In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette Cosway grows up occupying a complex and difficult position in West Indian society. Antoinette is white Creole, her ancestors colonisers from England who achieved power and wealth through slavery and exploitation. However, after the Emancipation Act of 1833 many of the white Creole plantation owners lost their power, wealth and status, and they sank to a position caught between a new generation of colourists coming over from England and the native population. Growing up, Antoinette bears the brunt of guilt for the history of slavery and the cruelties perpetrated by her ancestors, and she is fully aware of the resentment that is aimed at her family by her ancestors’ racist attitudes and demonstrating “the indelible, colonizing mentality of a coloniser allows her to overcome some of the disadvantages of gender and enjoy the privileges of being a part of the dominant culture, privileges that are not available to the sadly dispossessed and inevitably condemned Antoinette.

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In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette's marriage to Rochester does not improve her situation as might have been hoped but rather drags her down into despair and madness. In Rochester and Antoinette's relationship, Rochester assumes the position of both patriarch and coloniser, which is ironic given that Antoinette, whose ancestors were colonisers, is now placed in the position of the colonised Other. From the outset of her marriage, Antoinette is rendered powerless, treated as “dispensable property that can be bantered for a respectable lineage” by Rochester and Mason (Ferguson 94). Upon arriving at Grambois, Antoinette feels that “This house belong to Miss Antoinette’s mother, now legally possesses and controls both Antoinette herself and Antoinette’s brother Pierre and arguably driving her mother to madness. However, Antoinette is not entirely innocent or impartial in her treatment of the black natives. In moments of anger she makes prejudiced and racist comments, calling Tia a “cheating nigger” (10) and Christopher a “laughing black devil from Hell” (96), betraying her internalisation of some of her forefathers’ racist attitudes and demonstrating “the indelible, colonizing mentality of a coloniser”.

Marginalised by this double rejection and forced to live between cultures, Antoinette experiences feelings of a “double homelessness” (Rhys 5), betraying her internalisation of some of her forefathers’ racist attitudes and demonstrating “the indelible, colonizing mentality of a coloniser”.

Somewhat similarly to Antoinette, in A Passage to India, Adela finds herself in a place where she is at odds with the majority of her companions. As a newcomer to India, Adela holds views that are wildly different from those of the Anglo-Indians who live there. For example, Adela “ha[s] no race-consciousness” (Forster 114). This causes many of the Anglo-Indians to hold her in contempt, with Mrs Turton “thinking her ungracious and cranky” (21), while in turn Adela “doesn’t think the (Anglo-Indian)” behaves pleasantly towards Indians” (40). However, whereas Antoinette has very little agency, being first trapped by her family’s poverty and then forced into marriage, Adela has plenty of agency. It is her decision to travel to India from her home country of England, and in turn she also has the power to decide whether or not she will marry Ronny Moore, who is described as the “man whom Miss Quested would probably not too certainly marry” (18, my emphasis). Furthermore, despite her quibbles with the Anglo-Indians, Adela remains a member of the imperial force occupying India, and her actions and comments frequently betray her colonial mind set. Although Adela claims at first to want “to see the real India” (18), later she admits that “her dealings to see and patriarchy also come into play. By comparing these two characters, I wish to highlight some of the similarities these two women face in their disparate situations because of their gender. At the same time, this comparison will demonstrate how Adela’s status as coloniser allows her to overcome some of the disadvantages of gender and enjoy the privileges of being a part of the dominant culture, privileges that are not available to the sadly dispossessed and inevitably condemned Antoinette.

Now completely and literally dispossessed, Antoinette’s marriage to Rochester is torn apart by the multiple versions of stories and truths that Rochester is confronted with, as he becomes increas-ingly “perplexed by the surface of official colonial policy and practice” (Smith viii), and “hear[s] so many stories he don’t know what to believe” (Rhys 72). However, even after the breakdown of their relationship, Rochester is determined to maintain his power over Antoinette, and when Christie suggests, “She marry with someone else. She forget about you and live happy,” Rochester laughs and thinks, “Oh no, she won’t forget” (102). As a result of Rochester’s domineering patriarchal and colonial behaviour, Antoinette becomes a changed person, in fact, she becomes scarily a person at all, as her “rational mind” breaks (111) and brands her “a Mammoo’s Marmalade” (98) and brands her “a Mammoo’s Marmalade”.

Indigenous people have had to learn to be less visible in public, less assertive, less able to speak for themselves. Even in literature, the voice of the colonised has often been marginalised and subjugated. The narrative, as he takes over the story and provides “his empire’s voice” (Rhys 99). In response to this an act of “colonial obeah” (Smith vii), Antoinette becomes a “doll” with a “doll’s voice” (118) and a “doll’s smile” – nailed to “her stiff white face” (111). By the end of Part II, Rochester’s power and control over his wife is total, as he acknowledges when he says “I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out… She was only a ghost” (Rhys 110). Antoinette’s powerlessness is exacerbated by the fact that, in accordance with Victorian marriage laws, Rochester’s status as her husband means that he now legally possesses and controls both Antoinette herself and everything that once was hers. Despite the protests of several characters, including Aunt Cass’s statement to Richard Mason that Antoinette should be protected, legally (Rhys 72) and Christie’s assertion to Rochester that “This house belong to Miss Antoinette’s mother, now it belong to her” (103), Rochester is completely right when he tells Christie, “I assure you that it belongs to me now” (103). Rochester’s hard-hearted exploitation of the power and control he wields over his wife is reflected in his heartless attitude towards the property he gains from her, saying of Granbois, “I’d sell the place for what it would fetch. I had meant to give it back to her. Now – what’s the use?” (112). Now completely and literally dispossessed, Antoinette is driven into insanity, and a scene between her and Richard Mason near the end of the novel is telling of the cause of her madness and distress. When told by Grace Poole that she attacked Mason, Grace says “I didn’t hear all she said except I cannot interfere legally between yourself and your husband. It was when she said legally that you flew at her” (19, 20). Adela’s central experience in A Passage to India provides an
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Once again and reassert disappearing from the narrative almost entirely until changed" (Herz 94-5). After his arrest Aziz is also silenced, are more permanent, whose life is peremptorily and utterly portrayed as the sole victim, Aziz is arguably more strongly victim and aggressor is blurred," and instead of Adela being in India, she still wields power over Indians. In fact, in the Anglo-Indians, and as a member of the colonising force that Adela “has started the machinery; it will work to its awful mistake” (179). However, once her initial confession (177), and she even tells Ronny, “he’s innocent; I made an realise[n]g now what a fine loyal character she was” (229), and he tells her before she leaves, “I do like you so very much, I may say so” (234). For Aziz, conversely, the repercussions of Adela’s accusation spread far beyond the day of his trial, it is stated that the Anglo-Indians “believed he was guilty… to the end of their careers” (231), and although “they had nothing actionable against him,” nevertheless “to the end of his life he remained under observ- ation, thanks to Miss Quested’s mistake” (262). In spite of all this, Adela is still afforded more consideration and respect than Aziz; even Fielding, who is more emotionally moved, Adela ability to dismiss the case is taken away from her, as Mrs Moir recognizes when she says that Adela “has started the machinery; it will work to its end” (183).

However, although as a woman and the alleged victim of an attack, Adela is used by the Anglo-Indians, and as a member of the colonising force in India, she still wields power over Indians. In fact, in the aftermath of Adela’s accusation, “the boundary between victim and aggressor is blurred” and instead of Adela being portrayed as the sole victim, Aziz is arguably more strongly victimized because he “the character whose suffering is more permanent, whose life is preemptorily and utterly changed” (Herz 94-5). After his arrest Aziz is also silenced, disappearing from the narrative almost entirely until the trial, and is obscured by a judicial process according to which “he is always the prisoner or the ‘defence’: effectively deprived of his identity” (104). Fortunately, once Adela is allowed into the stand to speak for herself once again and reassert her agency, she is able to perpetrate her story. For unlike Antoinette, who does not escape from the patriarchal-colonial nexus into which she is entrapped, Adela does release herself from her victim position once she is taken to the stand and speak for herself in court.

For unlike Antoinette, who does not escape from the patriarchal-colonial nexus into which she is entrapped, Adela does release herself from her victim position once she is allowed to take the stand and speak for herself in court. A comparison of Adela and Antoinette yields some interesting points of similarity, but it is also clear that their situations are vastly different. As a white Creole living in the West Indies after Emancipation, Antoinette experiences a sense of dispossession and rejection by the colonial power of her native country because of her ancestors’ exploitation and enslavement of the native population. However, her troubles are only exacerbated by her marriage to patricular, neo-coloniser Rochester, as she is marginalized by her husband and driven mad, unable to find a home even in her “homeland” of England. Conversely, Adela also experiences feelings of not belonging and the negative repercussions of being a woman, temporarily losing her agency after accusing Aziz of assaulting her and being reduced to victim and symbol. However, as a member of the colonising race Adela is able to overcome some of the hardships associated with her gender and has access to power and agency that Antoinette does not, as seen in the fact that she is able to regain her voice and agency at the trial. Forced to return to England as a consequence of her statement, nevertheless the trial is depicted as a formative experience for Adela, and back in England, it is assumed that she is able to build a positive, comfortable life for herself.

Unlike Adela, Antoinette’s “homecoming” to England is not at all positive or comforting, as she is imprisoned, mistreated and driven further into madness. As a white Creole, Antoinette is expected to return to England as a “renouncing her own people,” she is forced to leave her “dream; when Grace tells her they are in England she says, “I yield some interesting points of similarity, but it is also clear that their situations are vastly different. As a white Creole living in the West Indies after Emancipation, Antoinette experiences a sense of dispossession and rejection by the colonial power of her native country because of her ancestors’ exploitation and enslavement of the native population. However, her troubles are only exacerbated by her marriage to patricular, neo-coloniser Rochester, as she is marginalized by her husband and driven mad, unable to find a home even in her “homeland” of England. Conversely, Adela also experiences feelings of not belonging and the negative repercussions of being a woman, temporarily losing her agency after accusing Aziz of assaulting her and being reduced to victim and symbol. However, as a member of the colonising race Adela is able to overcome some of the hardships associated with her gender and has access to power and agency that Antoinette does not, as seen in the fact that she is able to regain her voice and agency at the trial. Forced to return to England as a consequence of her statement, nevertheless the trial is depicted as a formative experience for Adela, and back in England, it is assumed that she is able to build a positive, comfortable life for herself.

Unedited, already known to readers of Bontine’s Jane Eyre, the novel ends with Antoinette’s premonition of her own death amid the fiery ruins of Thornfield Hall. Thus, these two different novels nevertheless deal with similar themes of colonialism, imperial power and gender. A comparison of Adela and Antoinette yields some interesting points of similarity, but it is also clear that their situations are vastly different. As a white Creole living in the West Indies after Emancipation, Antoinette experiences a sense of dispossession and rejection by the colonial power of her native country because of her ancestors’ exploitation and enslavement of the native population. However, her troubles are only exacerbated by her marriage to patricular, neo-coloniser Rochester, as she is marginalized by her husband and driven mad, unable to find a home even in her “homeland” of England. Conversely, Adela also experiences feelings of not belonging and the negative repercussions of being a woman, temporarily losing her agency after accusing Aziz of assaulting her and being reduced to victim and symbol. However, as a member of the colonising race Adela is able to overcome some of the hardships associated with her gender and has access to power and agency that Antoinette does not, as seen in the fact that she is able to regain her voice and agency at the trial. Forced to return to England as a consequence of her statement, nevertheless the trial is depicted as a formative experience for Adela, and back in England, it is assumed that she is able to build a positive, comfortable life for herself.

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