulibri or in Granbois), is one of her kin. Even in her early memories of the Coulibri estate, her deeper bonds are with the black people. Though she admired the picture of Miller's daughter, it was not the burning of it that made her sad. Rather she feels desperate that nothing of her life has remained the same after she left the burning Coulibri Estate. Her psychic resort in desperation is with Tia. In fact, both their identities merge with each other. Andrea Ashworth, in her introduction to the novel, views this as a strategy by Rhys: "Holding up mirrors to her characters, Rhys forces them to recognise reflections and connections. 'Like in a looking-glass,' as the young Antoinette sees it when she faces Tia, who has just hit her with a jagged stone: 'We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself'" (ibid., xi). In a changed social milieu (the novel is set in the 1830s, post-emancipation period, though it was published in 1966), Antoinette and many white Creole masters have turned out to be white slaves, their black slaves free but directionless individuals; and both get confounded in the new social roles that life has flung them into. True that the migration of both white Europeans and enslaved Africans to the Caribbean was in diagonally opposite conditions. If the white people came with an ingrained imperial psyche to exploit, the blacks were forcefully made to migrate with horrifying slavery thrust upon them to be exploited. Yet, maybe the variegated collage of colours in nature; assorted populace of the Caribbean; invariability of their plight; even their acceptance of their helplessness and tolerance that followed; or their stay for long and the very nature of the soil of the land—altogether must have brought in a sense of assimilation in them that was not possible for fortune hunters like Mason and Rochester. If the former two migrated there to build lives, the latter's (in civilised garb) intention was to plunder. Hence their migration was for a short while and could probably not make an affirmative impact on them.

Assimilation is what one witnesses among the dwellers of Coulibri and Granbois which included migrants like white Europeans, black Africans and the natives of the land. Assimilation

involves the process of getting absorbed into the dominant culture of society to such a degree that the assimilating group becomes socially indistinguishable from the other members of society. But then the very dominant culture of Caribbean society, one can say, is motley in every sense. Some may feel that assimilation denies individual identity. But Rhys is conscious of the ambivalence behind the very idea. Perhaps that is why the text abounds with numerous references to assimilation in spite of glaring differences: tears in Tia's eyes and blood on Antoinette's forehead bind them together with the hatred and warmth of centuries. If Antoinette's physical self bleeds by hurt (much before her psychic self realises), Tia's hurt psychic self exudes tears in her eyes. No wonder, an individual self tends to get dissolved amidst such varieties in terms of life and terrain. And especially in the new social scenario, Antoinette's soul mates are black former slaves, not any white Creole: her thoughts after the burning of Coulibri estate, in desperation, are,

. . . there would be nothing left but blackened walls and mounting stone.

Then. . . . *I saw Tia. . . .* and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. *We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river.* As I ran, *I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her.* Not to leave Coulibri. . . . I saw the jagged stone in her hand but *I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either*, only something wet, running down my face. . . . *I saw her face crumble up as she began to cry. . . . It was as if I saw myself.* Like in a looking-glass. (ibid., 38; emphasis added)

It is but natural that there grows a close bond among the ones who spend their formative years together, and the close bonds shape one's psyche. This proves true even in the case of people like Annette and Christophine, Antoinette and Christophine, and her black friends and attendants like Tia, *Caroline, Baptiste, Hilda, and others* in Granbois. In childhood finding nothing else to love, Antoinette emotionally clings to Granbois and is resultantly cared for by her black associates. Over a period of time, there grows among them a genuine concern for each other. Perhaps that is why it is Christophine who responds to Antoinette's nightmare by bringing Tia; Antoinette's nightmarish vision of Obeah in Christophine's place vanishes away as soon as she sees Christophine's smiling face. Antoinette would see her deranged mother only along with Christophine and none else. White Creole Aunt Cora's objection to Antoinette's hasty marriage with a strange Englishman can be silenced by Richard Mason's oppressive dominance; Christophine would rather encounter Antoinette's husband than be intimidated by him. If Aunt Cora wants to secretly help her with two gold rings, Christophine does not mince words. To Rochester's face, she says:

. . . . she don't come to your beautiful house to beg you to marry with her. No, it's you come all the way to her house—it's you beg her to marry. And she love you and she gave you all she have. Now you say you don't love her and you break her up. What you do with her money. Eh? (ibid., 130)

Richard Mason is no brother to her. You think you fool me. You want her money but you don't want her. It is in your mind to pretend she is mad. I know it. She will be like her mother. You do that for money? But you wicked like Satan self! (ibid., 132)

Christophine takes up the joint responsibilities of a mother and friend to Antoinette. While she asks Antoinette to come out of the marital bond for self-defence, she also pleads with her husband to love Antoinette as she learns that Antoinette is bound to him emotionally. But after seeing his indifference to Antoinette's pains, Christophine does not hesitate to ask him to return half of the dowry and leave West Indies so that Antoinette can marry again, forget him and be independent of Christophine too. One must note that it is in front of her genuine self that Rochester's true self becomes manifest. As she speaks of Antoinette's remarriage, he thinks, "A pang of rage and jealousy shot through me then. Oh no, she won't forget. I laughed" (ibid., 131). It is this "blue-black" Christophine who upholds both white Creole Annette's and Antoinette's stature and convinces Rochester that his wife's pride is far superior and greater than his which he witnesses on the day of their journey towards England. Though shattered by his betrayal, he notices "her (Antoinette's) face blank, no expression at all. Tears? There is not a tear in her. Did she remember anything, I wondered, feel anything?" (ibid., 137) Interestingly, Antoinette's life is surrounded mostly by black people and she relates herself with each one of them in Granbois. In fact, Rochester feels envious of the charm that gets exuded from her in Granbois. As his narration progresses, one can see that his initial dislike for Antoinette gets transformed into all-consuming envy in him. But he is also forced to note the changing conduct of these seemingly expressive and vulnerable people towards him after his betrayal of Antoinette. Giggling Hilde disappears, gentlemanly Baptiste becomes reserved, brown Amelie who showed contempt initially by addressing Antoinette as 'white cockroach' feels sorry for this white Creole deep in her heart. One is made to note, all the while, that the lingo and tempo of the action used by a black is ever intelligible to a white Creole and vice-versa. By these instances, one can thus say that in the West Indian context, assimilation is at far deeper levels than it appears.

In her article "Charting the Empty Spaces of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*", Missy Dehn Kubitschek views assimilation as a "self-destructive" (Kubitschek 1987, 24) tragic flaw in Antoinette. She likens the two strategies employed in the novel, namely "assimilating and remaining marginal", to two courses that women's movement at present charts (ibid., 23) and attributes the first course to Antoinette, who by her wrong choices in life has participated in her own destruction. To her, Antoinette "abandons her own feelings and experiences, or more accurately, redefines them from a point of view not her own" . . . "in order to achieve" the "goals" like "peace and safety" (ibid, 24). In her attempts to conform to Rochester's and England's modes, Antoinette, according to Kubitschek, "has obliterated her original identity" (ibid., 26). But lost everything that is hers in the quest because of her effort to assimilate with English; she later "awakens with a new certainty about herself and purpose after her last cry to Tia" (ibid., 26). But then, it is surprising that the setting of the

novel, so central to the ideas of assimilation and marginalisation, does not figure in the essay. It is but natural for one to ask whether it is possible or even feasible for one to remain marginal and survive without getting assimilated into Caribbean islands. The scholar's answer would be in affirmation, and Christophine is her example for remaining marginal and faithful to her roots through *Obeah*. However, one can see that Christophine clings to *Obeah/Voodoo* for her bare survival which itself is a challenge for each amidst an assorted populace. Except for Annette, none to rely on, *Obeah*, for her, is more a survival strategy than her roots. It becomes obvious when Antoinette approaches her seeking a remedy for her distress, and *Obeah* does not impact on a *beke* (a descendent of early European, usually French, settlers in the French Antilles). Jilted by the man (with whom she started to lose her initial reserve), Antoinette pleads with Christophine to cast a spell (through *Obeah*) on Rochester to love her again after he ceases to feel for her, though initially, she does not spell it explicitly. All through their conversation, one can see that the communion between them goes beyond verbal; the practical remedies that Christophine offers to Antoinette originate more from her life experiences and concern for Antoinette than from her religious faith:

..... You know what I wanted as soon as you saw me, and you certainly know now. Well, don't you? I heard my voice getting high and thin.

'Hush up,' she said. 'If the man don't love you, I can't make him love you.'

'Yes you can, I know you can. That is what *I wish and that is why I came here. You can make people love or hate. Or die,*' I said.

She threw back her head and laughed loudly. (But she never laughs loudly and why is laughing at all?)

'So you believe in that *tim-tim story [fairy tale] about obeah, you hear when you so high? All that foolishness and folly. Too besides, that is not for beke. Bad, bad trouble come when beke meddle with that.*

'You must,' I said, 'You must.'

'..... But Christophine, if he, my husband, could come to me one night. Once more. I would make him love me.'

'No doudou. No.'

'Yes Christophine.'

'You talk foolishness. Even if I can make him come to your bed, I cannot make him love you. Afterward he hate you.' *'No, I don't meddle that for you.'*
(Rhys 2000, 93-94; Emphasis added)

The Obeah woman Christophine does her best to dissuade the white Creole from “tim tim story” of Obeah. Her genuine advice to Antoinette is simple and practical. It is as though her migration in childhood and her journey of life in the Caribbean islands has taught her to value life in its basic form without any adornment or affiliation to any particular faith. Bare survival is what she teaches Antoinette. Being a white Creole, Antoinette cannot learn that; her identity is inseparable from the islands, and Rochester’s from England.

However, the Creole protagonist Antoinette’s attempts to impress upon her newlywed English husband that “There is always the other side, always” (ibid., 106) fail miserably. At home, neglected by his father and elder brother, a baffled Rochester (who goes nameless all through the novel) feels confounded in the Spanish town Jamaica and Granbois on the Honeymoon Island. His sense of rejection at home not only induces a false pride in him but also coerces him to marry Antoinette (for whom he feels nothing). In all falsity and disturbed state of mind, the Englishman strikes his relationship with the Creole wife and sees only reflection of his indifference in her:

It was all very brightly coloured, very strange, but it *meant nothing to me. Nor did she, the girl I was to marry.* When at last I met her I bowed, smiled, kissed her hand, danced with her. *I played* the part I was expected to play. She never had anything to do with me at all. *Every movement I made was an effort of will and sometimes I wondered that no one noticed this. I would listen to my own voice and marvel at it, calm correct but toneless, surely.* (ibid., 65; emphasis added)

It is this assumed “calm, correct but toneless surely” beguiling attitude and vulnerability that dominates all his interactions with Antoinette and takes away her initial armour of indifference and pushes her to a tragic death. While the English man conveniently ‘plays’ his role, all his polemics about the natural world on the Honeymoon Island reminisce one of Mr. Mason, Antoinette’s stepfather. Rhys, all through her narrative, compels one to see the striking semblance between the English men who not only think and act alike but also make reverberating impacts on the Creole women Annette and Antoinette. For instance, the very marriage of Senior Mason with a ‘pretty woman’ Annette induces a mixed reaction of envy and admiration for Annette: ““why should a very wealthy man who could take his pick of all the girls in the West Indies, and many in England too probably?’ ‘Why probably?’ the other voice said, ‘Certainly.’ ‘Then why should he marry a widow without a penny to her name’” (ibid., 24). Young Antoinette vouches for others’ admiration of her mother’s dance, “Yes, what a dancer ... There was no need for music when she danced” and dancing Annette reminds her audience of the song, “light as cotton blossom on the something breeze” (ibid., 25). Despite her bias, the gossip is well aware that Mason “didn’t come to the West Indies to dance – he came to make money as they all do. Some of the big estates are going cheap, and one unfortunate’s loss is always a *clever man’s gain*” (ibid., 25; emphasis added).

Jean Rhys's *grouse* centres on these "*clever* [English] *men*" who gained at the cost of Creole women by demoralising them. Antoinette's marriage to the nameless Englishman runs parallel to her mother's marriage. The genteel self of both the English men gradually vanishes as they gain wealth.

Except for Caribs and Arawaks, all dwellers in Coulibri and Granbois, whether it is Rochester, Mason, Annette, Antoinette, Amelie or Christophine, are migrants of diverse kinds. But unlike inevitable migrants Englishmen, all others could assimilate and be an integral part of the island. They blended so well that their lives appear to be incomplete without their connection to their fellow dwellers and the Island itself. This bond of the migrants to the once upon a time alien land is quite intriguing and has intricate implications on this manifold bond. One of them perhaps would be to note that, as they migrated over generations to the Caribbean, they brought their respective psychic terrains to the Caribbean. While the migrants missed their home terrains in the Caribbean islands, they also might have simultaneously explored and created a homologous psychic terrain in this alien land (initially to make their lives bearable). Of course, it was an agonising odyssey but worthwhile. The new Act of 1833 not only flung open chaos and commotion among the islanders but also kept open the doors of islands to the opportunist inevitable migrants to take advantage of the chaos. This added intervention of the new white people aggravates the pre-existent suspicions and creates the mixed reactions of blacks and white Creoles in Coulibri and Granbois. If some plot and burn Coulibri Estate; some other black people's cruelty surfaces in their jibes and jeers at Annette's family (one can't overlook that it was insinuated by thoughtless Mason's measure to bring indentured labourers); some others like a black woman in tears while Annette's family departs; if Myra, the new servant, abandons them in crisis, Christophine, Annette's Martinique slave, remains loyal to white Creole Mistresses, even after she becomes a free woman. While in Granbois, Daniel (who claims to be Antoinette's half brother) with a strange vindictiveness scheme against Antoinette; Amelie's mockery and betrayal of Antoinette; Baptiste, Caroline and Hilda's warmth for Antoinette; and Antoinette's sense of belonging to Granbois—all together suggest that the coexistence of migrant inhabitants from disparate terrain means living through entangled multivalent (inherited, attributed/alleged, acquired, lost/ forgotten) identities. Unlike colonial masters, enslaved Africans had few options. Used to the status and privilege of being slave masters, white Creoles did not have the need to go elsewhere. By the time post- Emancipation Act shook them, they were already an inseparable part of the land and were financially in such a dire state that they themselves could not afford or dare to venture anything new, apart from waiting for new Europeans who came as 'saviours' to lift them out of their plight. But what most of the white Creoles could not see is that their lives would have been tolerable only if their 'saviours' could have migrated psychically along with the geographical migration. All the Englishmen, Mason, Rochester and Fraser, fail in psychic migration though they migrate geographically. The primary concern behind the English men's migration is material gain; neither to relate with anybody nor to make the island their home. Lost everything to the new Law and new Europeans, the Creole women's quest for

identity in a changed scenario gets all the more entangled by the intervention of the English men whose only concern was fortune-hunting. Thus, the two opposite intents of white Creole women and Englishmen collide with each other. Though of European origin, in spirit, Antoinette has been a Caribbean and looks for higher and genuine fulfilment in her spouse and naturally fails with her temporary migrant husband. It is noticeable that even in her disturbed state of mind, the England of her imagination is with tall trees and gardens similar to her home in the Caribbean. Antoinette's spirit, accustomed to the free and open terrains of home, would not be bound by the cardboard terrain of England. The only terrain that probably could have contained her would have been Rochester's caring terrain. And her migration to this cardboard terrain occurs after the failure of her relationship with Rochester. In the absence of genuine love, this migration is a forced one and deprives her of her Caribbean identity. In the cardboard terrain, her new nomenclature is Bertha which she cannot recognise with. The only terrain that probably could have contained her in this unknown terrain would have been Rochester's caring terrain. When it crumbles miserably, the proud Caribbean she is, embraces her liberation; what if it is a disaster to her own self. She would rather be mitigated and accept life in death than be dead, even when alive physically. The two deaths that she speaks of her mother recurs in her case too — "the real one and the one that the people know about" (ibid., 106). Like her mother Annette, she ceases to be her natural self the moment she realises Rochester's true concern. Coming out of the marital bond is out of the question for her as the very marital bond had robbed her of all her material resources, and this has left her with none to rely on.

Love and hatred in the Caribbean Island seem to be guided by warm human emotions though at times frailties dominate their lives (as in the case of Cosway and Daniel). In contrast, the temporary migrants like Mason, Rochester, Richard and Fraser, these Englishmen, have cold calculations ever lurking beneath their claim of intense love. Their loyalty is directed to this end of commercial gain. And their vows, including the ones that they take during their weddings, are fraught with sly strategies. Rhys's counter-narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is meticulously devised with alternative narrative voices, powerful images, dreams, letters, interior monologues, stream of consciousness, contrasts, and parallelism to compel her readers to see what was left unsaid in Jane Eyre's romantic narrative.

As a mass of weedy flotsam and jetsam in the Sargasso Sea (that hovers between Europe and West Indies in the North Atlantic Ocean) makes the navigation of the ships notoriously difficult, an assorted mass of dwellers that encompass migrants from disparate terrains along with the natives makes an individual identity extremely complex in the Caribbean islands. Due to this intensely complicated social hierarchy, a confounded sense of self can see only an identity entangled with multiple variables. Comprised of its own disparate terrain, the Caribbean islands provide asylum to all: The early white Creole migrants, directionless in the new socio-economic condition; opportunist/inevitable migrants, the English men that migrated in quest of fortune and became almost plunderers; black migrants whose ancestors were forcibly migrated, baffled with their newly found freedom; and the natives lost amidst

all the migrants—seem to reiterate the words of Coco the parrot ‘*Qui est la? Qui est la?*’ (Who is there?) The answers in the country they live in will push them to utter bafflement.

Notes

1. <https://www.un.org/en/events/slaveryremembranceday/background.shtml>. Accessed 29 October 2021.
2. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Middle-Passage-slave-trade>. Accessed 8 November 2021.
3. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade>. Accessed 8 November 2021.
4. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/caribbeanhistory/movement-of-people.htm>. Accessed 29 October 2021.
5. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-transatlantic-slave-trade-records/>. Accessed 29 October 2021.

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