Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the Case of Postcolonial Haunting

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The "grand narratives" of history are dominated by stories of victory and heroism, tales of conquest and the "spread of civilization." What these "grand narratives" fail to tell are the stories of the conquered, the losers of history. These stories remain in the periphery of the historical narrative, mentioned only here and there in passing; a cargo jettisoned from a slave ship or the cackling laughter of the mad Creole woman in the attic. The "histories we choose to remember and recount" (Bhabha 57) provide a one-sided, often Eurocentric view of the state of the world. As a result they push "minor" cultures and people further and further into the margins until they become little more than a footnote. Postcolonialism aims, as Homi Bhabha puts it, for a "radical revision" of this fact. By tearing down the binary oppositions which structure the current historical and literary narratives, postcolonial theory allows for the emergence of the "projective past" or haunting of the present by an unsettled past and the "split narratives" that accompany it (Bhabha 57). The postcolonial narrative acts to represent cultures that have been marginalized through colonization as it "bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation" (Bhabha 46). In other words, the postcolonial acts as a centrifuge pulling the peripheral narratives back to the centre. The result,

suggested in Bhabha's essay "*Freedom's Basis in the Indeterminate*" and exemplified by Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is that postcolonial literature serves as both "action and agency" (57): action being the "radical revision" (46) of the historical narratives, and agency—a more complex representation of the marginal cultures of history. I will argue that, as the "projective past" forces itself into the texts of the colonial narrative, it splits that narrative to allow for a space of revision in which the story of the marginalized can be expressed. This splitting of the narrative is visible in the structure of Rhys's novel: it is composed of three discreet parts in which different characters' voices take up the narration. Part One is told by Antoinette, Part Two by Rochester, and Part Three (set in England), brings us Antoinette/Bertha's final echo. In the gap between these sections, there is the untold story of the "mad woman," a story that, in dialogue with *Jane Eyre*, the reader must reconstruct.

In 1847 Charlotte Bronte published *Jane Eyre*, a novel which would stand the test of time and become part of the English literary canon. Bronte's novel catalogues the sadness of Jane's early life; her mean aunt, a boarding school no child should ever be subjected to and eventually, her employment as a governess in Thornfield Hall. This is where Jane's luck seems to turn. Once at Thornfield, she falls in love with her employer, the dark, brooding Mr. Edward Rochester, and he with her. Unfortunately Jane's luck turns again when, just as the two are to be married, it is made known that Mr. Rochester is already married and that he has his wife imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield. The sad truth comes out, that Rochester was tricked into this marriage with Bertha, a Creole woman of "bad blood," and that he has imprisoned her because she is mad. Jane leaves and finds refuge with her distant cousins. Meanwhile, back at Thornfield, Bertha in a fit of madness sets the house ablaze and ends her own life. Rochester attempts to rescue her but is crippled by the fire. Jane eventually returns to him and happiness is restored to both of them.

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* "bears witness" (46), as Bhabha suggests, to the unequal cultural representation in *Jane Eyre*; it offers the radical revision of the narrative. In *Jane Eyre,* the character of Bertha Mason exists solely in the margins of the story. As a peripheral

character, she is only heard echoing through the halls of Thornfield, unseen for most of the book. She is simply a tragic mistake in Rochester's past; the mad Creole woman in the attic whose madness stems from her bad blood. In contrast, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides a more complex understanding of a more complex character. The reader is able to see the evolution from Antoinette Cosway of *Wide Sargasso Sea* to Bertha Mason of *Jane Eyre* and all of the factors contributing to her madness. Rhys questions that madness and suggests that it cannot simply be explained by Bertha/Antoinette's bad blood.

Bhabha states that the postcolonial text speaks "of the reality of survival and negotiation that constitutes the lived moment of resistance, its sorrow and its salvation" (57). In other words, postcolonial writing constitutes the moment of self-definition and all that accompanies it. It resists the forced marginalization imposed by the center/periphery structure of the colonial system. While in *Jane Eyre* Bertha's death is as marginal as her existence, with the sole purpose of clearing the way for Jane's and Rochester's marriage, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, death represents Antoinette's salvation from her colonial relationship with Rochester.

According to Bhabha, there is a "time lag" of the postcolonial and its function is to "slow down the linear, progressive time of modernity to reveal its gesture" (56). Time lags in such a way that it allows for a more critical viewing of the past. Bhabha claims that "this slowing down, or lagging, impels the past, projects it" (56) and that this projection is "a mode of breaking the complicity of the past and present in order to open up a space of revision" (57). Bhabha's projective past is therefore a ghost-like reappearance and representation of the past in the present. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* this past is represented as the zombi, which Rochester comes across in a book entitled "The Glittering Coronet of Isles" and specifically the chapter on Obeah where Rochester finds the definition of the zombi. It is "a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead. A zombi can also be 'the spirit of a place.'" (Rhys 88) Rochester experiences this ghost of the place when he gets lost in the forest and stumbles on the ruins of the priest's house. The "spirit" of the place appears hostile to Rochester and he feels "certain of danger" (87). What he sees are the ruins of

colonialism: the "*pavé* road like the French made" (87) and the priest's house itself are all remnants of the colonial past, they remain as ruins preventing that part of history from being forgotten.

Apart from this incident, numerous other examples of the projective past confirm Rhys's concern with restoring the margins to the center in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Of the island, Rochester says that he "hated its magic and the secret [he] would never know" (Rhys 141). What he feels is the presence of the projective past and its hostility which he cannot comprehend because he is not willing to revise the colonial narrative. The island haunts Rochester because it is attempting to confront him with the colonial past and force a revision. Rochester refuses to do this and as a result feels this presence in every aspect of the island and so grows to resent it. Rochester measures everything in relation to the fact that he is English and the locals are not; he still defines everything through a pre-existing binary opposition. For Rochester, things are either English or they are not and it is, of course, only the English things which he values. In the postcolonial context, the binary opposition clearly places the colonizing power at the centre and measures everything else in accordance with this structure. Rochester can only see all of the ways in which the island is not English and it is therefore worth less to him. In revising the colonial narrative, Rhys undermines this binary opposition so that the colonizer and colonized are represented equally.

Another instance of the projective past is the haunting character of Antoinette's mother and her descent into madness. Early in the text, Antoinette goes to visit her mother who is described as "a white woman sitting with her head bent so low that I couldn't see her face. But I recognized her hair, one plait much shorter than the other" (40). After Rochester's arrival and soon after her own descent into madness begins, Antoinette is described in much the same way: "she was sitting in a rocking chair with her head bent. Her hair was in two long plaits over her shoulders" (66). Rochester begins to hear stories about Antoinette's mother and sees her madness projecting itself into Antoinette. However he fails to fully understand the complexity behind the madness, dismissing it simply as "bad blood" and attempting to bring Antoinette under his control.

The most concrete example of the projective past, however, lies in the structure of the text. Part one describes the innocence of Antoinette and by extension it is a representation of the island in its original, untouched state. Part two is the introduction of the dominating, colonizing force. In this case, it is Rochester. And in part three Antoinette has left her story entirely; she is projected into the story of Jane Eyre as a "ghost of a woman" (153). She is the haunting aspect of Rochester's past that lingers in the story of his present just as the history of colonialism haunts the postcolonial narrative. According to Bhabha, "the time lag of postcolonial modernity moves forward, erasing that compliant past tethered to the myth of progress, ordered in the binarisms of its cultural logic: past/present, inside/outside" (Bhabha 56). As Jean Rhys' story moves forward, she erases the compliant past that is the story of *Jane Eyre* and instead reorganizes the binarisms by moving what was at the outside of the story, to the inside.

The ghost of the past in the present necessitates a literal split in the narration "between the time of utterance and the space of memory" (57). A split between the past, narrating the time of utterance and the narration of the present, affected by the space between the "then" and "now", not fully understanding what has happened because of what has been lost. The difficulty in writing the postcolonial narrative is that there is so little evidence of the tragedies once faced by the colonized people precisely because the very nature of colonization is to marginalize and erase. In the space of memory, aspects of identity are lost - including language, tradition and culture. With the integration of the projective past, those aspects are present and so the projective past not only allows for a more complete revision of the past but for a more thorough recognition of *present* identity.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the narration is split along several lines. It is split between Antoinette in the first section and Rochester in the second. This shows the split of representation inherent in colonial history. The moment of their marriage becomes the moment of *colonization*; Antoinette is no longer represented through herself, she is wholly represented through Rochester. He renames Antoinette and begins calling her Bertha effectively stealing her identity, an integral part of the act of colonization. Their experience on the island together

becomes the "space of memory" where little pieces of her are chipped away until she no longer recognizes herself. However in the third section, when she becomes a haunting presence as the embodiment of the "projective past," the narration splits again. This time it splits between Bertha and Antoinette, arguably the same person but Bertha has lost so much of her identity that she no longer recognizes herself as Antoinette. Wandering the halls of Thornfield she turns a corner and sees "...the ghost. The woman with the streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her" (Rhys 154). She has lost so much of herself that she does not recognize her own face; she only has a vague sense of familiarity upon seeing it in the mirror. Nevertheless she has moments where she remembers her past, the "smell of vetivert and frangipani, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering" (151). Bertha is haunted by the memory of Antoinette just as Rochester is haunted by the ghostly presence of Bertha. Bertha is however able to reconcile the "projective past" and reclaim her identity in a final act of resistance and revision.

A result of the "projective past" and its split narratives is the redefinition of the colonial relationship. According to Bhabha the postcolonial "departs from the traditions of sociology of underdevelopment or the 'dependency' theory". (47) That is to say that it moves away from defining a culture based on its dependence on another. As it stands postcolonial societies are defined by their relationship to their colonial counterparts by a this, not that mentality; if it's black then by definition it cannot be white, for example. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rochester describes Antoinette as "Creole of pure English descent" but "not English or European" (Rhys 56). He also describes the way the people speak as "not English but the debased French Patois" (57). It is made very clear that in the mind of the European colonizer the world is defined only by *their* relation to it. Rochester sees the features of the island and of Antoinette as definitely not English.

However as Bhabha points out, the postcolonial seeks to revise "the pedagogies that set up the relation of Third and First Worlds in a binary structure of opposition" (Bhabha 47). They seek to define these cultures without dependency on the colonizing force as a point of reference. Jean Rhys succeeds in this by taking Bertha who was

previously written solely in the margins of the story and defined exclusively as "not being Jane Eyre" and gives her life a complexity that is unreachable in the binary state. In this form she is able to become Antoinette Cosway and it forces "a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries" (48) that exist outside the sphere of binary opposition. *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells of her struggle for identity and when she finally breaks out of the binarisms that Rochester tries to impose on her she is able to reconcile her identity. Jean Rhys forces a recognition of Antoinette's identity separate from the sphere of the colonizer.

Ultimately this is the purpose of the postcolonial narrative, the action of which Bhabha spoke. It follows a "revisionary impulse" of "reinterpreting and rewriting the forms and effects of an 'older' colonial consciousness" (Bhabha 48). The postcolonial revision does not actively seek to alter the past, solely the representations of it. The postcolonial uses the haunting aspect of the colonial past to represent a more complete past where both the history of the colonizer and the colonized are represented. Jean Rhys rewrites the "'older' colonial consciousness" of *Jane Eyre* and she opens "up a space of revision" (57) when she takes Bertha from the attic of Thornfield and allows her to become fully recognized and fully represented.

Through the projective past which is present in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the split narratives that accompany it, the postcolonial reorders the binary oppositions which previously ordered the colonial relationship thus redefining and revising both the identity of the colonized and the history of colonization. The postcolonial narrative acts as both "action and agency," (57) it both demands action through revision and enables it through representation. Jean Rhys's reconfiguration of the story of "the mad woman in the attic" in *Wide Sargasso Sea* represents an idea "more complex than either the nihilism of despair or the utopia of progress" (57). Rhys has reconfigured the colonial story of *Jane Eyre* so that it represents the histories of both the colonizer and the colonized. The haunting of Jean Rhys's text "speaks of the reality of survival and negotiation that constitutes the lived moment of resistance, its sorrow and its salvation" (57).

Bibliography

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