

Mirroring the Self: Antoinette's Identity Construction in Wide Sargasso Sea

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ABSTRACT : *As a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, British author Jane Rhys's novel Wide Sargasso Sea reveals the oppression and destruction of the individual by colonialism, racism, and patriarchal society by reconstructing the tragic fate of Antoinette Cosway. This paper focuses on Antoinette's identity construction process, and analyses her exploration and struggle for "self" under multiple cultural and social pressures with the help of Jacques Lacan's theory of mirror stage. Antoinette's failure of identity construction is not simply a personal psychological dilemma, but an inevitable product of colonial history, cultural conflicts and social changes. She tries to identify herself through mirroring relationships with others (such as her childhood playmate Tia and her husband Rochester), but ultimately suffers a mental breakdown due to the denial and deprivation of her identity by the external world. This research not only enriches the postcolonial and feminist interpretations of Wide Sargasso Sea, but also, from the perspective of identity construction, profoundly reveals the far-reaching harm of colonialism and patriarchy to the individual's spiritual world, providing a new perspective and theoretical support for understanding the identity predicament of marginalized groups in the colonial context.*

KEYWORDS- *Identity Construction , Jacques Lacan, Jean Rhys, Mirror Stage theory, Wide Sargasso Sea*

I. INTRODUCTION

Wide Sargasso Sea is a classic novel by British author Jean Rhys, considered a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. By reconstructing the tragic fate of Antoinette Cosway, the "madwoman in the attic" in *Jane Eyre*, the work reveals the oppression and destruction of individuals by colonialism, racism and patriarchal society.

The existing research mainly unfolds from three dimensions: feminism, postcolonialism, and narrative strategies. In the study of feminism, Laura E. Ciolkowski (1997) pointed out that *Wide Sargasso Sea* dramatizes the persistent struggles over meaning that are at the critical center of such a feminist politics of knowledge. With the rise of postmodernism, Calvin Tennakoon (2014) pointed out that under European imperialism, society was forced to conform to the strict regulations of binary categories or face abjection into a liminal space. Antoinette seeks a world not bound by colonial masks or oppressed identity, so she creates a world in which identity does not exist. Inayat Ullah and Muhammad Arif (2013) pointed out that Jean Rhys gives an exhaustive portrayal of the place through concrete words and meticulous consideration by transforming into words the scents, sounds and colors. The colonizer may be able to tag the colonized nations in accordance with their own standards but the fact remains that the soul and real identity of these oppressed nations is simply beyond the oppressors' ability to captivate. In the study of narrative strategies, scholars draw on narratology and discourse theory to explore how authors employ formal techniques to empower marginalized voices and reveal power dynamics. Li Yuanyuan (2005) argues that Rhys uses multiple first-person internal perspectives, which is key to deconstructing this classic text and reconstructing empathy. Xiu Limei (2018) further delves into this theme. By meticulously distinguishing the mechanisms of first-person narratives among Antoinette, Rochester, and the imprisoned Antoinette, she

reveals how Rhys embeds her authorial intent in the text through normative narrative forms. This process involves both sympathy for Antoinette and questioning of Rochester's narrative authority, thereby establishing Antoinette's discursive authority within the narrative.

Current research primarily focuses on the following aspects, while the identity construction process of the heroine, Antoinette Cosway, has not yet been fully explored as a central pathway for revealing the intersection of colonial violence and gender oppression. Philosophically speaking, identity is the foundation of finding the meaning of personal existence. The Mirror Stage theory put forward by Jacques Lacan not only revolutionised psychoanalysis, but also provided a subversive perspective on the study of identity construction.

In 1949, the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan presented a paper named "Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je" (The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed) at the 16th International Psychoanalytical Association. "This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infans stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. This form would have to be called the Ideal-I." (2)

The mirroring stage produces the "ideal self", which means the subject internalises the perfect and complete image in the mirror as the ideal self. This process lays the foundation for the subsequent social identity, but it also plunges the subject into the eternal dialectical contradiction of "self and other". The mirror stage is only the beginning of self-alienation. With social interaction and language acquisition, the subject is further alienated by the "Symbolic Order" and forms a social self. Language incorporates the subject into the universal structure, but it also deprives the original self of its authenticity, leaving the subject in a permanent tension between "reality" and "fiction". The core of Lacan's mirror image theory is an unconscious relationship of self-deception. Whatever it is philosophy or literature, there is only one question—"Who am I?"

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette is a descendant of early European immigrants in the West Indies. She and her mother lived under the hostility of both blacks and whites, and were excluded from the edge of society. Antoinette has always hoped to complete her identity. The image of the mirror appears many times in the article, symbolizing Antoinette's attempt to gain identity.

Lacan points out "This moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the imago of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy (so well brought out by the school of Charlotte Bühler in the phenomenon of infantile transitivity), the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations." (4) This means while the mirror stage ends by 18 months, children continue to develop more complex self-images based on interactions with others. This ongoing dynamic between the subject and its image reflects a lifelong pursuit of an ideal self and imagined completeness. A person's sense of self-identity or self-awareness, is first established through mirroring. Mirror image refers not only to the self-image that the subject acquires in infancy by looking into a mirror, but also the subject acquires in adulthood through the gaze of others. People's identity is formed in the process of constant contact with others and reflection on oneself.

In this way, the theory of Mirror Stage has a great impact on the study of identity construction. Self-identity and self-awareness are built through mirror images. The image in the mirror is a person's desire to authenticate self. Only when a person is the same as the mirror image can he/she establish his/her identity.

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II. ANTOINETTE'S IDENTITY CRISIS

The three parts of *Wide Sargasso Sea* are narrated in the first person by the heroine Antoinette and her newlywed husband Rochester. In the first part, Antoinette talks about her childhood experience. In the second part, Rochester tells about his married life with Antoinette, which embeds two paragraphs of Antoinette statements. In the third part, Antoinette narrates the life of being imprisoned in the attic. The image of "mirror" appears many times in the text, paving the way for Antoinette's identity construction. Antoinette's identity construction is conducted through a variety of mirror images. Multiple mirrors enrich the inner feelings of the character and make the text more readable. Therefore, it is through these mirrors that Antoinette reflected on herself and tried to construct her identity.

Antoinette, heroine of the story, is a creole and descendant of early European immigrants in West Indies. She is regarded as colonized by British white people like other indigenous blacks on the island. But for the indigenous black people on the island, she represents the early colonists. This dual identity makes her both unrecognized by white British and hated by indigenous blacks.

As a white Creole woman, a union between the Europeans who settled the Americas and the native blacks, she is a "white cockroach" to indigenous blacks and a "white nigger" to white people. Growing up in the cracks makes Antoinette always live in contradiction and confusion. She has no sense of belonging, and is shrouded in the shadow of loneliness and helplessness all the time. She can only put her hope in the fantasy of the vain dream home and the desire to obtain an accurate identity.

III. THE BEGINNING OF ANTOINETTE'S ATTEMPT TO CONSTRUCT HER IDENTITY

Antoinette was born into a white plantation family in the West Indies. Her black neighbors hated her so much. The black people living around Antoinette constitute the first mirror relationship in the text, reflecting the complex and tense relationship between the whites and the former slaves. Among them, the one who communicates the most with Antoinette is Tia, the daughter of Christophine's friend, who became Antoinette's first mirror and her first attempt to complete identity.

Antoinette is eager to find her sense of self-identity from her black friend Tia. They eat the same food, and sleep side by side, and even have bath in the same river. Silvia Cappello argues that in Antoinette's mimicry of other people is concealed her attempt to find her own identity. In Antoinette's view, they seem to be reflections of each other in the mirror. Antoinette has a strong emotional resonance with Tia. As Lacan says, Mirror Stage is related to the concept of "the other", that is, how others affect a person's self-identification. Mirror is not only a tool to realize self-identity, but also the reflections of the desires and ideals. The self in the mirror shows an "ideal self", and this idealized image often stimulates individuals' desire for unity and identity. Tia represents Antoinette's idealized self. She hopes to define herself through Tia. Through the mirror image of Tia, Antoinette tries to find an idealized identity in her through imagination and emotional connection, and also shows her pursuit of a clear identity.

However, no matter how beautiful the "I" in the mirror is, it is not the real self. Although Antoinette hopes to establish a deeper connection with Tia, there is still a misalignment between the idealized self-identity and reality. "I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass." (41) At the end when the black burnt the manor, the stone in Tia's hand not only broke Antoinette's head, but also broke the mirror between her and Antoinette, destroying Antoinette's identity construction. The last two sentences reveal the core of Lacan's mirror theory that mirror will bring the self-identification. But the appearance of this mirror is not to find similarities, but to make the individuals inside and outside the mirror independent. Antoinette finally understands that the relationship between her and Tia is not a perfect mirror identity, but an opposite full of cracks and conflicts. The problem of "who am I" has troubled Antoinette from the beginning of the story. "Identity" is not only the recognition that Antoinette wants to get, but also the gap she can never jump over.

IV. THE END OF ANTOINETTE'S IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AFTER THE LOSS OF MIRROR

Antoinette went to England after she married Rochester. She wanted to get a sense of identity from Rochester, just as she tried to establish an intimate relationship with Tia when she was a child. After being called "white cockroach" again, she bluntly revealed her identity recognition dilemma to Rochester. "It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all." (93) She explained to her husband the origin of this pejorative name, which reflected her marginal position in the race. She exposed her loss of self-perception to her husband.

However, in Rochester's view, his wife is just "the other" of other race. The cultural identity and situation of Rochester as a the British are completely different from those of Antoinette, so he can not understand Antoinette's sufferings, and he does not want to know her spiritual needs at all. Rochester mentioned that he did not love Antoinette, but just longed for her. Rochester even deprived Antoinette of her original name and called her "Bertha", which further made Antoinette lose her self-awareness. Rose Kamel suggested that Rochester finally exposes him as a would-be colonizer unable to force his Euro-centered and masculinist will on a Creole until he changes her name to Bertha, nullifies her past, and transports her to a mainland prison. Rochester had no respect for Antoinette. Not only did he not support Antoinette to find her own cultural sense of belonging, but he also deprived her of her most basic sense of herself—her primitive name. The name is an important sign of her identity. Changing her name means that she is forced to further give up her original identity, thus further exacerbating her identity crisis. Antoinette is about to give up finding the answer of "who am I". After being called as "Bertha", she just answered "It doesn't matter". Before she finished her self-identity construction, she was about to lose her dignity as a human being.

The repeated barriers to identity and Rochester's deliberate separation of Antoinette's self-awareness eventually led to mental problems with her. She was locked up in the attic of Thornfield at last.

"There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now...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. But the glass was between us—hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (162) After losing the mirror, Antoinette's recognition of self-identity was completely deprived and dissipated. When she was young, she once questioned of "who am I" by staring at herself in the mirror. She tried to build an idealized self through the mirror image. She tried to overcome the distance between herself and her idealized image by kissing herself in the mirror. However, she also knew that the girl who looked like her in the mirror was not her indeed. She is always separated from her ideal self by a layer of cold and hard glass. She can neither get complete satisfaction from the mirror image, nor find a complete and stable self through the mirror image. Her mirror image can not satisfy her identity construction.

Therefore, Antoinette puts the hope to build her identity on others. She is eager to complete her identity by establishing an intimate relationship with others, such as her childhood playmate Tia and her husband Rochester, and putting others in the mirror, so as to satisfy her sense of belonging. However, the mirror image she expected did not give her the same response. In the end, she even lost the reflection of the mirror, which meant that she could not confirm herself through the outside world. After the identity she gained from the outside world was deprived, her inner spirit also collapsed. The lack of external support and the rupture of the mirror image aggravated her identity crisis step by step, and finally led to a complete mental breakdown.

V. THE CAUSES OF THE FAILURE OF ANTOINETTE'S IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The racial system of the colonial society deeply affects the fate of every character. Antoinette's family used to be planters, but with the decline of the colonial system and the abolition of slavery, their wealth and power gradually disappeared. The decline of the family symbolizes the disintegration of the colonial system. Antoinette's confusion and collapse in social and personal identity also reflect the long-term influence of colonialism. *Black Skin, White Masks*, an classic work of post-colonialism deeply critical of the cultural psychological trauma inflicted on oppressed blacks by white colonialism.

Jennifer Gilchrist pointed out in “Women, Slavery, and the Problem of Freedom in *Wide Sargasso Sea*” that for Antoinette, the liberation the New English bring both rips away safety and imposes new, repressive social controls. The identity crisis of Antoinette is rooted in the colonial ideology based on binary opposition. In colonial discourse, the boundaries of race identity are clear. The cultural characteristics carried by whites and blacks are diametrically opposed. It is the existence of this boundary that preserves the colonial order. Antoinette’s problem of identity refers to the contradictions of colonial discourse itself. What people can see from Antoinette is not the clear image of “white” or “black”, but the fusion of both. This fusion dissipates the binary opposition between black and white, but it also blurs Antoinette’s identity and makes her a person living in-betweenness.

In parallel, patriarchal oppression and colonialism are intertwined, bringing identity crises to Antoinette again and again. Rochester’s thoughts not only reflects the gender oppression of Creole women, but also reveals the objectification and control of colonial women by colonial white men. Through Rochester’s attitude, the author revealed how men in colonial society strengthened their power through gender and racial criteria.

VI. Conclusion

Jean Rhys was born in a British colony. Her father is Welsh and her mother is of Creole descent. Such a family background makes her think deeply about race, culture and identity issues. The novel reflects the author’s identity crisis as a Creole immigrant writer. In addition, Rhys’ own writing career has also been excluded from the male-dominated literary community to a certain extent. She deeply feels the marginal position of women in cultural and social structure. Antoinette and Rhys both seek self-expression and identity in a male-dominated society. In this way, the author can also be regarded as a mirror image of Antoinette.

Antoinette, the heroine of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, has been living in the “cracks” because of her special cultural background identity. Unable to gain a sense of self-identity, she tried to construct herself through the mirror image of others. Tia and Rochester, who are placed in the mirror, are not only the tools for Antoinette to achieve self-identity, but also reflect the ideal identity of her. When she was plated with Tia in her childhood, she hoped that she was also black so that she would not be insulted as a “white cockroach”. After marrying Rochester, she longed to be understood by her husband and accepted by white people, but also failed. On the surface, the establishment of the subject depends on the alienation of the self, but in fact, the construction of the self is inseparable from neither itself nor the counterpart of the other. Without “the other”, there is no “self”, and the two are opposite and unified.

Antoinette finally realized that the ideal state in the mirror image would never be the real self. The rift between the idealized self and the real self in the mirror image, and the unbreakable barrier and the loss of external identity finally made her unable to achieve completing self-identity through the mirror images. The mirror has become her obstacle and even her obsession, but not a tool. After losing the mirror, she could no longer confirm her identity, and completely fell into the crisis and loss of identity.

The identity confusion of Jean Rhys and Antoinette is similar in many ways. They all lived in a complex racial and gender context, facing the oppression and psychological trauma brought about by colonial history. This similarity is not only the source of inspiration for Rhys’ creation, but also reveals her deep struggles of self-identity in colonial society as a Creole female writer. The identity problem of Antoinette is not only a personal psychological dilemma, but also a product of colonial history, cultural conflicts and social changes. The author can be regarded as another mirror of Antoinette. These mirrors are, on one hand, an important means of expression for the author’s voice and, on the other hand, they also largely intensify the mental suffering, which is the special significance of the text. It is from these mirroring relationships that readers can gain a deeper understanding of the author’s craftsmanship and further enhance the understanding of the deep harm of colonialism and patriarchy.

In the novel, due to the colonial heritage and the existence of male power, the heroine can only construct her identity through negative feedback. In other words, Antoinette’s identity was established in a negative way. Tia told her that she was not black, and Rochester told her that she was not white. She relied on the mirror images of others to try to construct her identity and gain a sense of acceptance, but in the end, she only got a negative answer. She do not know who she is, but only who she is not. She does not know whether she is white or black, but only knows that she is neither white nor black. The answer of “who am I” should be a positive answer, but not

“who I am not”. And “I am not who” is based on the gaze of others in the mirror and the reflection of “I” on this gaze. Therefore, Antoinette can never complete her identity.

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