

EXAMINING colonialism and gender in *A Passage to India* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Wide Sargasso Sea and *A Passage to India* are two very distinct novels set in different locations and at different times, yet both of these works deal with issues of colonialism and imperialism, and through the characters of Adela and Antoinette, issues of gender 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.

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 colonisers 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 (Emery 165). With memories of their former enslavement still fresh, the local black West Indians call Antoinette's family “white cockroaches” (Rhys 9) and “white niggers” (22), and in Part I, a group of black West Indians set fire to Coulibri, causing the death of 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 Christophine a “damned black devil from Hell” (86), betraying her internalization of some of her forefathers' racist attitudes and demonstrating “the indelible, colonizing mentality of a family that has extorted and appropriated Caribbean land, money, and labor over centuries” (Ferguson 101). Apart from her mother's marriage to Mason, Antoinette and her family do not find camaraderie and solace with the English neo-colonisers either, who look down upon them and state that white Creoles are “not in their ranks” (Rhys 5). Marginalized by this double rejection and forced to live between cultures, Antoinette experiences feelings of a “doubled homelessness,” dislocation and not belonging (Emery 163). These feelings are never truly assuaged and preclude any discovery of a cohesive, authentic self; later in the novel, Antoinette tells Rochester, “I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all” (Rhys 64).

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 compatriots. 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” as a result of being “too new” (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-Indians] behave pleasantly to 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 though not 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 on she admits that “her desire to see India had suddenly decreased. There had been a factitious element in it” (74), and Aziz thinks cynically that Adela's wish to see India was a mere “pose,” which “was only a form of ruling India; no sympathy lay behind it” (273). On top of this, despite the fact that Adela is outwardly sympathetic towards the Indians, in her accusation of Aziz, she commits an extremely pernicious act against an Indian, and Fielding tells Adela that “you have no real affection for... Indians generally” (230). Although Adela does eventually withdraw her accusation, a courageous act that detrimentally affects her relationship with the Anglo-Indians, the effects of her original action can never be completely undone, as is discussed later.

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 bartered for a respectable lineage” by Rochester and Mason (Ferguson 94). Upon arriving at Granbois, Adela states that Rochester looks like “a king, an emperor” (Rhys 44), and Rochester's power is reflected in the narrative, as he takes over the story and provides “his version of the tale (by his definition, the only version of the tale)” (Fayad 231).

Rochester loathes Antoinette's otherness and marginalizes and subjugates her, seeing her as “a stranger to me... who did not think or feel as I did” (Rhys 58).

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conflicting narratives that lie below 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 Christophine 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 scarcely a person at all, as Rochester “break[s] her up” (98) and brands her a “Marionette” (99). In response to this an act of “colonial obeah” (Smith xii), Antoinette becomes a “doll” with a “doll's voice” (110) 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 Cora's statement to Richard Mason that Antoinette “should be protected, legally” (Rhys 72) and Christophine'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 Christophine, “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 he said except ‘I cannot interfere legally between yourself

Their relationship is torn apart by the multiple versions of stories and truths that Rochester is confronted with, as he becomes increasingly “perplexed by the

and you husband.' It was when he said 'legally' that you flew at him” (119–20).

Adela's central experience in *A Passage to India* provides an

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interesting counterpoint to the multiplicity of different truths and voices found in Wide Sargasso Sea. Once Adela has stated that Aziz attempted to assault her in the Marabar Caves, no one in the upper echelons of Anglo-Indian society doubts

her story, even when she doubts it herself. Instead, it is held up as an unquestionable truth and becomes a vehicle for the Anglo-Indians to launch their own “fanatical” crusade against their Indian subjects (Forster 144). Adela is then silenced and swept up in the hysteria, and “it is only during the trial and subsequently that we are given any glimpse of that experience from her point of view” (Herz 99). This silencing of Adela is somewhat akin to the silencing of Antoinette; as Rochester reduces Antoinette to a zombi-like state, so Adela is reduced to “only a victim” and transformed into mere symbol (Forster 164). In the Anglo-Indians’ minds, “the chilly and half-known features of Miss Quested vanished, and were replaced by all that is sweetest and warmest in the private life,” as they “felt what he loved best in the world was at stake,” and she becomes an emblem of all that is English and needs protecting from the Indians (163). In the weeks before the trial, Adela realises that she may have been wrong to accuse Aziz, as she is hounded by an “echo” that symbolizes her guilt (177), and she even tells Ronny, “he’s innocent; I made an awful mistake” (179). However, once her initial confession has been made, Adela’s ability to dismiss the case is taken away from her, as Mrs Moore 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 loses her agency among 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 is “the character whose sufferings are more permanent, whose life is peremptorily 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 defense’... effectively deprived of his identity” (104). Fortunately, once Adela is allowed onto the stand to speak for herself once again and reassert her agency, she is able to exonerate him.

For unlike Antoinette, who does not escape from the patriarchal/colonial

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.

is depicted as a beneficial episode for Adela as coloniser, while Aziz, the colonised, must bear the negative consequences. Adela walks away from the chaos she caused relatively unscathed, and the experience is depicted as a positive and formative experience both through Adela’s eyes, as she thinks that “she had become a real person,” and through the eyes of Fielding (Forster 217). Arguably the most sympathetic Anglo-Indian in the novel, Fielding initially dislikes Adela, thinking her “a prig” (102), but in the aftermath of the trial he begins to see a different side of her, “realiz[ing] now what a fine loyal character she was” (229), and he tells her before she leaves, “I do like you so very much, if 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 observation, 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 connected to Aziz than to Adela, tells him, “you must let off Miss Quested easily” because “she is perfectly genuine and brave” (223), leading Aziz to “renounc[e]... the whole of the compensation money, claiming no costs” (231).

After Adela’s actions at the trial, for which she is seen as “renouncing her own people,” she is forced to leave Anglo-India (Forster 205), for, as Ronny thinks, “he really could not marry her – it would mean the end of his career... no one would receive her at the Civil Station” (228). However, even after the majority of the Anglo-Indians have turned against her, Adela is never truly isolated, thanks, once again, to her imperial origins. Fielding comes to her rescue in the aftermath of the trial, escorting her from the courthouse to the safety of his apartments, and she remains there for the rest of her time in India. It is not through any warm feeling toward Adela that Fielding does this initially, but rather because they are fellow countryman and -woman. He thinks, “The English always stick together! That was the criticism. Nor was it unjust,” and knows that “if... an attack was made on the girl by his allies, he would be obliged to die in her defence” (207).

Furthermore, “the girl from middle-class England”

is allowed to return to her own country and build a life for herself, and it is very likely that Adela will be comfortable and content among her friends and family back in

England (Forster 193). Although Adela feels despondent upon leaving India, it is stated that when the boat reaches Egypt, “the atmosphere altered. The clean sands... seemed to wipe off everything that was difficult and equivocal,” an image of renewal and erasure of past mistakes (235). On top of this, Adela’s humorous conversation with the American missionary reveals that she can return to her old life, her time in India a mere inconvenience; “I don’t say to what do you turn, but to what do you re-turn” (235). The fact that Adela has been able to create a pleasant life for herself is clear when towards the end of the novel Fielding tells Aziz that “Miss Quested is our best friend” (269), and when Aziz reads a letter from Adela to Mrs Fielding, “It was all ‘Stella and Ralph’, even ‘Cyril’ and ‘Ronny’ – all so friendly and sensible,” showing a group of colonisers “making up their little difficulties, and closing their broken ranks against the alien” (275). On top of this, at the end of the novel Adela receives her ultimate expiation, when Aziz gives Fielding a letter for Adela in which “he wanted to thank his old enemy for her fine behaviour two years back,” and the two men talk of “how brave Miss Quested was” and “her courage” (283).

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 has been raised to think of England as her true home and fed “a fetishized representation of the British Empire grounded in myths of family loyalty and safety” (Raiskin 252). She thinks of England as a “dream” (Rhys 49), believing that “I will be a different person when I live in England and different things will happen to me” (70). However, Antoinette’s dream of England has always been flawed and fantastical, as Rochester recognizes when he comments that she thinks of England as “some romantic novel, a stray remark never forgotten, a sketch, a picture, a song, a waltz, some note of music, and her ideas were fixed” (58). Conversely, Christophine’s description of England as a “cold thief place” is much closer to the truth (70).

After arriving in England, Antoinette becomes the quintessential “madwoman in the attic,” locked in a room which “completes a series of spaces in Antoinette’s life, beginning with the maternal space of Coulibri that seems bound only by the sea and gradually narrowing through her contact with patriarchy until she is finally reduced to a windowless room” (Fayad 237). Her dreams crushed, Antoinette cannot admit that this is the reality of the England that she mythologized for so long and continues to cling to her dream; when Grace tells her they are in England she says, “I don’t believe it... and I will never believe it” (Rhys 119).

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However, her fate is inevitable, already known to readers of Brontë’s Jane Eyre, and her journey “can only end in madness... a symbol of the total spiritual

isolation which is the white West Indian’s historical destiny” (Look Lai 28). 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, rejected by the people 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 patriarchal, 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 colonizing 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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