The Silenced Love Story

The Complexity of Colonialism in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Elisabeth Stenman

2016

C-uppsats, 15 hp
Engelska

Handledare: Marko Modiano
Examinator: Iulian Cananau
Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to look into how Jean Rhys describes the complexity of colonialism in the Caribbean and how it affected the colonized people and the European colonizers. Her novel Wide Sargasso Sea is considered to be a re-writing of Jane Eyre, but it also demonstrates social rankings and racial groupings in the colonial society. She does not only describe Mr. Rochester’s first wife, she also depicts the forbidden love story between Antoinette and her “coloured” cousin Sandi. The analysis will have a postcolonial approach by using postcolonial theory and concepts, for example, Said’s concept about the Other, Fanon’s ideas about the psychological effects on the oppressed and Bhabha’s theory about colonial mimicry.

Keywords: Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, colonialism, social ranking, otherness, colonial mimicry
Table of contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 4

2. Background ........................................................................................................................................... 5
   2.1 Postcolonialism ................................................................................................................................. 5
   2.2 Re-writing ......................................................................................................................................... 6

3. Theory .................................................................................................................................................. 7
   3.1 Orientalism and the otherness ......................................................................................................... 7
   3.2 The psychological effects on the oppressed .................................................................................... 8
   3.3 Ambivalence .................................................................................................................................... 10

4. Close-reading ....................................................................................................................................... 11
   4.1 The hierarchy of the white people ................................................................................................. 12
   4.2 Colonial mimicry – no privileges, but threatening ........................................................................ 14
   4.3 Black people and fighting back ..................................................................................................... 17

5. Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 19

6. Works cited .......................................................................................................................................... 22
1. Introduction

*Wide Sargasso Sea*, written by Jean Rhys, is considered a prequel to *Jane Eyre* in order to fill in the gaps of Mr. Rochester’s marriage to the Caribbean madwoman. The novel is about an Englishman who arrives in Jamaica and marries a white, creole heiress because of a large dowry. The man is supposed to be the character of Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* but is kept unnamed throughout the novel and therefore will be mentioned as “the husband” in this essay. The arranged marriage turns out to be a disappointment since there are several cultural conflicts, both between the spouses but also between the Englishman and the Caribbean culture. Antoinette has a relationship with her coloured cousin, Sandi, which is not acceptable because of the colonial values and the social hierarchy. Consequently, the husband brings Antoinette and the fortune to England in order to take control and save his face.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is a postcolonial re-writing which questions and challenges the colonialist representations. Rhys presents the colonized people in the Caribbean and how they define themselves, and moreover, how they are defined by others due to the colonialist social structures. They are all affected by British and colonial views and values, which rule the social hierarchy. The silenced love story between the white creole, Antoinette, and the coloured man, Sandi, is a good example of that.

The analysis will have a postcolonial approach which will mainly focus on the hierarchy in social groups of society, but also the relations between the groups. The aim of this essay is to investigate how Rhys demonstrates the complexity of colonialism and how it affected the colonized people, but also the colonizing people.

In this essay, there will be a presentation of the background of postcolonialism and the theoretical concepts that will be used in the close-reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Finally, there will be a conclusion which will discuss and sum up the findings in the analysis.
2. Background

2.1 Postcolonialism

The novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* deals with colonial issues such as identity and social ranking due to colonial hierarchical structures and for that reason, postcolonial criticism is a suitable approach toward the novel. Postcolonialism is a theory which includes several aspects. According to Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory* (2009), postcolonial critics reject the idea that great literature does not change over time and has a universal significance based on Western literature. Instead, they focus on cultural differences in literary texts and draw attention to cultural diversity and explore how they are presented in literature (185-186). Barry presents four characteristics of postcolonial criticism. Firstly, the awareness of the non-Europeans, or “the others” and how they are depicted is crucial, which is how European writers identify the colonized people (187). A more thorough presentation of this concept will be given further in this paper. Secondly, attention to the language used is an important characteristic in postcolonial criticism, since using colonizers’ language also acknowledges the colonial structures (Barry 188). Thirdly, postcolonial critics focus on hybridity or double identities, which is a position when people belong to two or more cultures and for that reason express contradictions and double loyalties (Barry 187). Finally, the fourth characteristic is the cross-cultural interplay, which deals with postcolonial writers’ relationship to both European tradition and their own non-European cultural tradition. This double or mixed identity consequently expresses the unstable and ambivalent nature of characters and their inner conflicts, which postcolonial critics are aware of (Barry 189).

John McLeod claims in *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2010) that there is some critique of the postcolonial theory since postcolonial writings include concepts that are used in other theories, such as Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis etc. (3). Consequently, this brings some disagreements and dispute within the postcolonial field since there is such a variety and no specific and homogenized theory. However, McLeod argues that postcolonialism has its own background which can be demonstrated in several ways, which brings diversity and dynamism to the theory (4). Consequently, postcolonialism can efficiently be used in several ways as a critical concept in describing the effects of the colonial ruling.

Another issue in postcolonial theory, according to McLeod, is to be precise in using terms such as “colonialism” and “postcolonialism” (39). Colonial norms and values are not automatically removed when a country acquires its independence. Even though the colonizers
have been removed, the colonial thinking and knowledge will remain and still affect and oppress the formerly colonized people. Therefore, it is crucial to keep in mind that “the term ‘postcolonialism’ is *not* the same as ‘after colonialism’” because it does not describe a new historical period without colonial oppression but on the contrary “recognize both historical *continuity and change*” (McLeod 39). This means that postcolonialism admits the colonial representations which still exist today, despite the decolonization, and it also points out the need for change and, moreover, the actions that have already been taken. Therefore, postcolonialism covers not only the historical past but also the present and the future (McLeod 39).

2.2 Re-writing

According to John McLeod (163), the teaching of English Literature in the colonies was a way of asserting British cultural and moral values and at the same time devaluing the indigenous peoples’ cultural traditions and norms. Consequently, a hierarchy was made where the distinction was between the civilized colonizers and the non-white people. The aim was to cultivate the colonized people in order to make them appreciate British culture. However, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out in her essay *Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism* (1985) that the role of British Literature was also to produce “the cultural representations of England to the English” (243), which was a crucial part of imperialism since it gave the colonizers an identity of being masters and that gave them the right to dominate the colonized people. In British literature, there are descriptions of the superiority of the British Empire and its culture and traditions. Later on, colonized people re-wrote European classic literature in order to answer back and challenge the views of the colonized people. According to McLeod, re-writing is much more than filling-in the gaps in the source text. A re-writing usually resists or challenges colonialist representations of the colonized peoples (McLeod 193).

There have been some doubts if Rhys, who was a white creole from Dominica with a family history of slave-owners, can be considered a postcolonial Caribbean writer. However, Helen Carr argues in her book *Jean Rhys* (2012) that Rhys was incredibly aware of the complexities of identities and also about the hierarchical imperialist system which affected the colonized people and their lives (20-21). Carr claims that even though Rhys had a heritage as a colonial settler “she can be considered a postcolonialist in her attitude to the Empire and in her employment of many postcolonial strategies “(24). Moreover, Rhys used the West Indian
vernacular when she gave the disempowered a voice and showed the power of language, according to Carr (22).

In Rhys’s re-writing of Jane Eyre she does not only fill in the gaps but she also creates a picture of how the British imperialist structures had formed the Caribbean society and how people identified themselves and others by those ideas. According to McLeod (193), a re-writing usually opposes and questions colonialist representations of the non-whites and their cultures. Therefore, a re-writing of a classic text may be regarded as postcolonial. Rhys pictures the oppressed people who dare to challenge and question those in power. However, since the novel Wide Sargasso Sea is set after the actions in Jane Eyre, the novel is considered as a “post-dated prequel” (McLeod 191) and therefore stands independently from the source text of Jane Eyre. According to McLeod (191), Rhys resists her novel being completely controlled by Jane Eyre and challenges its meaning by criticizing its colonial representations, which is typical of postcolonial re-writings.

3. Theory

3.1 Orientalism and otherness

Edward Said’s concept Orientalism is an important part of the colonial discourse since it shows how the Empire constructed the identity of the colonized people and dominated them by that knowledge. He mainly focuses on how the Europeans defined the colonized people in the East, but his theories can also be applied to how they defined the colonized people in other countries.

Said writes in his book Orientalism (2003) that the construction of identity “involves establishing opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subjected to the continuous interpretations and re-interpretations of their differences from ‘us’” (332). The concept ‘the Orient’ is, according to Said, a man-made idea which Europeans used in order to point out their own superiority in contrast to Eastern people and their cultures (7). The Orientals are therefore imagined to be what the Europeans are not. This construction of identity is therefore linked to the disposition of power or powerlessness since the Orient was supposed to be weaker than the West (Said, 204). These ideas turned out to be an academic field in which Europeans could structure and classify the non-whites by common-held assumptions. For example, the Orientals were considered to be strange, peculiar and they were speaking in odd languages, in contrast to the Westerners, who were rational and sensible. The Orientals were
also looked upon as primitive and backward compared to the enlightened Europeans. Furthermore, the Orientals were regarded as exotic and degenerated people who oozed sexuality and had free intercourse, which was the opposite of European norms (Said 166-167). Moreover, there were moral classifications of the non-Europeans. Said gives some examples: “The American is ‘red, choleric, erect’, the Asiatic is ‘yellow, melancholy, rigid’, the African is ‘black, phlegmatic, lax’” (119). All these classifications became connected with ideas about biological differences and therefore a racial imbalance was created. The primitive Orientals needed to be handled and taken over in order to establish the true Western norms (Said 206-207). In Said’s words, “[o]nly an Occidental could speak of Orientals, for example, just as it was the White Man who could designate and name the coloreds, or nonwhites” (228). The Orientals were not supposed to be independent since they were too uneducated to be able to rule themselves. As a result, Said argues, European culture obtained power and identity by defining the West as the opposite of the degenerated East since they claimed the right to represent the non-whites who therefore were silenced (Said 3).

There is some criticism toward Said and his theory of Orientalism, according to McLeod (56). There is some questioning if the enormous archive of Orientals materials is as uniform and homogenous as Said presents it. Moreover, since the materials cover two millennia of documentation, there would be some changes in attitudes and outlook on the Orient. Another criticism of Said’s theory is that he does not examine the Orientals’ resistance to Western influence (McLeod 57). There must have been some resistance and challenging of the Western representations. For that reason, some critics consider Said’s work to be a part of the Orientalist field which he describes (McLeod 58). Further, he has been criticized for not considering the resistance within the West, since not all Westerners were racists and there were nations that were against slavery and opposed how colonized people were treated. Finally, Said has been criticized for not considering female travellers and writers and how they depicted the East and the Orientals (McLeod 59). However, the criticism demonstrates that the colonial discourses are various and diverse. Said’s theory is, according to McLeod, correct when it points out how the West represented The East in order to dominate people, but the Orientalist representations were probably not uniform or unchallenged (McLeod 60).

### 3.2 The psychological effects on the oppressed

While Said demonstrates how Europeans legitimated their oppression of colonized people, Frantz Fanon describes the psychological effects on the opposed in his book *Black Skin, White
Masks (2008). He writes about his own experience to regard himself in the relation to the white man and therefore objectifying himself as “the other” (83). Fanon writes: “The white world, the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man – or at least like a nigger” (86). The racial ideology of the colonizers gave him an identity and function which disempowered him both psychologically and socially. Further, he describes how he felt imprisoned by not being able to define his own identity and therefore was split by his own selfhood and the identity which the Europeans made for him. Even though he lived by the values and norms of the European culture and was well-educated, he was not accepted on equal terms in society due to his black skin. McLeod calls this process for “colonising the mind” (20) which is how Europeans managed to convey their attitude about the colonized people as less worthy people. The colonized people were forced to disdain themselves and their own culture and at the same time accept Western values and norms (McLeod 20-22). In order to resist European attitudes there must be an awareness of how language is used and what suppositions and images it conveys, according to McLeod (25).

Fanon also points out the importance of language, but he focuses on the ability to speak the European, dominating language correctly. He claims it is a way to take on the culture of the language which makes the black man considered “whiter” and more equal to the white man: “Mastery of language affords remarkable power” (Fanon 8). However, a black man who speaks a proper European language may be considered suspect since it is expected that he ought to speak pidgin and, for that reason, Europeans may talk a more simplified speech to him. This behaviour fixates the unequal balance between black and white people (Fanon 22-25).

Further, Fanon claims that the reason a black woman gets involved in a relation with a white man is because she wants to become “whiter” since it is a way to climb the ladder of social rankings (30). Another way is money; “One is white above a certain financial level” (Fanon 30). Fanon argues that in Martinique, there is a common wish to somehow becoming whiter since the Manichean concept still rules how people perceive themselves and others (31). The Manichean concept involves that whiteness is connected to beauty, light and goodness while blackness signifies darkness and evilness. In order to become whiter, it is a good idea to marry a white man from Europe since it is a way to go from a class of slaves to a class of masters (Fanon 41). Moreover, being a child of a white woman is a privilege in the colonies since when “a white woman accepts a black man it is a giving. Not a seizing”, according to Fanon (32). The white masters often slept with, or raped, their coloured female
slaves or servants and for that reason, there are many illegitimate children of former slave-owners and masters in the colonies. Having a white mother was, therefore, an advantage since the child was not “made in the bushes”, as stated by Fanon (32).

The same idea was applied by the European colonizers, according to Hilda van Neck-Yoder. She writes in the article Colonial Desires, Silence and Metonymy (1998) that “because the legal status of ‘white’ was conferred via the mother, wealth and prestige of ‘the white people’ depended on the ability of colonialist men to control the sexual behaviour of their sisters, wives and daughters, i.e. to keep colonized men from having sexual access to these women” (192), but at the same time the male colonizers took the right to abuse women of the colonized in order to dominate. Consequently, controlling sexual relations was a way to build and preserve the unequal power relations in the colonies, according to van Neck-Yoder (192).

3.3 Ambivalence

Said claims that European colonizers created the images of the savage non-European peoples and Fanon describes how the colonized people were psychologically affected by this practice. However, the colonizers created contradictions in the colonial discourse since they, on one hand, considered the non-whites peculiar and “other”, and, on the other hand, studied the colonized people in order to get knowledge about them (McLeod 63). This conflict, of both knowing the people yet considering them as “the other”, is demonstrated in stereotypes of the non-whites. According to McLeod, “[t]he stereotype both installs and disavows difference: it ensures that the colonised are at the same time radically other yet capable of being understood” (64). This creates an equivocal representation of the colonized people. It is upon these ideas Homi Bhabha bases his thoughts about, what he calls, “mimic men” (Bhabha 128). In his essay Of Mimicry and Man (1984), he claims “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (126). This is what Fanon experienced when he was not accepted on equal terms in society despite his education. Bhabha writes about how the British colonizers required the colonized to learn the English language and attend their English missionary schools in order to civilize them. Consequently, mimic men, who learnt the language and the values and norms of the British culture, were raised, but since racial stereotypes were repeated over and over again, the colonized were fixed in racial prejudice which was disempowering them (Bhabha 128-129). They were considered “almost the same but not white” (Bhabha 130) and became in the position of being in-between their own cultural identity and the colonizers’ cultural
identity. However, the mimic men were considered a threat to the colonizers since they could speak their language and act as them, which revealed the resemblance between the colonizers and the colonized. Therefore, the mimic men were excluded from society and did not have the same privileges as the white colonizers, even though the mimic men were educated (Bhabha 130). According to Carr, Rhys was constantly aware of how the politics of imperialism affected people's identities since she herself, a West Indian creole living in Europe, experienced this ambivalence of being mixed and marginalized. However, she does not only portray people who live in a racial in-between world but also those who drift between being rich and poor, sick and well (Carr 27-28).

The writer Edward Kamau Brathwaite describes the mimicry as a cultural tragedy in the article Creolization in Jamaica (2003) since it deprived Jamaica of the African culture. During the time of slavery, there were two cultural traditions in Jamaica, the European, and the African, and none of them were local traditions since they all were foreigners to the island. The black slaves in Jamaica failed in maintaining their own culture since they were eager to be seen by their masters and therefore imitated the European traditions and became mimic men (Brathwaite 204). Consequently, the African traditions never became a norm and for that reason, Jamaica lacks its own black culture and has not succeeded in creating Afro-Creole traditions, which still affects the identity of the Jamaican people. However, creolization is, according to Brathwaite, “an historically affected socio-cultural continuum, within which (in the case of Jamaica) there were four inter-related and sometimes overlapping orientations” (205), which is not really stable and uniform. This shows that colonialism still influences people and nations, and will probably do so in the future.

4. Close-reading

In Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys describes the social hierarchy and racial groupings in the Caribbean society. She portrays white people, who are the elite of society, but also the former black slaves and moreover, the mixed-raced people, whom she calls “the coloureds”. There is a wide spectrum within and between these groupings which are due to the European colonial norms. The close-reading is divided into three parts, which will look into the categories of being white, coloured or black. The focus will be how they define themselves within their own group, but also what happens when they interact between the groups, as in the relation between Antoinette and Sandi.
4.1 The hierarchy of the white people

Rhys does not write about the love story between Antoinette and Sandy explicitly since their relationship is not accepted by all people in society. In order to understand why it is hidden and not told by Antoinette as a narrator, it is essential to first look into those ideas and norms that formed her identity and values.

The first part of the novel depicts a variety of white people in the colonial society of Jamaica, and it also describes how Antoinette tries to define her own whiteness. The very first sentences state; “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks” (15). It is implied that the white Europeans set the norms of society and it also points out social and racial categories within the white people of Jamaica. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in Postcolonial Studies (2007), the term “creole” was originally applied to white people with a European heritage who were born and raised in the colonies (51-52). Antoinette’s mother, Anette, comes from Martinique and is, therefore, a white creole with French origin which makes her different from the Jamaican creole ladies with English origin. Daniel says that “French and English like cat and dog in these islands since long time.” (80), which excludes Anette from the white creole upper-class society of Jamaica. Her English husband, Cosway, was a slave-owner who drank himself to death and left Anette and her two children to take care of the run down estate. Anette waits for the compensation the slave-owners were supposed to get after the Emancipation Act passed and therefore she does not have any money. That is another reason why she is not approved by the white creole society. Fanon stated that people were white above a certain financial level, which defines whiteness as economic power. Antoinette’s black friend, Tia, explains: “Real white people, they got gold money” and “Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger” (21). This is why people stare and laugh at Anette and her family. Even though they are white people, they are poor and therefore excluded from the upper-class society where they once belonged.

Anette faces the true reality when she understands that Antoinette runs wild and that she only has one dress to wear. For this reason, she has to take some action and she marries an Englishman, Mr. Mason, in order to change their lives and to gain some respect. Mason introduces English customs in their family, and Antoinette likes to be an English girl since it includes her in the white society and she is no longer a “white nigger”. Her favourite picture is “The Miller’s Daughter” which shows a typical English girl with brown hair and blue eyes (30), who probably becomes her role model. After the fire at Coulibri, Antoinette’s hair had to
be cut and she worries that her hair will become darker than before (38), which makes her more different from the English girl in “The Miller’s Daughter”.

According to Carole Angier, author of the biography *Jean Rhys* (1990), the English people in Dominica, where Rhys was born, pretended that they lived in “a little England” and considered England as their true home. For this reason, they brought all their food, books, ideas and traditions to their new country. They sent their children to school in England and went there for vacation and retirement (Angier 5). Moreover, they brought their outlook on the colonized people as well. Mason believes that black people are lazy and harmless (Rhys 28), which corresponds well to Said’s theory of how Africans were viewed by Western colonizers. Anette does not approve of Mason calling the black people “niggers” or “negroes” (28), which is something he cannot understand. Moreover, Anette criticizes Mason for neither seeing the good in the black people nor realizing that they can be dangerous. She explains: “They are more alive than you are, lazy or not, and they can be dangerous and cruel for reasons you wouldn’t understand” (28). Yet, Anette and Antoinette share the same racial prejudices as Mason. For example, Anette calls Godfrey “a rascal” (19) and Antoinette calls Tia a “cheating nigger” (21). So, even though the former slave-owners recognize the individuality and humanity in their former slaves, the racist stereotypes are still kept alive.

When Antoinette is sent to the convent school, she is rescued from two bullies by Sandi, who is the son of one of Cosway’s illegitimate children. She realizes: “Once I would have said ‘my cousin Sandi’ but Mr. Mason’s lectures had made me shy about my coloured relatives” (42). Antoinette has adopted Mason’s outlook and customs in order to identify herself as English and therefore she understands that she cannot get involved with a coloured man. She belongs to the class of British colonizers who dominate the colonized people. Nevertheless, Antoinette leaves one of her books on the ground, on purpose, so Sandi can run after her and bring her the book. She describes him as a tall boy with long legs and when he ran “his feet hardly touched the ground” (42). Obviously, she is interested in him and follows him with her eyes when he chases the bullies away. This might be the beginning of their love story.

She feels safe and happy in the convent and wants to stay there, but Mason has other plans. He has arranged with some English friends to come over and wants Antoinette to meet them. She understands that there is something more to it since the other girls in the convent are very curious (49). Mason has probably already arranged the marriage with the English man and Antoinette in order to control her and her sexual behaviour since that was, according to van Neck-Yoder, necessary in order to preserve the unequal power relations in the colonies.
Since the story about Antoinette and Sandi is not told in the novel but is only implicitly hinted, there cannot be any certainty if Mason knows about their relationship or not. However, he claims that he wants her to live with him and that he will take care of her. He says: “I want you to be happy, Antoinette, secure, I’ve tried to arrange it” (49).

The character of Antoinette portrays several categories of being white in the colonized Jamaica. She is a marker of slavery since her father was a slave-owner and moreover, he was a drunkard and he was also promiscuous since it is said he had had many women and several illegitimate children (24). Furthermore, Antoinette’s mother is a French-Creole from Martinique which makes her stand out from other creoles in Jamaica with an English heritage. Moreover, her mother marries an Englishman which makes Antoinette identify herself as an English girl. On top of that, as a child, she experiences poverty, which excludes her from the white upper-class society, but as the step-daughter of Mason, she becomes rich. Consequently, there is a wide spectrum of whiteness; English or creole, French creole or English creole, slave-owner or not slave-owner, rich or poor. Antoinette experiences all of these categories which make her confused about her own identity and where she belongs, even though her origin is of white colonizers.

4.2 Colonial mimicry – no privileges, but threatening

The mixed-raced people are described as a group by themselves and are called “coloureds” in the novel. They neither belong to the white society nor the black community. One of the coloured characters is Daniel Cosway who claims to be Antoinette’s half-brother since he is one of Cosways’s illegitimate children. The servant, Amélie, describes Daniel as a “very superior man, always reading the Bible” (99). In this way, he intends to imitate white people, which Bhabha calls “colonial mimicry” or becoming a “mimic man” (Bhabha, 128). For example, Daniel acts like a polite English gentleman when he sends a letter to the husband in order to arrange a meeting with him and moreover, he has a sitting room with a black and gilt clock where he receives his visitors. He can read and write and has adopted Christian beliefs. However, one of his framed pictures in the room is a text saying “Vengeance is Mine” (100), which implies his attitude and outlook on his situation. He is considered by all of the Caribbean characters to be a hateful man who only makes trouble, which may be the consequence of his effort of adapting the white colonizers’ norms, yet, not having the same privileges. He is in the position of being in-between his own culture and the white colonizers’ culture. According to Angier, Rhys was well aware of the fact that the coloured and in –
between people had an outright hatred for white people. She writes in one of her letters how she tried to become friend with a coloured girl in school, but the girl just gave her a loathing look. She writes: “This was hatred – impersonal, implacable hatred. I recognized it at once and if you think a child cannot recognize hatred and remember it for life you are most damnable mistaken. I never tried to be friendly with any of the coloured girls again” (Angier14).

Daniel acts like a white man but he also points out the stereotypes that are fixed by the prejudices which disempower him and other coloured people. He calls the husband “a tall fine English gentleman” and himself “a little yellow rat” (103). Nevertheless, both of them are in similar circumstances. The husband is a victim of the patriarchal inheritance law of entailment which leaves him, as the younger brother, without money from his father. This is the reason why he has come to the Caribbean since he is in need of money. Daniel is also denied the inheritance of his father, but because of racial causes, since his mother was a former slave and he is an illegitimate child. Even though he tried to claim his rights, his father ignored him (101). Consequently, the husband and Daniel have experienced the same injustice of being denied by their fathers and both of them carry cold and resentful feelings toward them. Despite their similar circumstances they differ in social ranking since the husband, as an Englishman, is a respected man, and Daniel, as a coloured man, is excluded and despised. According to Bhabha, the mimic men revealed the resemblance between the colonizers and the colonized, which is shown in the encounter between Daniel and the husband, but they were not on equal terms due to colonial norms and values.

Daniel tries to blackmail the husband in order to get some of Antoinette’s money, and again he points out the differences between them. He says: “What is five hundred pounds to you? To me it’s my life” (104). This demonstrates the unequal economic situation between the two men. The reason for the blackmailing is that Daniel knows about the relationship between Sandi and Antoinette. Sandi is the son of Daniel’s coloured half-brother Alexander Cosway. Alexander was their father’s favourite son and lives a prosperous life. According to Amélie, Alexander owns three rum shops and two dry goods stores (100), which picture him as a successful businessman. Daniel calls Alexander “two-faced” because he does not speak against the white people and he does not talk about his wealth (103). It seems that Alexander is also imitating the European colonizers’ culture, and has succeeded by turning away from his black heritage. The denial of the black people’s traditions is one of the reasons African culture never became a norm in Jamaica, according to Brathwaite, since black and coloured people were too eager to imitate European traditions. Moreover, Alexander has married a fair-
coloured woman from a respectable family (103), which highlights Fanon’s ideas of the ambition of becoming whiter in order to succeed in society. Consequently, Alexander’s son Sandi is described as being like a white man “but more handsome than any white man, and received by many white people.” (103). Nevertheless, Sandi is a coloured man with a heritage from slavery which makes the relationship with the white creole girl Antoinette, whose heritage is from slave-owners, complicated and taboo. That may be the reason why their love affair is repressed and not told explicitly in the novel. Antoinette who has made an effort of identifying herself as an English girl understands that it is not appropriate in having a coloured boyfriend, and therefore she keeps quiet about it since that is her strategy to deal with complications. It is like when she found the dead horse or when Mason told her that she should meet his friends from England: “Say nothing and it may not be true” (16, 49).

In the last part of the novel Antionette remembers her last meeting with Sandi. He had asked her to come with him since he could not bear to see her unhappy, but she refuses since she is raised by English norms and values and thinks that their relationship is “a waste of time” (152). It is more important to her to be included in the European society and in “their ranks”. Being married to a coloured man would exclude her and she might not want to experience that again. Nevertheless, if they would have married, Sandi would probably have gained even more respect in society. Especially his children might have been regarded as white people since they would have had a white mother, which is considered to be a privilege in the Caribbean, according to Fanon. Moreover, a marriage between a man, with a heritage of slavery, and a former slave owner’s daughter would have united both sides of slavery, but that is unthinkable in the colonial society since that would not keep the unequal power relations between the colonizers and the colonized. According to Said, European culture obtained power by defining the colonized people as degenerated, and that may be the reason why Antoinette considers their relationship as “a waste of time”.

The English husband has noticed that people are gossiping and laughing at him but since he is a true English gentleman he ignores it and hides his feelings. He realizes that he was only a small child when he learnt to hide his feelings since it was “necessary” (85), and this is probably one of the reasons why the relationship is never told by him as the narrator; he represses it. But when Daniel tells him about Sandi he starts questioning his wife and their marriage. Amélie also confirms these rumours since she tells him “I hear one time that Miss Antoinette and his son Sandi get married, but that is all foolishness. Miss Antoinette is a white girl with a lot of money, she won’t marry a coloured man even though he don’t look like a coloured man” (100). The thought of having a wife that might have had a sexual relationship
with a coloured man is inconceivable and it would taint both her and their marriage. According to Said, the non-Europeans were considered to be exotic and liberal with their sexuality and these ideas make the husband uncomfortable since it makes Antoinette a part of this strangeness or otherness. He starts to scrutinize her and projects his racial prejudices on her. He states: “She’ll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She’ll not care who she’s loving). She’ll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would – or could” (136). He identifies her as an Oriental and not the proper Victorian woman he wishes her to be, and therefore considers her mentally ill. In order to become the master and to take control, he rapes Antoinette, re-names her to Bertha and moreover, has sex with the servant girl, Amélie. The husband acts like a western conqueror in order to save his face as the dominating master. However, he realizes that people will continue to gossip and laugh at him since Daniel threatens to tell people about Antoinette and Sandi. That is too humiliating and therefore, he plans to go back to England. Consequently, the coloured characters, Daniel and Sandi, are a great threat to his marriage and also his European identity as the superior master, even though they do not have any real power in the colonial society.

4.3 Black people and fighting back

In the novel, it is the former slaves who try to fight back, even though they do not really succeed since they are at a disadvantage. At the riot, Aunt Cora silences the mob by threatening them with “eternal fire” (37), and later on, the English husband silences Christophine when he threatens to call the police (132). This shows the unequal power relationships in the colonies where the colonizers oppressed the non-whites by defining them as degenerated. According to Said, that is the reason why the non-whites were silenced in the colonies. Black people’s identity was fixed to powerlessness and weakness, and white people’s identity was to be strong and superior.

Rhys portrays the former slaves as an impersonal group with no names. For example, at the riot, Antoinette does not recognize any of the black people and says: “They all looked the same, it was the same face repeated over and over” (35). Moreover, there is an unnamed boy by the clove tree who cries when Antoinette and the husband are leaving for England. Ironically, the tree has a name, but the boy does not, which bereaves him of his own identity. Even though the former slave-owners recognize good and evil in their former slaves, they still consider them as a depersonalized group of slaves. However, Rhys depicts the former domestic slaves, who are servants, more individually and gives them a voice. Angier writes
that Rhys had complex feelings about black people since she both envied their cheerfulness and their relaxed attitude to life but also feared their anger (Angier 13). In the novel, Antoinette enjoys the “the gay busy noise” (Rhys 90) when the black women are talking and laughing while washing clothes, and she thinks: ”This is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay” (90), even though she is afraid of the black people’s anger, which she experienced at the riot. This shows the ambiguity of the relations between white and black people in the colonies. The colonizers could have a personal relation to their black servants, yet considered them as strange and other. Antoinette has a close relationship to Christophine, but since she has a slave-owner heritage, it creates split feelings.

Moreover, Rhys challenges the Manichean concept, since she connects the black people with warmth and gaiety and the white people with coldness and stiffness. According to Fanon, people are striving for whiteness since it is connected to light and goodness while black is related to darkness and evilness, but Rhys makes associations the other way around. Christophine says to the English husband that “you are a damn hard man for a young man” (128) and Antoinette says that he is like “[a] stone” (122). In the end of the novel, Antoinette describes England as a dark and cold place where “everything is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it” (148), and the Caribbean with warmth and colour (151).

One of the black servants is Christophine, who stands out from the rest since she comes from Martinique, is blacker than the others and speaks both English and French, but also Patois (18). Most of the other black people are afraid of her and keep their distance since she is considered different and it is believed that she knows black magic. Christophine seems to be a strong and independent woman who dares to speak up, at least in front of Antoinette and her husband. However, she is also excluded from the black community, as Anette and Antoinette are excluded from white upper-class society. To some extent, it shows the difficulties for the black community to be unified and keep their traditions and culture. Moreover, they were also divided because of their background, their functions, and their masters’ languages, English or French. Nevertheless, Rhys gives them a voice and she lets them speak in their own Caribbean vernacular, which is something the English husband dislikes. He thinks that Christophine’s language is “horrible” (71) and says he cannot understand the unnamed black boy who wants to follow him to England (140).

Christophine is the person who scrutinizes and judges the English husband. She dares to challenge him from the beginning. The husband recalls; “We stared at each other for quite a minute. I looked away first and she smiled to herself” (61). Christophine is the mother who Antoinette never really had since Anette had very little interest in her. She takes care of her as
a child, presents Tia to her, nurses her after the rape and tries to encourage her to leave her husband. She questions the fact that Antoinette had to leave everything she owned to the husband and she believes that Richard Mason has tricked Antoinette into marriage. To some extent Christophine fights against the European ideas and laws when she tries to persuade the husband to return half of the dowry to Antoinette and leave the island, but she does not stand a chance when he threatens her with the police (132). However, when she tells him that if he leaves the island, Antoinette will probably marry someone else and become happy, he is struck by “rage and jealousy” (131). He does not want to give her up and thinks: “Made for loving? Yes, but she’ll have no lover, for I don’t want her and she’ll see no other . . . She’s mad but mine, mine” (136). Leaving Antoinette and some of the money to a coloured man is unthinkable since in the colonial and imperialistic view he is the one who should be in control. Coloureds could not be in charge and rule over what was supposed to be a white man’s possessions.

According to Said, Orientals had to be handled and spoken for, since they were too uneducated to manage by their own. It was also necessary for the colonizers to classify and name the Orientals. That might be the reason why he re-names Antoinette to “Bertha”. Antoinette tries to fight back by insisting that her name is not “Bertha” and that the husband would not be accepted by her real father, Cosway (121). This is the first time she refers to her real father instead of Mason. Somehow, she might realize that she would not be in this situation if she had not identified herself as an English girl and tried to fit into the white, European people’s ranks. Perhaps she could have married Sandi with her father’s approval and for that reason keep her real names Antoinette Cosway, instead of becoming “Antoinette, Bertha, Cosway, Mason, Rochester”. Nonetheless, she keeps playing the part as the English girl who marries an English gentleman. Her wish of being “in their ranks” breaks her heart and puts the sun out of her creole soul.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to look into how Rhys demonstrates the complexity of colonialism in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and how colonialism affected the colonized people and the colonizing people in the Caribbean. Rhys manages to describe not only the social hierarchy and the racial groupings, but also the wide spectrum which exits within and between these classes.
The main character Antoinette is caught between the English society and the colonized culture. In her childhood, she is excluded from the white upper-class since her mother is a French creole and they live in poor conditions. Being considered “real white people” is not only due to the colour of their skin but also to financial conditions. Rhys describes the wide range of whiteness in which English people are the superior followed by the English creoles and, further down the scale, French creoles and the poor. She also narrates how white people maintain the unequal power relationship in the colony by dominating the colonized people and silence them. The way the husband treats Antoinette, when he finds out about the love story between Antoinette and Sandi, shows how the Englishmen treated the colonized people. He projects his racial prejudice on her, abuses her and finally re-names her, which is exactly what the Englishmen did to the colonized people in Jamaica.

Rhys also pictures the struggle of the black people who try to fight back but do not succeed, since they are easily silenced by their former white masters. The former slaves are at a disadvantage and are disempowered even though they try to stand up for their rights. But the colonial norms set the rules and the former slaves cannot break those. Racial prejudices fix them to be considered as the Other, with no rights at all in society. Even though slavery has been forbidden, the black people are still treated as slaves. This creates a hostile atmosphere and Antoinette is afraid of the black people’s anger, yet, she enjoys their easiness and gaiety. She has a close relation to Christophine, who has taken care of her as a child, and Antoinette is very fond of her, but at the same time she considers her as an ignorant slave. Rhys points out this ambiguous and complex relationship that existed between masters and their slaves in the colonies.

Furthermore, Rhys describes a diverse and divided black community which is not unified. Some of them are depicted as an angry but depersonalized group of former slaves, and some of them are still loyal to their former white masters and for that reason imitate their traditions. That makes the community divided into smaller groups which can also be a reason why they do not succeed in bringing together their community and maintaining their African culture in the Caribbean.

Besides describing the former masters and slaves, Rhys portrays the mixed-race people who are in-between the white society and the black community. Some of the “coloureds”, like Daniel Cosway, are full of hatred since they have adopted the white man’s culture; yet they do not have any privileges. Other coloureds, like Alexander Cosway, are rich and successful businessmen but still they are not included in the white society since the racist stereotypes are repeated over and over again. Even though they have adopted and succeeded
in the white society they are still considered as primitive and degenerated non-whites. However, since they understand the white culture and are living by its norms they may be regarded as dangerous or as a threat to the white people. The relationship between Antoinette and Sandi is a good example of that. Sandi, who comes from a rich family and has fair skin, is still a marker of slavery, which makes a relationship with a white woman, with a history of slave-ownership, impossible. He will never be accepted in the white upper-class where she belongs, and she will be excluded from the white elite. Therefore, the love story between Antoinette and Sandi is never explicitly told, since it crosses the boundary between the class of masters and the class of slaves. Their love story is brilliantly told by Rhys who hints their relations in the servants’ and Daniel’s gossip and in Antoinette’s cursory memories. It is a secret which should not be told since it is forbidden. This demonstrates the wide gap between the white people and the coloureds and the complexity of colonialism in the Caribbean. Daniel, who understands the complications of their relationship, tries to profit by blackmailing Antoinette’s husband. Again, Rhys points out the balance of power between different groupings. Even though Daniel does not have any actual power in society, he is a threat due to his knowledge and understanding of the white culture. Consequently, the husband brings Antoinette and her fortune to England in order to save his face.

Rhys describes the colonial society in all its levels and nuances, and also how the colonial social structures and ideas determine how people define themselves and others. However, she challenges the norms by implicitly telling the love story about the white creole and the coloured man, which is overruled by the Englishmen who come to the colony to further their careers. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not only a re-writing of *Jane Eyre*, which fills in the gaps about Mr. Rochester’s first wife, it is also an independent novel which describes the complexity of colonialism in the Caribbean colonies.
6. Works cited

Primary Source

Secondary Source


<http://www.jstor.org/stable/778467>


<http://abahlali.org/files/__Black_Skin__White_Masks__Pluto_Classics_.pdf>

<http://global.britannica.com/topic/inheritance-law>

