

EXOTICISM IN JEAN RHYS'S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

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Abstract: The notion of an endless and exotic space reflected in the title of Jean Rhys's novel includes the possibility of hidden meanings as well as an intense feeling of the unknown and the inexpressible, which permeates the entire story and becomes an important source of the sublime. The self-conscious use of exoticist techniques and modalities of cultural representation might be considered less as a response to the phenomenon of the postcolonial exotic than as a further symptom of it, a result of the commodification of cultural difference.

Keywords: exoticism, cultural differences, colonial conflicts, sublime

The Margins of Exoticism

Although the word “exotic” currently has widespread application, it continues to be commonly misunderstood. For the exotic is not, as is often supposed, an inherent *quality* to be found ‘in’ certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places; exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic perception—one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery. The exoticist production of otherness is dialectical and contingent; at various times and in different places, it may serve conflicting ideological interests, providing the rationale for projects of rapprochement and reconciliation, but just as easily legitimising the need for plunder and violent conquest. Exoticism, in this context, might be described as a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity. Within this circuit, the strange and the familiar, as well as the relation between them, may be reworked to serve different, even contradictory, political needs and ends. As Stephen Foster has argued, the exotic functions dialectically as a symbolic system, domesticating the foreign, the culturally different and the extraordinary so that “phenomena to which they ... apply begin to be structured in a way which makes them

comprehensible and possibly predictable, if predictably defiant of total familiarity” (Foster 21). Exoticism is a control mechanism of cultural translation which relays the other back again to the same; but to domesticate the exotic would neutralize its capacity to create surprises. Thus, while exoticism describes the systematic assimilation of cultural difference, ascribing familiar meanings and associations to unfamiliar things, it also denotes an expanded, distorted, comprehension of diversity which effectively limits assimilation “since the exotic is kept at arm’s length rather than taken as one’s own” (Foster 22). As a system then, exoticism functions along predictable lines but with unpredictable content.

As a technology of representation, exoticism is self-empowering; self-referential even, insofar as the objects of its gaze are not supposed to look back. For this reason, exoticism has proven over time to be a highly effective instrument of imperial power; the exotic splendour of newly colonized lands may disguise the brutal circumstances of their acquisition. The exoticist rhetoric of fetishised otherness and sympathetic identification masks the inequality of the power relations without which the discourse could not function. In the imperial context, this masking involves the transformation of power into spectacle. For Said, exoticism functions in a variety of imperial contexts as a mechanism of aesthetic substitution which “replaces the impress of power with the blandishments of curiosity” (Said 159). The massification of the exotic also entails a reconsideration of the conventional exoticist distinction between the (imperial) “centre” and the “peripheries” on which it depends. The arrival of the exotic in the “centre” cannot disguise the inequalities—the hierarchical encodings of cultural difference—through which exoticist discourses continue to function. What is clear, in any case, is that there are significant continuities between older forms of imperial exoticist representation and some of their postcolonial counterparts. Two of these continuities are the aesthetics of decontextualisation and commodity fetishism. The three aspects of commodity fetishism—mystification (or leveling-out) of historical experience; imagined access to the cultural other through the process of consumption; reification of people and places into exchangeable aesthetic objects—can help the literary works of those much-traveled writers (such as Jean Rhys, in this case) who are perceived as having come from, or as having a connection to, “exotic” places to acquire an almost talismanic status. Exoticist spectacle, commodity fetishism and the aesthetics of decontextualisation are all at work, in different combinations and to varying degrees, in the production, transmission and consumption of postcolonial literary/cultural texts. If exoticism has arrived in the “centre”, it still derives from the cultural margins or, perhaps more accurately, from a commodified discourse of cultural marginality, embedded in the valorized discourses of cultural otherness.

In contemporary cultural theory, marginality is often given a positive value, being seen less as a site of social exclusion or deprivation than as a locus of resistance to socially imposed standards and coercive norms. As the African-American cultural critic bell hooks defiantly puts it:

Marginality is a central location for the production of a counterhegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives ... [Marginality is] a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds (hooks 341).

This view is frequently echoed by large numbers of postcolonial writers/thinkers, for whom marginality represents a challenge to the defining imperial "centre" or a transvaluation of the lived or remembered experience of oppression. The embracing of marginality is, above all, an oppositional discursive strategy that faces up to hierarchical social structures and hegemonic cultural codes. This strategy is self-empowering, not just because it draws strength from opposition, but because it conceptualizes the transformation of the subject's relationship to the wider world. The postcolonial deconstruction of the opposition between a monolithic "centre" and its designated "margins" envisages the possibility of multiple centres and productively "intersecting marginalities" (Ashcroft *et al.* 104). The exotic is the perfect term to describe the domesticating process through which commodities are taken from the margins and reabsorbed into mainstream culture. This process is to some extent reciprocal; mainstream culture is always altered by its contact with the margins, even if it finds ingenious ways of looking or of pretending to look, the same. Exoticism helps maintain this pretence; it acts as the safety-net that supports these dangerous transactions, as the regulating mechanism that attempts to manoeuvre difference back again to the same. To define the margins can thus be seen as an exoticising strategy: as an impossible attempt to dictate the terms and limits of intercultural contact, and to fix the value-equivalence of metropolitan commodity exchange. To keep the margins exotic—at once strange and familiar—is the objective of the mainstream; it is an objective which it can never fail to set, but which it can never attain. Contemporary forms of exoticism are arguably misrecognitions of these changes—attempts to ensure the availability of the margins for the mainstream, and through this process to "guarantee" the mainstream, keeping it out of reach of harm. Spivak does not reject marginality *per se*, but she rejects it as exotic—as a legitimizing category for different versions of cultural otherness.

The confrontation and incorporation of exoticist discourse(s) in postcolonial writing forms the principal subject of its main concept, the postcolonial exotic. Thus, the postcolonial exotic occupies a site of discursive conflict between a local assemblage of more or less related oppositional practices of assimilative codes. More specifically, it marks the intersection between contending value regimes: one regime—postcolonialism—that posits itself as anti-colonial and that works toward the dissolution of imperial epistemologies and institutional structures; and another—postcoloniality—that capitalizes both on the widespread circulation of ideas about cultural otherness and on the worldwide trafficking of culturally “othered” artefacts and goods. This constitutive tension within the postcolonial might help explain its abiding ambiguity; it also helps us better understand how value is generated, negotiated and disseminated in the postcolonial field of cultural production. In this case, “strategic exoticism” could be an option, but it is not necessarily a way out of the dilemma. The self-conscious use of exoticist techniques and modalities of cultural representation might be considered less as a response to the phenomenon of the postcolonial exotic than as a further symptom of it; for the postcolonial exotic is, to some extent, considered a pathology of cultural representation under late capitalism—a result of the commodification of cultural difference.

Exoticness in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The notion of an endless and exotic space reflected in the title of Jean Rhys’s novel includes the possibility of hidden meanings as well as an intense feeling of the unknown and the inexpressible, which permeates the entire story and becomes an important source of the sublime¹. This feeling, in fact, arises from the paradox inherent in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*: one of its most important characters is given only marginal and scant attention. It is Rochester’s first wife Bertha who enables the author to develop the plot, evoke a mysterious atmosphere and create an “objective correlative” for the main heroine’s anxiety of otherness. Nevertheless, the characterization of this disquieting figure is reduced to the unconvincing

¹ Contemporary concepts of the sublime follow the ideas of Longinus (the experience of transcendence as an effort to express and to share intense feelings) as well as those of Edmund Burke, in particular his analysis developed in *The Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. In the period between Boileau and Kant, Burke contributed to the theme by creating a sharp distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. The feeling of the sublime, according to Burke, is connected with fear and the instinct for self-preservation. Immanuel Kant, one of Burke’s followers, in his *Critique of Judgement* defines the sublime as something which arouses the suprasensuous faculty of mind and brings man to the realization of his freedom from all external constraints. The link between the experience of the sublime and the feeling of powerlessness is further observed by J.-F. Lyotard, who focuses on the desire to express the inexpressible in the process of overcoming the feeling of emptiness.

description of an evil inhuman monster. Drawing on her own experience of the West Indies, Jean Rhys portrays the fate of a young, unhappily married Creole heiress in a wider context of cultural differences, colonial conflicts and racial hatred. Born in Dominica as the daughter of a Welsh doctor and a white Creole mother, Jean Rhys came to England at the age of sixteen. Like her heroine, she had to undergo a complicated search for identity, and Antoinette's story reflects her own sense of alienation and displacement. According to Rochester, it is her exotic origin and Creole blood that causes Bertha's lunacy and, accordingly, her propensity towards sin and crime. The emotional intensity connected with the feeling of the sublime is linked to "unconscious fears and desires projected on to other culture, peoples and places" (Botting 154) and insanity is viewed in terms that imply racial prejudice.

In Jean Rhys's novel, the conflict between European and West Indian consciousness is worked out through the same fatal relationship but from a variety of points of view. As in *Jane Eyre*, on a surface level it is a conflict between conventional attitudes and emotional excesses. In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, it becomes the crucial subject of the narrative, and its psychological, social, historical and geographical aspects are employed without suppressing the effects of the irrational and the mysterious. The "projective method" of landscape description, which is an important device of characterization in the novel, contributes to the escalation of the conflict. By contrast with the wintry landscapes that form the setting of *Jane Eyre*, the summery climate of the West Indies in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is typical of Romantic topography and evokes the space of the traditional Gothic romance. Rochester's violent denial of Antoinette's exoticism is the result of his own identity crisis as an Englishman in the West Indies. His trouble with the lush Caribbean landscape is the most significant aspect of his feelings of alienation in the West Indies. At first, he is enticed by the island of Dominica just as he is by Antoinette: "It was a beautiful place—wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 51-52). He describes his lust for his wife in similarly fierce terms as well; for example, "One afternoon the sight of a dress which she'd left lying on her bedroom floor made me breathless and savage with desire" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 55). Then, the unfamiliar, oppressive heat, colors, tastes, and sounds overwhelm Rochester's senses and his consciousness. Combined with Antoinette's sultry manner, the warm climate makes him feel intoxicated and sexually defenseless. As with Antoinette's search for her reflection, Rochester feels as if he is drowning: "Everything is too much ... Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 41). Much of Rochester's apprehension is grounded in his fear of himself and his own "primitive" desires. The

“extreme green” (Rochester) notes in the landscape may be interpreted as an awakening of primordial emotions and ‘irrational’ powers, which are anathema to him. The result of this turmoil is Rochester’s displacement of his fear and desire for the land and people on to Antoinette:

I hated the place. I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 103).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the author’s response to *Jane Eyre* entails greater focus on a single character (Antoinette/Bertha). The effect of doubling is a dilution of the self as Antoinette’s identity is divided. Antoinette’s doubling with Annette, for example, means that the madness that was seen as an integral and defining aspect of Bertha’s character is revealed to have been shared by her mother too: “Look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother...” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 49-50). Antoinette’s childhood double, Tia, further dilutes Antoinette’s sense of self when she takes her clothes and by extension, her identity. Tia is an external projection of Antoinette’s self; she is the active and powerful double that Antoinette wishes she could emulate, “fires always lit for her, sharp stones did not hurt her bare feet, I never saw her cry” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 23). Tia’s presence in this last dream is explicable in terms of a yearning, on Antoinette’s part, to return to her childhood innocence and a renewed desire to embody Tia’s strength and independence. Even as she contemplates the ultimate act of will— self-annihilation—Antoinette is keenly aware of the psychological traits she lacks.

Just as important as what her doubles take from her is what Antoinette herself loses. Over the course of the text, she gradually becomes distanced from herself until she finally becomes her own Other, Bertha. The process starts at least as early as Antoinette’s time in the convent, where she cannot see herself because there is “no looking-glass in the dormitory” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 46). This divorce from self is further developed during her analogous confinement in Thornfield Hall: “There is no looking-glass here and I don’t know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. 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. (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 147)

Her transformation culminates when Antoinette finally does glimpse herself in a mirror, unexpectedly: “It was then that I saw her—the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 154). In this moment of forced recognition, Rhys “makes Antoinette see her *self* as her Other, Brontë’s Bertha... the so-called ghost in Thornfield Hall” (Spivak 250). So weakened and deteriorated is Antoinette’s identity by the novel’s end that there is not even an Antoinette to see in the mirror; only Bertha remains. Under the pressure exerted by the Rochester-figure, Antoinette has been reborn as the Bertha-figure. She is forced to recognize herself as she is perceived, and in the process is forced to abandon her own conception of her identity that she had previously held as an accurate, inviolable truth. This splitting can be explained in psychoanalytic terms. After the formation of the ego—which Lacan refers to as the mirror stage—the child’s desire will become more specifically narcissistic than erotic, as he becomes captivated no longer by the mother’s body but by his identity as perceived, as the imaginary complement of his lack. Antoinette’s forced acceptance of this Other image signals her acquisition of a new level of consciousness and, as it were, a new fashioning of identity. Her new identity is bound by the constrictions imposed by the colonizer-husband it is not one that is self-fashioned. Furthermore, Antoinette’s earlier attempt to kiss herself in the mirror suggests a narcissistic yearning for the self who is, of course, thwarted by the mirror that mediates the encounter between self and reflection. Her subsequent glimpse of herself as Bertha reveals the complete loss of her former self, no longer attainable even in the form of a reflection. This is a metaphor for psychological development and maturity, for the emergence of the Other’s fully individuated identity from the shadow of the colonizing self; a metaphor which acknowledges the degree to which the two are for a time co-dependent, but which also ultimately allows for the Other to be considered separate.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there is a strongly analogous passage in which the same theme, the theme of the Other, is treated with greater pessimism. In this scene, Antoinette and her childhood friend Tia enter a virtual “narcissus-mirror” stream to swim. Antoinette somersaults at Tia’s request, but turns and “came up choking” (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 21), clearly distressed by the experience. Although it would be easier for the colonial mindset if the two Others (Tia and Antoinette) could be successfully collapsed into one counterpoint to the imperial self, Rhys’s point is that though they are both Others Tia and Antoinette are substantially different even from each other and cannot be merged.

Rhys’s text resists the positing of a single, immutable Other against which the colonizing self can oppositionally define its identity. Instead, Antoinette apparently loses her

identity, which is symbolically appropriated by Tia, who now wears Antoinette's clothing: "I looked round and Tia had gone. I searched for a long time before I could believe that she had taken my dress—not my underclothes, she never wore any—but my dress, starched, ironed, clean that morning. She had left me hers and I put it on at last and walked home in the blazing sun feeling sick, hating her" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 21). Antoinette's failure to successfully reconstitute herself after this exchange is allegorized when Tia mirrors her one last time, in an incident which sees Antoinette's one-time friend turn against her and side with the black villagers. As Coulibri burns, Tia attempts to destroy Antoinette's physical identity:

Then, not so far off, I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her... 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. 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 (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 38).

Tia's attempt to kill Antoinette, her mirrored image, anticipates Antoinette's own self-annihilation as the Bertha-figure of *Jane Eyre* and externalizes her subconscious desire for the liberation of death. These events also foreshadow the colonial encounter represented by the Rochester-figure's arrival as the colonized Other. Antoinette has her identity erased by this interaction with Tia, thus emphasizing the inherent risks involved in such exchanges. The failure to reconstitute the self to be reconstituted or even extricate the self from the Other after a temporary merging of identities is an anxiety which becomes fully realized in Antoinette's marriage. After marrying she loses not only economic independence, but her very name: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 121). Doubly subjected to control, she loses her maiden name through marriage and her first name through her husband's violent, colonial renaming of her as "Bertha". The patriarchal oppression of marriage and colonialism are thereby depicted as being linked. Antoinette's identity was, of course, precariously balanced from the start, for she exists as she does in the margins of race, and on the border of European whiteness and Caribbean indigenosity: "Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 56). Antoinette and her family occupy a liminal position in Jamaican society: they are rejected by the English and alienated from the locals. She is dubbed a "white cockroach", a foreigner-within: "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. 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" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 85).

The balance between dominance and marginalization is crucial: the Other's presence is tolerated only as long as there remains a potential to subdue it and indoctrinate it in the ways of the self, for the purposes of strengthening the self. The Other emerges as a source of concern when it threatens to overrun the self and undermine its identity, assimilating itself so successfully that the self runs the risk of culturally degenerating to the level of the Other instead of civilizing it.

This loss of boundaries between self and Other at the very site of invasion has an unimaginably destructive potential in English Gothic romances, but it is important to remember that it is the anxieties attendant upon the entrance of intruding colonizers in an imperial context that provides the impetus for much postcolonial writing. The fear and the very real consequences of imperial invasion register clearly in postcolonial texts like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which the tension between Caribbean culture and European values and power structures is keenly felt. The loss of Caribbean culture, debased and made subservient by the imposition of European laws and customs, bears striking parallels to the Gothic fears of reverse colonization. Christophine is quick to recognize the essential similarities between the introduction of European law and the recently abolished system of condoned slavery it purports to redress: "No more slavery! She had to laugh! "These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people's feet. New ones worse than old ones—more cunning, that's all" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 22-23). Antoinette soon falls victim to this very law, as is intimated in the following exchange between her and Christophine:

He will not come after me. And you must understand I am not rich now, I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him.

'What you tell me there?' she said sharply.

That is English law. (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 91)

For all her attempts to avoid the laws of the invaders by resisting marriage, Christophine, who claims, "I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man," (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 91) ends up as poor as Antoinette in a land where European powers and

not indigenous ones decide wealth and poverty, slavery and emancipation. The erasure of Caribbean culture at the hands of their oppressors is evident in a telling scene where Antoinette's husband is welcomed to Granbois with a gift of frangipani wreaths. The Rochester figure crowns himself with one of the wreaths, but in contradiction of Antoinette's assertion that he looks "like a king, an emperor," he then declares, "I hardly think it suits my handsome face" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 62). One need hardly explain the symbolism of what follows: "[I] took the wreath off. It fell on the floor and as I went towards the window I stepped on it" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 62). Perhaps the fullest expression of the success of the colonizer is the acceptance and internalization of the colonizer's beliefs by the Other. The detrimental effects of the aggressive and arrogant European power structures imposed on the "Oriental" lands and their peoples, and the consequent damage to local culture and customs, exemplify what it was that the English feared, as reflected in the reverse-colonization anxieties of Gothic fictions.

Conclusions

Although postcolonial texts differ substantially in terms of the sensationalism they encourage and the emphasis they place on effect-driven strategies of reader involvement, they are interested in issues of representation and can be seen to employ similar representational *topoi* in their engagements with the unknown. In particular, the exotic tropes and the fear of the foreign lend themselves admirably to explorations of postcolonial anxieties over loss of identity on the individual and cultural levels in direct consequence of colonisation.

In conclusion, this paper has scratched the surface of the interfaces between exoticism and postcolonial interests. A fuller account would consider in greater detail related issues such as the role of women and madness, superstition and "civilization", sexual desire (both repressed, as it finds a metaphorical place in colonization), the relationship of the past to the present, and a consideration of patriarchy and paternalism (and female-empowering alternatives) as they pertain to imposed and traditional models of society.

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