

Quest for Identity in Rhy's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: An Afrofuturistic Analysis

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Abstract

This research examines the historical struggles of the Black community, particularly their oppression in a racial world as depicted in the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The study explores the impact of colonizers' oppressive ideology on the Black population, resulting in alienation and chaos, while also highlighting the struggle of the community to establish its identity in a futuristic world. The theoretical framework used for the study is Afrofuturism, a genre that envisions alternative futures and re-contextualizes past experiences through an Afrocentric lens. Focus is on Yatasha Womack's concept of Afrofuturism. The research explores how characters challenge and dismantle internalized oppressive ideologies, transforming them into advocates for justice and empowerment. Furthermore, Afrofuturism reimagines the themes of alienation from the novel in a future where historical and present-day issues of oppression are addressed, and Black communities are empowered and celebrated. This vision underscores the importance of affirming Black identities, celebrating cultural heritage, and transforming historical traumas. Afrofuturism provides a powerful lens for understanding identity struggles within a Triple Colonized scenario, offering hope for a future where diverse identities are embraced and empowerment leads to collective healing and transformation.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, Alienation, Identity, Racialized, Yatasha Womack

Introduction

Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) by Jean Rhys is a novel that explores the quest for identity in a world shaped by colonialism, patriarchy, and racial oppression. The novel's protagonist, Antoinette Cosway, is a mixed-race woman struggling to find her place in a society that denies her black- and-white heritage. Through Antoinette's story, Rhys highlights the complex intersection of race, gender, and identity. The novel also contributes to the Afrofuturistic literary tradition, which seeks to reclaim marginalized narratives and imagine a more liberal future.

Jean Rhys is a Dominican British author whose developing years were lived in a patriarchal society that also influenced her key themes. Her first four novels were published during the 1920s and 1930s, but it was after the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966, that she emerged as a significant writer. This novel was a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and was awarded with WH Smith Literary Award in 1967. Rhys's Creole heritage and her experiences as a white Creole woman, both in the Caribbean Island and in England, influenced her life and writing.

Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) can be seen as an early example of Afrofuturistic literature, as it challenges the traditional narratives of colonialism and racial oppression. By giving voice to Bertha, Rhys allows readers to see the story of *Jane Eyre* in a new light, one that is more nuanced and complex than the original. The novel also explores how the legacy of colonialism continues to impact the lives of people of color today. In a nutshell, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a powerful work of literature that offers a unique perspective on a classic story and engages with important themes of identity, colonization, and racial justice central to the Afrofuturist movement.

Afrofuturism: *The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* by Ytasha L. Womack (2013) is a comprehensive introduction to Afrofuturism, a cultural and artistic movement that explores the intersection of African diaspora culture, science fiction, and fantasy. In this book, Womack examines the history and evolution of Afrofuturism, its key themes and motifs, and its influence on contemporary art, music, literature, and film.

The research objectives focus on analyzing and understanding various themes and aspects of the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, particularly as they relate to the oppression Blacks face in a racial world. The first research objective explores the causes of oppression of Blacks in a racial world in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The second objective of this research explores how *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicts the alienation caused by violent attributes stemming from the colonizer's oppressive ideology. This objective examines the novel's portrayal of the consequences of the oppressive ideology propagated by the colonizers. The third research objective finds how *Wide Sargasso Sea* highlights Black's struggle for identity. This objective aims to study the novel's exploration of the challenges faced by Black characters in their quest to establish and assert their identities in a racially hostile environment.

Literature Review

Wide Sargasso Sea is a powerful example of postcolonial literature that uses Gothic aesthetics to disrupt dominant discourses and gives voice to those silenced by colonialism. Decker argues that the novel's use of Afrofuturistic elements, such as the presence of spirits and the use of magic, allows Rhys to reimagine a future in which the legacies of colonialism can be overcome. At the same time, Decker shows how Rhys's attention to the natural world and environmental issues in the novel highlights how colonialism has also impacted the environment (Decker, 2017).

Catherine Lynette Innes (2013) explores how *Wide Sargasso Sea* engages with questions of futurity, or the possibility of imagining a different future, in the context of colonialism. Innes argues that the novel's use of Gothic elements, such as madness and haunting, allows Rhys to disrupt linear narratives of progress and to imagine alternative futures in which the legacies of colonialism can be overcome (Innes, 2013).

Marcella Polain (1998) examines how *Wide Sargasso Sea* engages with questions of memory and identity. Polain demonstrates how Rhys's use of memory and flashback allows her to challenge dominant narratives about race, gender, and power and to offer a counter-narrative that centers the experiences of the colonized (Polain, 1998).

In "Wide Sargasso Sea and the African Diaspora," Kaiama L. Glover (2008) examines how *Wide Sargasso Sea* engages with the African diaspora and the legacy of slavery in the

Caribbean. Glover argues that the novel's focus on the experiences of white Creole women in the Caribbean exposes the complexity of the colonial experience and how it has shaped the cultural identity of the Caribbean (Glover, 2008).

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to analyze the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* through the lens of Afrofuturism. The research focuses on textual analysis, examining characters, dialogues, and narrative structure to understand themes of identity, oppression, and resistance. Ytasha Womack's theoretical framework is applied to explore how the novel reimagines narratives of racial and cultural identity. Primary data consists of the novel itself, while secondary data includes critical essays, journal articles, and Womack's Afrofuturism.

Theoretical Framework

In this research, qualitative analysis of the *Wide Sargasso Sea* is performed through an Afro-futuristic lens. The research focuses on the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* and its exploration of issues faced by Black characters in a racially divided world. It aims to analyze themes of racial oppression, violence, alienation, and identity struggles within the novel. The research uses an Afro-futuristic lens, emphasizing experimentation, re-imagining identities, and liberation for African-descended people. It highlights the importance of Afro-futurism in reviving Black culture, challenging stereotypes, and envisioning liberated futures. This research considers the notions of Ytasha Womack to delineate the afro futuristic aspects present in the *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Afro-Futurists pay heed to the representation of blacks on the platforms headed by colorless beings white. For blacks, their glorious history has been destroyed by the colonial powers to engrave their supremacy for an extended period. In her book, Ytasha L. Womack quotes Ingrid Lafleur, an art curator and Afro futurist. He says, "*I see Afro-futurism as a way to encourage experimentation, re-imagine identities, and activate liberation*" (Womack, 2013, p.22).

She further gives Ingrid Lafleur's view regarding Afro-futurism, who says, "*I generally define Afro-futurism as a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens*". The definition suggests that Afro-futurism gets rid of imposed identity and creates a new one without the influence of western slogans and ideas (Womack, 2013).

Womack (2013) says, “*Afro-futurists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future... In some cases, it is a total revision of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques*” (Womack, 2013, p.59). By exploring new ideas and re-imagining identities free from Western influence, Afro-futurism allows the characters to break free from the confines of stereotypes and reclaim their cultural heritage with pride. It becomes a means of empowerment and liberation, encouraging them to forge a new path. Afrofuturism provides a lens through which to reimagine narratives and envision a future free from the legacy of colonization and oppression. Afrofuturism celebrates intersectionality and envisions diverse and empowering identities for women. Afrofuturism empowers women to actively participate in rewriting history and forging paths of empowerment, fostering hope for the future.

Data Analysis

Racial Oppression in a Racial World

Wide Sargasso Sea depicts the systemic oppression of Black individuals through the lens of colonialism and slavery. Antoinette's experiences highlight the intersectionality of race and gender, as she navigates societal rejection from both white and Black communities. Her lament, 'You are not my people... You are not the people of this place' (Rhys, 1966, p.77), underscores her exclusion and alienation. The novel critiques the dehumanization and economic exploitation perpetuated by colonial powers, emphasizing how racial hierarchies continue to shape identity.

Alienation and Cultural Loss

Alienation is a recurring theme in Wide Sargasso Sea, as characters grapple with their sense of belonging. Antoinette's reflection, 'I often wonder who I am and where my country is' (Rhys, 1966, p.65), captures the cultural displacement experienced by individuals caught between conflicting identities. Christophine, a figure rooted in Afro-Caribbean spirituality, also faces alienation as a result of systemic racism. Afrofuturism reimagines these narratives, envisioning futures where cultural identities are restored and celebrated.

The Struggle for Identity in a Hostile Environment

Antoinette's journey in Wide Sargasso Sea reflects a profound struggle for identity in the face of colonial and patriarchal oppression. Her resistance to being renamed 'Bertha' by Mr. Rochester symbolizes a rejection of colonial erasure. This act of defiance aligns with the Afrofuturist goal of reclaiming and redefining marginalized identities. The novel's exploration of hybridity and intersectionality offers a critique of societal norms, proposing liberated futures for those silenced by systemic oppression.

Blacks have been oppressed and objectified throughout history till date. During foreign rule, due to the Colonizer's oppression and stigmatization, their past was erased, leaving the Black in the pit of despair, resulting in aggression and violence. Afrofuturism takes representations of the lived realities of black people in the past and present and reexamines the narratives to attempt to build new truths outside of the dominant cultural narrative. By analyzing how alienation has occurred, Afrofuturism works to connect the African diaspora with its histories and knowledge of racial bodies. This research explores how African Blacks struggle for identity in Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Moreover, this research tries to discover the oppression and alienation caused by the dominant culture's oppression and the struggle of Black to revive their identity and ensure their place in the futuristic world.

The novel primarily takes place in the Caribbean and explores the complex identity of Antoinette Cosway (Bertha) as a Creole woman of mixed racial heritage. An Afrofuturistic analysis of identity in the novel would investigate how Antoinette's sense of self is shaped by her cultural background, her relationship with the Caribbean environment, and her experiences of colonization and marginalization. Antoinette's character undergoes a transformative quest to break free from the oppressive forces that constrain her, including patriarchy, colonialism, and racial prejudice. An Afro-futuristic analysis would highlight the moments in the novel where Antoinette defies societal expectations and seeks liberation, drawing parallels to the broader Afro-futurist movement's emphasis on empowering marginalized communities.

As an Afro-futuristic analysis of the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the research highlights how the novel reimagines a classic literary work from a marginalized perspective. By exploring the backstory and inner world of the character traditionally dismissed as the "madwoman in the attic," the novel subverts the dominant narrative and gives a voice to the marginalized. This act of reimagining aligns with the Afro-futurist mission of questioning and reshaping historical and cultural representations to empower those who have been silenced or erased.

The research analyzes how Antoinette's identity is shaped by her racial background and gender, class, and geographical location. The analysis explores the intersectionality of these factors and how they contribute to the multifaceted nature of Antoinette's quest for self-discovery and liberation. This research offers a fresh and innovative perspective on the novel by employing Afro-futurism as a theoretical framework. Through this lens, the research delves into the themes of identity, liberation, and reimagining in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, illustrating how the novel's narrative aligns with the broader goals and principles of the Afro-futurist movement. By exploring the complexities of Antoinette's journey, the analysis sheds light on the empowering potential of creative expression and speculative imaginings for

marginalized communities, ultimately highlighting the importance of diverse and inclusive narratives in literature.

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys is a novel that explores various themes related to race, identity, and oppression. While the novel primarily focuses on the story of Antoinette Cosway, a white Creole woman, it also sheds light on the broader context of racial oppression Black individuals face in a racial world. The causes of the oppression of Blacks presented in the novel can be understood in various ways. The historical legacy of slavery and colonization plays a significant role in the oppression of Blacks. The long history of exploitation, dehumanization, and forced labor has shaped the power dynamics between the white colonizers and the Black population.

The legal and economic systems favor white individuals, making it difficult for Black people to break the cycle of poverty and oppression. Stereotypes and prejudice perpetuated by white colonizers contribute to the oppression of Blacks. Black individuals are often portrayed as inferior, exotic, or dangerous. These negative perceptions lead to marginalization, exclusion, and limited social mobility. The male dominance is also represented in the novel as, “Why should she wish to think? There was no point in it, ever” (Rhys, 1966, p.32).

Economic disparities and exploitation are significant causes of oppression. In the novel, the Black population is shown to be economically disadvantaged compared to the white planters. The racial Blacks are presented as poor in the novel. When Mr. Mason, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, came at Annette’s house to see her, Antoinette felt ashamed because of her poor dressing and hid herself because Mr. Mason was a rich English man who came to Caribbean Island to make more money. Antoinette, who is white but belongs to the Creole community, faces discrimination and isolation due to her mixed racial background. This highlights how divisions and hierarchies based on skin color can contribute to oppression even within the racial world. The novel also highlights how the oppressive racial environment denies Black individuals’ agency and autonomy. They are often treated as objects or commodities, stripped of their rights and individuality.

The novel portrays how the internalization of racial stereotypes and prejudices affects both Black and white characters. For instance, Antoinette’s husband, Mr. Rochester, demonstrates a sense of superiority and contempt towards the Black population, viewing them as “other” and beneath him. On the other hand, characters like Christophine, a Black servant, have internalized a sense of inferiority due to the systemic racism they experience. This oppression is represented in the novel as Rhys says, “*There is a bird that is my eyes. There is a woman too. And her name is Antoinette. Christ have mercy upon us*” (Rhys, 1966, p.52). As a practitioner of Afro- Caribbean spiritual beliefs and healing, Christophine faces hostility and rejection due to her “otherness.” Just as Rhys says in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “*I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where*

do I belong and why I ever born at all” (Rhys, 1966, p.65).

The novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* portrays the alienation of Black characters through several vital elements. *Wide Sargasso Sea* occurs in a society dominated by white colonizers perpetuating racial hierarchies. The Black characters, including Antoinette (who later becomes Bertha Mason), are marginalized and treated as inferiors by the white colonizers. This discrimination is evident in the treatment of Black individuals, including Antoinette’s mother, Annette, and her brother, Pierre. Antoinette says about her loneliness, “*You can pretend for a long time, but one day it all falls away, and you are alone*” (Rhys, 1966, p.55).

Antoinette exists in a liminal space, not entirely accepted by the white or Black community. The colonizers see her as an exotic and different, while the Black community often views her as privileged and aligned with the oppressors as Rochester says about Antoinette, “*She seemed so lost, so devoid of hate. „You are not my people, ” she said, You are not the people of this place*”” (Rhys, 1966, p.77). Language is an essential element in the portrayal of alienation. The novel explores how language can be used as a tool of oppression and control. Antoinette’s changing names throughout the story like Antoinette Cosway, Antoinette Mason, and Bertha Mason— represent her evolving identity and the loss of her true self under the influence of the colonizers’ ideology.

The novel delves into the psychological alienation experienced by Antoinette. As she navigates a hostile environment filled with racism, distrust, and uncertainty, her mental and emotional state deteriorates, leading to her eventual madness in the attic of Thornfield Hall. The novel also illustrates how some Black characters, like Christophine, respond to their alienation and oppression through various forms of resistance, including acts of violence. Christophine serves as a source of strength and guidance for Antoinette but is also aware of the limits of her power in the face of colonial dominance.

The Black characters are often forcibly uprooted from their original homes and ancestral lands, leading to a profound sense of displacement. Christophine, for example, is originally from Martinique and lives on the island of Jamaica, where the white community treats her as an outsider and is not fully embraced by the Black community. As in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette worries about the identity of her mother and says, “*My mother is a stranger to this place. She is not English. She is half white, half black. I suppose that is why she is such a queer mixture. She belongs to nowhere and no one*” (Rhys, 1966, p.22). Antoinette’s transformation into Bertha Mason exemplifies the culmination of the alienation experienced by Black characters. As Antoinette marries Mr. Rochester, a representative of the oppressive English colonizers, she finds herself trapped in a loveless and oppressive marriage. Stripped of her name, identity, and heritage, she becomes a symbol of the dehumanization and objectification faced by Black women during that

era.

The novel's title, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, also serves as a metaphor for the isolation experienced by the characters. The vast, lonely sea symbolizes the distance and disconnection between the island's different racial and cultural groups. It reflects the characters' struggle to find a sense of belonging and being adrift in a hostile environment. Sometimes a person is so oppressed that fitting into that respective environment becomes very difficult. As Antoinette says, "*Do you know that feeling? When it seems as though your skin is too tight for your body?*" (Rhys, 1966, p.53). The Black characters are marginalized and excluded from the dominant European society, resulting in a sense of displacement and disconnection from their cultural roots. Their identities are devalued and reduced to stereotypes, perpetuating a racialized world where Black individuals face systemic alienation due to the oppressive ideology of the colonizers. Afrofuturism offers a visionary lens to challenge this alienation, presenting futures where Black individuals reclaim their cultural identities and are empowered to dismantle the structures of oppression that have historically marginalized them.

The patriarchal society of the time restricts women's autonomy and freedom. Antoinette's marriage to Mr. Rochester, a British man, illustrates how women were often treated as property and stripped of their agency. Her husband's attempts to control her identity and suppress her emotions represent how women were subjugated within the confines of colonial society.

Antoinette's identity is further fragmented as she struggles to find her place in a world that considers her neither entirely white nor black. The novel explores how colonialism disrupts and erodes the identities of colonized individuals, especially women who bear the brunt of this identity crisis. Sometimes, colonial suppression affects the second generation mentally, and they often face difficulty accepting their closest relations. Just like Antoinette's mother is a Hybrid, and Antoinette says, "*My mother is a stranger to me. Once I loved her. Now I feel nothing for her*" (Rhys, 1966, p.35). Antoinette's journey is also an exploration of her mental and emotional turmoil. *Wide Sargasso Sea* humanizes and gives voice to the marginalized figure in Brontë's novel, allowing readers to see Bertha's perspective and the circumstances that led to her tragic fate. This subversion of the colonial and literary narrative highlights the complexities of identity and agency for women in a Triple Colonized setting. Christophine says, "*My story is a long one, and I will not bore you with it. But when we are women, we have to nurse men. I nursed my husband*" (Rhys, 1966, p.91).

The cultural loss of Antoinette intensifies her struggle for identity as she grapples with being torn between two worlds and not entirely accepted. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a powerful example of postcolonial and feminist literature. The novel addresses the aftermath of colonialism and draws

attention to the specific gendered experiences of colonization. By entering the narrative from the female perspective, Rhys sheds light on the unique challenges women of the time faced, especially those marginalized by their race and gender. Antoinette says, “*The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely, I tried to kiss her*” (Rhys, 1966, p.51).

Antoinette's position as a woman in a patriarchal society impacts her experiences and interactions. She faces limitations and expectations based on her gender and racial identity, adding to her sense of vulnerability and oppression. Christophine's role as a Black woman further highlights the intersectionality of gender and race. She navigates the challenges of being a woman in a colonized society while resisting the oppressive structures around her.

Despite the overwhelming odds, *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows moments of resistance and attempts to reclaim identity. While facing numerous challenges, Antoinette strives to assert her agency and finds a sense of self-worth. She resists her husband's attempts to rename her, reclaiming her birth name “Antoinette” rather than accepting the derogatory nickname “Bertha”, he bestows upon her. This act of self-affirmation becomes an act of resistance against erasure and control. Jean Rhys' novel gives voice to the silenced and marginalized, challenging traditional narratives and shedding light on the human cost of colonization.

Antoinette's journey exemplifies the devastating effects of colonialism on an individual's psyche and sense of self as she grapples with displacement, marginalization, and mental turmoil. By subverting traditional narratives and giving voice to the silenced and marginalized, Rhys challenges prevailing stereotypes and offers a profound feminist and postcolonial critique. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a timeless reminder of acknowledging and empowering women's voices and identities within the broader historical and literary discourse.

Closely intertwined with racial identity, cultural identity is a significant theme in the novel. Antoinette's identity is shaped by her Creole heritage, a mix of European and Caribbean cultures. However, she faces challenges in embracing her Creole identity fully, as the dominant white society views her as “other” and different due to her non-English upbringing and customs. She is caught between the traditions of her Caribbean homeland and the expectations imposed by English culture, particularly after her marriage to Mr. Rochester, an Englishman. This struggle with cultural identity further isolates her and adds to her sense of displacement and estrangement. Jacqueline Bishop (1995) examines how Rhys constructs the story of Antoinette, the novel's protagonist, and how her narrative challenges dominant narratives about race, gender, and colonialism (Bishop, 1995).

The novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* explores how characters internalize their society's oppressive

ideologies and stereotypes. For instance, Mr. Rochester, the husband of Antoinette, exhibits a sense of superiority as a white Englishman, considering himself intellectually and morally superior to the Black Jamaican population. This internalized racism leads him to devalue and exploit those around him, including Antoinette and her servant, Christophine. Christophine, a Black servant who acts as a mother figure to Antoinette, challenges the norms and defies the expectations imposed upon her. She refuses to be submissive and resists the role that colonial society tries to assign her. Despite facing discrimination herself, Christophine shows resilience and assertiveness, providing a contrasting example of internalized identity compared to Mr. Rochester. Antoinette, in particular, struggles to define herself in a world that constantly marginalizes and misjudges her. As she encounters racial prejudices, economic hardships, and personal tragedies, she grapples with questions of who she truly is and from where she belongs.

The novel portrays the characters' struggles, conflicts, and transformations as they grapple with the complexities of their sense of self amidst a racially divided and oppressive world. Through their journeys, the novel invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of identity and the impact of historical and societal contexts on shaping individual and collective identities. With her mixed racial background, Antoinette thrives in a society that celebrates hybridity and values cultural diversity. Afrofuturism depicts a future where the legacy of slavery and colonization is acknowledged and healed, allowing individuals to reclaim their identities without the weight of historical oppression.

Conclusion

The study explores the impact of colonizers' oppressive ideology on the Black population that resulted in alienation and chaos. Additionally, it highlights the struggle of the community to establish its identity in a futuristic world. This research delves into the historical plight of the Black community, focusing on their oppression in a racial world as depicted in the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

This research explores various themes in the novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, through the lens of Afrofuturism. It identifies racial identity as a prominent theme, focusing on the protagonist, Antoinette Cosway, who grapples with discrimination and alienation due to her mixed heritage. Antoinette struggles to embrace her Creole heritage amidst the clash of European and Caribbean cultures. Antoinette's search for her true identity is central to the story, as she faces rejection and isolation, leading to her descent into madness. The characters' experiences of loss of identity are depicted through changing names and transformations, particularly Antoinette's change to Bertha. The novel touches on gender identity, exploring the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal

society.

Afrofuturism is a genre that envisions alternative futures, re-contextualizes past experiences, and explores themes of identity and social change through an Afrocentric lens. Characters like Antoinette would thrive in a society that values hybridity. The Afrofuturistic perspective on identity in the novel framed the characters' journeys as quests for self-discovery and collective empowerment. Afrofuturism also envisions a world where gender roles are redefined, and gender identities are freely expressed and celebrated.

The research further explores women's struggle for identity in a Triple Colonized scenario, where various layers of oppression intersect. The novel also examines how colonialism and gender oppression intersect, affecting women's experiences. Cultural erasure under colonial rule is explored, revealing how Antoinette's Caribbean heritage and Creole culture are devalued, leading to feelings of displacement and alienation. *Wide Sargasso Sea* challenges stereotypes by humanizing Bertha Mason, empowering women's voices, and critiquing patriarchal and colonial systems. Afrofuturism celebrates intersectionality and envisions diverse and empowering identities for women.

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