

An Insight into the Themes in Jane Rhys's 'Wide Sargasso Sea'

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Abstract – Present paper is a profound study about the themes present in Jane Rhys's 'Wide Sargasso Sea'. The novel is written with an Anti - Imperialism and colonialism viewpoint but the research paper is an attempt to search the other main themes that are present in the novel. The paper aims to analyze the themes under the perspective of slavery and the changes that were taking place in the Caribbean after the abolishment of slavery. The research paper also intends to study the persisting abhorrence, hatred and abusive relationship between the Westerners and native Jamaicans.

Key words: Reverse Imperialism, Gender Inequality, Harassment

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INTRODUCTION

Colonialism refers to the policy of extending one country's control over another country for the purpose of earning more profits. In the beginning of fifteenth century, some of the European countries started to explore the world for their benefits. They wanted to find new possibilities of businesses and earnings in the other parts of the world. This led them to set up their colonies in many parts of Asia, Africa, North and South America. Although, it all started with economic interests but later on, these countries extended their power from economic to political and social control.

Jean Rhys wrote 'Wide Sargasso Sea' when the downfall of British empire had already begun in the Caribbean with the elimination of slavery. After undergoing sufferings inflicted on them, the natives of Jamaica wanted to take revenge on the Westerners by tormenting them physically and mentally. As Edward W. Said in his book 'Culture and Imperialism' states 'An immense wave of anti-colonial and ultimately anti-imperial activity, thought and revision has undertaken the massive edifice of Western Empire, challenging it, to use Gramsci's vivid metaphor, in a mutual siege. For the first time Westerners have been required to confront themselves not simply as the Raj but as representatives of a culture and even of races accused of crimes- crimes of violence, crimes of suppression, crimes of conscience'. (195) It was time for the Westerners to reap the crop that they had sown which was full of hatred, malice and vengeance. It is with the perspective of anti-imperialism and colonialism that the author has written this novel. The English empire's struggle to maintain its supremacy and power can be noticed throughout the novel, but it ends in frustration and disappointment as the Jamaicans were not ready to give in. Being Anti-colonialism as the main theme,

there are several other themes that are notably present in the novel. This article explores some of the other major themes like threats from outside and within, gender inequality and reverse imperialism present in the novel.

THREATS FROM OUTSIDE AND WITHIN

Antoinette, the main character in the novel, suffered a lot in the hands of fate and destiny. She was constantly in conflict within her own self and threats from outside. Although born and brought up in Jamaica, she could not relate with the Jamaicans and was also unable to trace her roots back to England which led to alienation and identity crisis. Being raised without parents' love and fellow camaraderie, she was isolated and introspective even in her childhood days. She faced racism to the extent that it jolted her inner as well as outer self. The native Jamaicans harassed her family by calling them 'slave owners' and 'white cockroaches' while the English used to refer to them as 'white niggers'. She faced a lot of threats from the outside world. A girl called her crazy like her mother,

"Look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother. Your aunt frightened to have you in the house. She send you for the nuns to lock up. Your mother walk about with no shoes and stockings on her feet, she sans culottes...she have eyes like zombie and you have eyes like zombie too" (Rhys, 45)

Her house was burned down by the natives when she was a child. Her brother Pierre died and mother became a mad woman after she was tortured brutally by the natives. She was followed and harassed by a negro boy as he threatened her by

saying, 'One day I catch you alone, you wait, one day I catch you alone.' (45)

Troubles waited for her not just in the outside world, but there was an unceasing fight going on in her mind as well. She gets married to Mr. Rochester in her quest for love but it turned out to be a loveless marriage. She opened her heart to him but he was unsympathetic and controlling like other people whom she had dealt with in her life. He used to call her by an odd name 'Bertha' as she recalls; "Don't laugh like that Bertha." 'My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?' 'Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha.' (122) He made her believe that she has inherited emotional brittleness from her mother and ultimately it resulted in losing her sanity. Her mental anguish, pain and inability to find a dignified and peaceful place led to the tragic end of Antoinette's life.

GENDER INEQUALITY

We are often reminded of the fancy images of romanticism when we think about the culture and attitude of the European people who lived in the 19th century, especially in the works of art which belonged to that period of time. However, when we compare it with the modern days, we observe that it was an unjust era for women in all spheres of life. Mary Virginia Terhune, in her book, *Eve's Daughters*, has stated that women had to face serious oppression from the opposite sex and it was accepted by the society. Women were valued according to the amount of hard work she could do and with regard to wealthy women, they were considered as showpieces in the cabinet. Consequently, all women, including wives and mothers had to work untiringly, though without any appreciation as they were expected to do so. Women were attributed with passive, subordinate and emotional adjectives and men with active, dominant and rational qualities.

Female characters in 'Wide Sargasso Sea' are also depicted with such attributes of soft heartedness and of trivial nature. They feel insecure and unsafe without the company of men. When Antoinette's mother, gets a marriage proposal, after the death of her first husband, she takes it as an opportunity to be safe and have a better status in the society. After the marriage she says, 'we were something to laugh at, but we are not poor now'. (Rhys, 29) It implies that a woman can feel safe only at the presence of a man. The patriarchal superiority can be noted throughout the novel, from the way Rochester addresses Antoinette with her mother's name as 'Bertha', as though she doesn't have an identity. He doesn't give any heed to her request of not to address her with that name. Even the marriage is done as part of a performance. He did that deliberately to acquire her wealth, as part of male supremacy. Another instance of female silence and submission to male dominance and power can be seen in their marriage. Though she wasn't completely willing for the wedding, but after it happened, she accepted him with silence and submission. Even at the

time of serious issues, when Christophine asks Antoinette to leave her husband, she says, 'He will not come after me. And you must understand, I am not rich now, I have no money of my own at all, and everything I had belongs to him.' (100). It shows the helplessness of women in the society. She has no other choice except to be submissive to her husband. So, they are the reflection of the attitude of the people of that time.

GLIMPSES OF REVERSE IMPERIALISM

A vast majority of post-colonial novels depict the imperialistic and cruel treatment of the native people of Africa by the Europeans. However, we see a reverse here in 'Wide Sargasso Sea'. There are several instances of harsh treatment of the Europeans and even the Creoles by the native Jamaicans. They are dealt with hatred and harassment. The interactions of the natives with the whites have always been antagonistic. Examples of such mistreatment can be seen at the beginning of the novel itself. The novel begins with such a statement, 'They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did'. (15) This sets the mood of the novel. This is followed by another instance in which the horse that Antoinette's mother, Annette, rode everyday was found dead under the frangipani tree. It was poisoned by the black people. This didn't stop with just with killing an animal but went on to attack the whites physically and emotionally. Antoinette never looked at any strange negro, because according to her, they hated the whites and creoles and addressed them as white cockroaches. A little girl, one day said to Antoinette, 'Go away, white cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody wants you, Go away.' (20) It clearly depicts the attitude of the native Jamaicans towards the descendants of the Europeans. The usage of 'white cockroaches' by the Jamaicans can be equated with the comparison of Congo people's faces with 'grotesque mask' by the Europeans in Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'. The hatred and resentment of the black Jamaicans at the whites and the Creoles reaches a climax when they burn the symbol of white oppression, the plantation house. Even at this tragic moment, Antoinette trusts her Jamaican friend, Tia, and then decides to run to her for help and wishes to live with her. However, to her surprise, she sees a jagged stone in Tia's hand. She says, 'When I was close, 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.' (41). So, we can witness a completely different picture of the African people here, who could overcome their fears and suppression and grab courage to react and fight against the white monopoly and dominance which they had suffered for hundreds of years.

CONCLUSION

Though it might appear that the main theme of the novel is the anti-imperialistic struggle of the

Jamaicans against the whites, but in fact, the author, Jane Rhys, tries to focus on the struggles of the whites, especially the creole women who had to undergo the physical threats from the blacks and the emotional threats within the family system of the creoles. The events in the novel bear witness to these struggles the women underwent during the different stages of their life. They had limited freedom and they fell victims to male dominance and had to face strict restraints, as we see in the case of Antoinette and her mother, whereas their Jamaican counterparts, who were once their slaves, enjoyed much more personal freedom within their own families and in the society. At the same time, we can figure out that the resentments and physical attacks at the local whites and creoles by the Jamaican people as the rise of reverse imperialistic movements among the native people.

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