

**“I Will Write My Name In Fire Red”: Subjectivity  
and Allegory in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Annie John***

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In 1986, Fredric Jameson made a grand sweeping statement with his theory that “[a]ll third-world texts...are to be read as...national allegories” (69). While this argument cannot possibly apply to all third-world literatures because of its generality, it does seem accurate when applied to Caribbean women’s fiction. Antoinette’s and Annie’s searches for identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Annie John* allegorically mirror the result of Britain’s empire-building technique of relegating colonial people to the place of the Other in order to (re)write the history of the modern world through the Empire’s eyes. Jean Rhys primarily uses naming to show that the male narrator stands in allegorically for England as he attempts to make Antoinette English and, when that fails, to rename her and make her inhuman to deflect her threat to the Empire. Jamaica Kincaid uses the relationship between mother and daughter as an analogy of the role of Britain as “mother-country” to the West Indian colonies. Despite the fact that the two women come from different generations and races and therefore experienced two very different points along the (post)colonial spectrum, the tremendous breaks between subjects (“Rochester” and Annie’s mother) and objects (Antoinette and Annie) by the end of the novels reveal that both writers can only envision a Caribbean identity separate from England. Analyses of Antoinette’s relationship with her husband and Annie’s relationship with her mother show that *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Annie John* are both national allegories because their use of the search for individual identity is a metaphor of the Caribbean fight for its own sense of self beyond the Other created by British colonialism.

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Rhys's careful focus on naming and its results in her best-known novel echoes the issues of British fictional creation of history/truth through writing. Knowing that Rhys helped write her own identity by changing her name exposes how important to the self a name is. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys reveals the effects of naming and the labels names carry, all the while calling into question the permanence of identity. Coco, Annette's parrot, even emphasizes this recurrent theme, persistently asking, "Qui est là? Qui est là? [Who is there?]" (*Sargasso* 25). When either Antoinette names herself or her husband renames her, the "namer" seeks to control her identity. Perhaps one of the most unfortunate conclusions of this reading is that Rhys did not fully succeed in her mission to rewrite *Jane Eyre* and, by extension, British colonial fiction: while leaving Antoinette's husband nameless, Rhys may have preserved the European colonial discourse as truth by the very ambiguity of his namelessness.

Antoinette's identity lies at the heart of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. After all, Rhys intended this book as Antoinette's story, the "mad Creole" from *Jane Eyre* ("Letters" 136). Antoinette does not create her identity entirely on her own, nor can her husband take all of the credit. Antoinette first learns to categorize identity between black and white, and here she experiences her first identity fracture. In the opening lines of the novel, Antoinette explains the situation: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (*Sargasso* 9). Later, before the reader even learns her name, Antoinette tells how she was labeled "white cockroach" by a little white girl and "white nigger" by her black friend Tia (*Sargasso* 13-14). Rhys presents Antoinette as the "Other" to both the black and the white Jamaicans.

Another aspect of Antoinette's identity is bound up with that of her mother, Annette. Veronica Gregg illustrates the mirroring of mother and daughter by pointing out how Rhys characterizes them the same way and uses nearly identical descriptions of the two women (Gregg 97). However, the effect does not only arise from the similarity of their given names, marital choices, and physical characteristics. Naming by those around them relegates the two women to identical emotional situations. Christophine's assertion that people "tell her [Annette] she is mad, they act like she is mad" (*Sargasso* 94) shows

that Annette's madness is externally imposed. Likewise, when Antoinette's husband takes her to England and shuts her up in the attic, only then does she become the "madwoman." In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester is given the authority to say "Bertha Mason is mad" (Brontë 124) and make it so. Although Rhys aimed to expose Antoinette's husband as the person responsible for her madness, by paralleling Antoinette's forced madness to Annette's imposed insanity, she illustrates the anonymity of the act. In other words, white English men did not drive their Caribbean wives mad; they "named" them mad.

The nun who receives Antoinette at the convent reinforces the ability of English men to construct women's identities by naming them. Antoinette introduces herself by her first name, yet the nun responds, "You are Antoinette Cosway, that is to say Antoinette Mason" (*Sargasso* 31). Before her husband defines her as the wife of an Englishman, Antoinette is told that she must define herself by the (white) men who have a relationship to her, her father and stepfather. Unfortunately, Antoinette learns quickly. Within a very short time, Antoinette has internalized this idea: "I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason, née Cosway" (*Sargasso* 31). Antoinette not only accepts the new name each time one is given, but she also allows them to accrete and follow her. The fact that Antoinette uses "née," usually indicating a maiden name left behind after marriage, emphasizes Antoinette's accretion of the names of the men to whom she is passed. Therefore, by the end of the novel (especially in conjunction with *Jane Eyre*), it might be fair to call her Antoinette Bertha Cosway Mason Rochester.

One can hardly wonder why Antoinette has so much trouble fixing her identity: while she has numerous identities to choose from, none were self-chosen and each is the product of colonial influence, mostly Britain's influence. The most damaging and influential names are those given by her husband, who has such mixed feelings about her that he cannot accept her as she is and finds numerous occasions to rename her. During Antoinette's relationship with her husband, one can see how the accretion of names finally forces her destruction at Thornfield Hall. When her husband labels her "Bertha" as a way to make her less threatening (by making her more English), Antoinette

fails to recognize the consequences:

‘Don’t laugh like that, Bertha.’  
 ‘My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?’  
 ‘Because it is a name I’m particularly fond of. I think  
 of you as Bertha.’  
 ‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said. (*Sargasso* 81)

Veronica Gregg contends that it does matter: “In renaming Antoinette Bertha, the husband does not succeed in changing her, but in splitting her identity” (98). When Antoinette finally gains control of the narration again, she too realizes, “Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette” (*Sargasso* 107). Her husband recognizes that “Antoinette” is dangerous, threatening, Creole; he means his Bertha instead to be “the proper Englishwoman” (Ciolkowski 343). Smilowitz echoes this intent, claiming, “[H]e calls her ‘Bertha,’ in an attempt to dissociate her from her West Indian past, and to establish her rebirth” (102). Antoinette knows how much power her husband holds in renaming her, but she cannot understand the influence except by relation to obeah, a Caribbean magic. She tells him, “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeah too” (*Sargasso* 88). Her husband’s power, however, stems from a magic that Antoinette has not encountered before; it springs directly from national authority. By asserting racial, cultural, and sexual dominance over the colonies, Britain endows men such as Antoinette’s husband with the power to deny colonial identities for the sake of preserving/perpetuating “Englishness.”

The other name with which the husband labels Antoinette carries symbolic importance, perhaps greater importance even than Bertha except for its minor role in the novel. Christophine confronts the husband with the name he called Antoinette: Marionette. She thinks that he called her a “doll...to force her to cry and to speak” (*Sargasso* 93). However, Marionette represents the next step in his attempt to classify Antoinette. By this point, the husband has realized that naming her Bertha has failed to make her an Englishwoman; he must then make her speechless. He does not call her Marionette to force her to speak but to keep her from speaking of her own accord.

While Antoinette accepted the identity of Bertha to a point (“It doesn’t matter”), she had not relinquished control of her West Indianness, as exhibited by her use of obeah to try to control him. Her husband realizes that Antoinette is a white Creole; that is, “Creole of pure English descent she may be, but...not English or European either” (*Sargasso* 39). When he cannot make Bertha English, he makes her a Creole madwoman. Rhys’s male narrator, because he is “[b]eset by doubts about himself” (Ciolkowski 346), must revert to the empirical identity-producing apparatus: he must recreate and rename the Other so as to preserve his own identity as white male English colonizer. Indeed each aspect of his identity meets its Other in the West Indies and specifically in Antoinette. She is antipodal to her husband: “ethnic” (her whiteness is called into question when her husband notes a resemblance to a “native”), female, non-English, and colonized.

The main focus here has been on Antoinette’s identity, but these conclusions necessarily bring us to the identity of Rhys’s male narrator, about whom Rhys acknowledges that she “carefully [hasn’t] named the man at all” (“Letters” 145). Readers may have noticed that so far the male narrator has only been named “Rochester” when he is referred to in *Jane Eyre*. Although critics and scholars customarily call Rhys’s male narrator “Rochester,” this actually ignores a purposeful narrative technique. Although Gregg believes that the “identity of the husband is constituted by the history and narrative of Europe and is dependent upon the ‘breaking up’ of Antoinette, the Creole woman” (103), leaving him nameless actually leaves the reader two choices as to his identity, two of which reverse the dependency of Antoinette and the “Rochester” figure. His lack of a proper name requires either that he be defined in relation to Antoinette, his Other, as in “Antoinette’s husband” or simply “the husband,” or as “Rhys’s male narrator.” Relating him to Antoinette causes some irony because Jameson assumes third-world cultures “are all in various distinct ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism...[and] none...can be conceived as anthropologically independent” (68). Rhys essentially fights the assumption that the Caribbean is dependent on Britain by forcing the male narrator to bear Antoinette’s name as his identity. However, as “Rhys’s male narrator,” he carries a different symbolic connotation, representing what Fanon

called “[t]he settler [who] makes history” (quoted in Gregg 100). The very importance of this “settler” rests on his anonymity. When *Wide Sargasso Sea* receives a Eurocentric criticism, Rhys’s lack of naming entitles this man to the power given to “imperial Europe, which designates the West Indies as a blank space on which to inscribe the desires of the European man” (Gregg 100). While his anonymity reinforces the power of naming that Britain endowed on its colonizers, it also leaves him silenced in Part Three of the novel and suggests that he might be the new “blank space” that Rhys leaves for her West Indian followers on which to write their histories.

Jean Rhys has truly reclaimed the Creole woman’s story from Charlotte Brontë’s British clutches while questioning British colonial ideology. *Wide Sargasso Sea* allows “Bertha Mason” to become Antoinette again and place the blame for her madness and her “growl[ing] like some strange wild animal” (Brontë 125) firmly where it belongs: on her husband. Essentially, she has reversed the gaze and placed her characters in opposite roles from what canonical British literature has traditionally allowed them. Through the deliberate and crafted use of naming, Rhys forces the male European colonizer to occupy the role of object, while the female West Indian becomes the subject. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys helps to un(re-)write the past and preserve the history that the British Empire tried to erase by “subjectifying” Antoinette and limiting the male narrator’s speech.

Like Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid emphasizes the importance of identity with her own choice to change her name. In *Annie John*, Kincaid uses naming as just one way to link Annie with her mother. This relationship becomes the microcosm of the West Indies’ relationship with England. Niesen de Abruna reiterates England’s power as subject: “In both the schools and libraries, the British found opportunities to distort and erase Antiguan history and to glorify British history in its place” (Niesen de Abruna 1998, 27). Just as Antoinette refused to accept her renaming, Annie resists England’s overt remaking of history in the scene where she writes over her school-book picture of Christopher Columbus, refusing “the great man” the status Europe would like to afford him (Kincaid 78). Yet it is important to note that Columbus doesn’t represent English colonialism per se; he stands more for a general European power. Annie’s reaction to Columbus offers a

national synecdoche rather than allegory. Since we are reading *Annie John* as a national allegory, we can identify Annie's mother as representing England. Like England writing over the blank space that they saw the West Indies to be, Annie's mother essentially creates Annie's history as well. Although as a young child, Annie relishes the strong connection that she shares with her mother, as she reaches puberty that connection begins to weaken, leaving Annie at a loss and forcing her to seek her own identity. In an article delineating the alliance of the mother and the other, Murdoch states, "This symbiotic relationship [of Annie and her mother] appears to function until the falseness of its premise is exposed to her" (Murdoch 98). Annie moves from the "symbiotic relationship" where she allows and even encourages her mother's creation of the past to a point where she realizes that she cannot define herself by her mother because her mother's stories do not comprise Annie's history.

The trunk of Annie's childhood memorabilia plays a vital role in Annie's life. Annie reveals her mother's storytelling actions, actions which create a pageant-like atmosphere. One cannot help but envision images of the obeah women conjuring spells when Annie's mother begins to tell Annie stories:

[A]s she held each thing in her hand she would tell me a story about myself. Sometimes I knew the story first hand, for I could remember the incident quite well; sometimes what she told me had happened when I was too young to know anything; and sometimes it happened before I was even born. Whichever way, I knew exactly what she would say, for I had heard it so many times before, but I never got tired of it. (21)

Initially accepting of her own (hi)story, Annie even craves her mother's memories. However, later on in the novel, "Annie matures into a resistor of the mother's text to become the powerful teller of her own stories" (MacDonald-Smythe 69). Kincaid shows this transition first through Annie's autobiographical essay. Annie's teacher assigns an autobiographical essay on the first day of class, and Annie tells of an experience with her mother in the sea during which Annie discovers

the fragility of her link to her mother and the very separateness of their identities. Although Annie's story is true, she "placed the old days' version [of the ending] before [her] classmates" so as to cover her loss of alliance with her mother (Kincaid 45). MacDonald-Smythe calls this point "the first attempt to transform the lie into art and...[later], the protagonist can weave her own story of selfhood from the 'lies' about maternal devotion" (62). I would argue that as Annie learns the truth behind the "'lies' about maternal devotion" that her mother weaves into stories, the young girl represents the Caribbean discovering that the "mother-country" is devoted to its islands only so far as they reflect favorably back on England. The Columbus situation, as well as Annie's portrayal of the British Ruth's hidden shame, alludes to the metaphorical role of the mother's relationship with Annie. Regarding Ruth and the British colonization, Annie says, "Of course, sometimes, what with our [English] teachers and our [English] books, it was hard for us to tell on which side we really now belonged — with the masters or the slaves — for it was all *history*, it was all in the past, and everybody behaved differently now" (Kincaid 76, emphasis added). This portion of the novel becomes a synecdoche just as does the Columbus incident, since Annie's recognition of British remolding of history and the resulting identity problems faced by the former colonies stands for the same awareness within the nation.

While Annie claims that she and other Antiguan were unsure of their place as "the masters or the slaves" (Kincaid 76), the intertextual evidence reveals that Annie certainly felt the distinction between herself and her mother(country). Niesen de Abruna agrees, declaring, "In *Annie John*...the alienation from the mother becomes a metaphor for the young woman's alienation from an island culture that has been completely dominated by the imperialist power of England" (Niesen de Abruna 1999, 173). By Annie's lying, stealing, and hiding things from her mother, Annie shows that she feels unable to live up to her mother's standards. She understands that there is a strong difference between her and her mother, as if a great ocean had come to separate them. Annie says at one point of her parents, "They talked about me as if I weren't there sitting in front of them, as if I had boarded a boat for South America without so much as a good-bye" (Kincaid 67). Annie's admission not only of the inequality

between mother and daughter but also of her feelings of inferiority proves that she was very sure of where she stood in the power division. Just as the Caribbean islands were never sophisticated or refined enough to be accepted as equals by the Empire, so too was Annie incapable of meeting her mother's ideals.

Some of the most revealing points of analysis come at the end of the novel, as Annie prepares to leave her childhood home. Looking back at the way she was as a child, Annie acts as if a great space of time has passed, and indeed, emotionally, it has. Although these memories pile up as proof that she has changed, lost her innocence, and uncovered the truth about her mother's fallibility, they also point to the mirroring of Annie's independence with that of the West Indies. As Annie lists all of the items that her parents have created for her, she comes to a moment of realization that expresses how she recognizes her coming of age:

When I look at things a certain way, I suppose I should say that the two of them made me with their own hands. For most of my life, when the three of us went anywhere together I stood between the two of them or sat between the two of them. But then I got too big, and there I was, shoulder to shoulder with them more or less, and it became not very comfortable to walk down the street together. And so now...here I am apart.  
(Kincaid 132-133)

Just as Annie has gotten too big to be submissive to her parents, the Caribbean has recognized its own role as individual subject rather than object of colonialism. Remembering how she emulated her mother when she was only five years old, her "little basket...a duplicate of her [mother's] bigger basket," Annie notes that the chemist "had to come from behind the counter" just to hear her, her "voice was so little and timid then" (Kincaid 139). At a young age, Annie's voice lacks the presence, the power, and the authority of her mother's voice. Likewise, in the early stages of colonization, the West Indies' voice was "little and timid" as it tried to vocalize its protests against dependence on England. Kincaid emphasizes financial dependence as another example

of England's reluctance to accept Caribbean self-sufficiency. While Annie's mother helps her open a bank account, Annie is never allowed to control that money until she breaks off from her family (Kincaid 140-141). In other words, once Annie develops her own identity as separate from her mother, her mother cannot withhold these symbols of her independence. Kincaid may be arguing that identity formulation must break completely with the former colonial power before the islands can demand release from dependence. For as much as the colonial powers may claim to want to "bestow" independence on their colonies, few believe the colonies capable of managing that independence.

The complete break from her mother's identity that Annie experiences comes during the period of her illness. Paradoxically, Annie's grandmother allows Annie the chance to create her self-image while her mother is emotionally absent. Niesen de Abruna succinctly clarifies this: "At the end of *Annie John*, Annie can find her own identity; she is able to do this through her identification with her mother and her grandmother, Ma Chess, who fills the maternal role when Annie's mother can no longer cope with Annie's psychological breakdown and physical illness" (Niesen de Abruna 1999, 175). Caton validates this view, believing that Ma Chess transcends the position of Annie's mother. When Annie "would feel that [she] was all locked up in the warm falling soot and could not find [her] way out," Ma Chess would stay with her until Annie was "herself" again (Kincaid 125). Caton provides this as an example of the "individual identity [that] provisionally loses itself to a cosmic, timeless version of the universe as an all-encompassing mother" (136). So whereas Annie's mother represents the cloying, controlling mother-country, Ma Chess exhibits the nurturing mother-earth, a persona with which Annie can identify because it is "all-encompassing" rather than categorically divisive.

Jean Rhys and Jamaica Kincaid present complex relationships that ostensibly concern the independence and identities of men and women or mothers and daughters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Annie John*. Although the realism and raw emotions the two writers offer permit straightforward readings of gender clashes or familial breaks, to ignore the national allegories that the novels represent does a disservice to Rhys and Kincaid and their nationalist agendas. Placing the resistance

to being objectified in the context of personal relationships ensures that all readers may relate to the struggle. Placing the resistance in the location of the Caribbean ensures that readers must consider the allegorical impact of the authority figures and of the “powerless” characters who fight to see that their identities are not merely created through colonialist “Othering.”

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