



Facultade de Filoloxía

Traballo de fin
de grao

Who's There?
Counter-Discursive
Strategies in Jean
Rhys's *Wide Sargasso
Sea*

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0. Introduction

During the last two hundred years, the artistic field has seen increasing debates about the autonomy of literature and literary works with respect to politics, history, religion and other social phenomena. From the final decades of the nineteenth century, the idea of “art for art’s sake” progressively acquired more and more relevance until becoming in the avant-garde period a definition or synonym for literary quality, while those works closer to any social vindication were often disregarded by the authoritative circles. Today, literary criticism has undoubtedly opened up the doors to a reassessment of those works detached from a *fin-de-siècle* and Modernist conception of art, especially through the consolidation of theoretical currents such as Cultural Materialism, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies or the Sociology of Literature in general. However, it is true that in some sectors of the academic field the identification of literary value and socio-historical detachment is still very much present. But this association nevertheless reveals itself as doubly inaccurate, first because of its utopian nature, and secondly, because of its restrictive character.

Although many artistic creations are highly independent from the economic order, they are inevitably, at a conscious or unconscious level, products of a time and invariably reflect the social tensions in which they were produced. To think of a good literary text as exclusively concerned with itself is certainly to restrict literature to an unrealisable notion, while negating, at the same time, wonderfully rich and well-written texts the value they deserve. *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys is certainly a novel capable of destroying this elitist description of the literary phenomenon. Beautifully designed, Rhys’s elaborated narrative puts forward an extremely complex main character, and provides an accurate representation of the colonial context in the nineteenth-century Caribbean. With a special treatment of language, both in its poetic dimension and in its more social role, the text blends Caribbean life and tradition with British inheritance. At the same time, and departing from an intertextual dialogue with Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), the novel subtly organises a series of very different strategies with the aim to resist and combat two dominant powers; namely, imperialism and, embedded in it, patriarchy. As a consequence, the novel is not only a valuable literary creation, but also a powerful tool for political contestation.

It is this idea the one that first triggered my imagination into the writing of the present essay; the possibility of studying a literary piece that, without losing quality,

constructs a strong response to two of the most repressive forms of power - the imperial and the masculine- which in several ways continue to subdue people in our contemporary societies. Departing from the assumption that *Wide Sargasso Sea* possesses a special counter-discursive tendency, this dissertation aims to examine in Rhys's novel the mastery of subjects within the colonial society and, most especially, their possible rebel to the authority that dominates them. Such an analysis has been guided by the concepts of the so-called Postcolonial Studies, with special attention paid to colonial discourse theory through critics such as Edward Said or G. C. Spivak. With the aim of transcending the commentary of what the text demands, the essay is briefly informed by a reflection on literary theory and criticism.

Consequently, this dissertation examines some seminal concepts as developed in postcolonial literary theory, as well as the notions of "discourse" and "counter-discourse" in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Such an interest has been echoed in the title of this dissertation: *Who's there?: Counter-Discursive Strategies in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea*. The first part of the title corresponds to a sentence in the novel, that of Coco, a parrot which knows how to ask in French *Qui est là?* (Who's there?), and answers himself, *Ché Coco* (Dear Coco). This is certainly a relevant sentence because, apart from the usual association that critics make of the parrot in the novel with women's situation, it provides an interesting metaphor for literary response in the postcolonial context. Just as Coco did, postcolonial writers have asked themselves "who's there?" and, again like the bird, have provided themselves the response. Raising their voices against those of the Empire's, postcolonial writers have constructed representations of those who were in the colonies, of themselves, taking hold of a historically denied agency. This is precisely what Rhys does when writing *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she raises her voice and speaks from the place of the colonised woman, and not only that, she does it with the particular purpose of subverting a long-time felt unjust dominance. Like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which opens up with the same question – Who's there? – the novel delves into the ghostly quality of subjectivity.

The structure of this dissertation aims to reflect the above-mentioned concerns. As a result, the first chapter of the essay, entitled "Postcolonial Theory", seeks to investigate the genesis of the field while providing a reflection about the controversies that have characterised it since its inception, such as the relationship with European post-structuralist theories.

Chapter two, “Discourse in the Postcolonial Context”, includes an analysis of the theoretical notion of “discourse” as proposed by Michel Foucault at an early stage, and as later used and appropriated by postcolonial theory. Through the analysis of exoticism and racial relationships as represented in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the exemplification of this notion is achieved, while the first instances of resistance as created in the text are carefully considered. However, a more thorough explanation of counter-discursive strategies arrives in the third chapter, whose title is, mimicking Spivak’s seminal essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985), “Three Counter-Discursive Strategies and a Critique of Imperialism”. Divided in three sections, this chapter aims at describing the subversive power contained in the process of identity formation of Antoinette Cosway, Rhys’s protagonist in the novel. Similarly, Rhys’s treatment of language and narrative perspective is here considered.

1. Postcolonial Theory

The late 1970s have been traditionally considered the starting point in the institutionalization of postcolonial studies. It witnessed the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a foundational text which inaugurated the discipline that came to be known as colonial discourse theory and that later was to inspire important critics such as Homi K. Bhabha or Gayatri Spivak.¹ It was also the moment of relevant specific historical and ideological changes which were to allow for the birth of a systematized critical work devoted to the theorization and understanding of the imperial and post-imperial context. This development affected literary, cultural and political studies and culminated by situating postcolonial theory in a prominent place in humanities research at the turn of the twenty-first century. It was this success which contributed to the consolidation of the present status of a discipline that, according to Neil Lazarus (2004: 1), "occupies a position of legitimacy and even prestige, not only within the Euro-American academy but also in universities in many countries of the formerly colonized world." Nevertheless, the multidisciplinary and especially the contestatory character that has defined postcolonial theory was not always an essential feature associated to such readings; it was rather progressively achieved when new ideological concerns were embraced.

The evolution of the term "postcolonial" (or "post-colonial") interestingly illustrates the genesis and transformation of the discipline. According to Benita Parry (2004: 66), "there has been a fluid, polysemic, and ambiguous use of the term," so it "can indicate a historical transition, an achieved epoch, a cultural location, a theoretical stance [...] whatever an author chooses it to mean." In spite of this, some general lines can be traced to follow the progressive semantic expansion of the word in its application to a "theoretical stance." It was initially used in historiography with an explicit "chronological meaning, designating the post-independence period" (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002: 186) and in this sense it entered and was employed in other fields of analysis. As Lazarus puts it (2004: 2), "to describe a literary work or a writer as post-colonial was to name a period, a discrete historical moment, not a project or a politics". He clarifies that if concepts such as "capitalism", "imperialism", "third-world" or "modernization" were already politically

¹ Postcolonial discourse theory has been defined as a discipline on its own within the field of literary and cultural theory (See Young 2006) and has been considered the starting point of postcolonial studies. Nowadays, it is understood as a constitutive part of the more general theoretical positioning of postcolonialism, within the field of literary and cultural analysis.

charged concepts in the 1970s, the notion of “postcoloniality” was far away from ideological debates.

As the twentieth century drew to its end, the concept became much more dynamic. It was first used “to refer to cultural interactions within colonial societies in literary circles” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002:186) ceasing to be, therefore, a historical category, thus coming closer to the specific analysis of literature and culture. Although at the time many critics were engaged in the study of the nature of imperial power, the term “postcolonial” remained far from any explicitly compromised political motivation – as well as from naming a particular field of study – until the critical interest was well advanced. In *The Location of Culture* by Homi Bhabha, as Lazarus (2004: 3) points out, postcolonial criticism is clearly endowed with ideological implications:

Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of “minorities” within geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. (Bhabha 1995: 171)

In the previous lines, Bhabha not only acknowledges the forces of power, as had been previously done by contemporary critics, but he also recognizes the role of postcolonial criticism in the task of opposing them, that is, its compromise to “intervene” in the “ideological discourses” of power. In Neil Lazarus’s words, “[f]or Bhabha, ‘postcolonial’ is a fighting term, a theoretical weapon which intervenes in existing debates and resists certain political and philosophical constructions” (2004: 4). Something very similar maintains Parry when explaining Spivak’s position; she says that for Spivak “the purpose of postcolonial critique is understood as being to dismantle and displace the truth-claims of Eurocentric discourses” (2004: 67). Therefore, if the term “postcolonial” first came to be associated with the critical field as a label for the literary and cultural interactions of formerly colonised territories, it is clear that it ended up being the term for describing an ideologically charged and combative form of literary criticism, as Young (2010: 283) explains:

La crítica postcolonial trata de **deshacer** la herencia ideológica del colonialismo [...] o, como también podríamos decir, **deconstruirlo**. Esta tarea implica necesariamente **descentrar la soberanía intelectual** y el dominio de Europa, por lo que a menudo nos referimos a ella

como una crítica del eurocentrismo, una crítica que representa un **desafío** a los límites del etnocentrismo occidental [...].²

This is not to say that there is only one definition of the task which occupies the postcolonial critic; that depends, in fact, on the particular conception each author has of the role of criticism. Still, it is true that the change to the understanding of a compromised form of analysis constituted postcolonial studies as a specialized and stable academic field (Lazarus 2004).

It is this contestatory character of postcolonial studies which has set them in clear relation with other forms of literary criticism such as feminism, queer studies or post-structuralism, at first more rooted in the European continent:

Post-colonial writing and literary theory intersect in several ways with recent European movements, such as postmodernism and poststructuralism, and with both contemporary Marxist ideological criticism and feminist criticism. These theories offer perspectives which illuminate some of the crucial issues addressed by the post-colonial text, although post-colonial discourse itself is constituted in texts prior to and independent of them. (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 155)

The authors in the previous lines effectively recognise the connection between European and postcolonial criticism but, at the same time, they seek to highlight the independence of the latter while avoiding a complete identification of the two, which could be interpreted in terms of dependency. They understand that these theories have functioned “as the conditions of the development of post-colonial theory in its contemporary form and as the determinant of much of its present nature and content” (ibid.). However, they also believe that the recognition of such a connection could “reincorporate post-colonial culture into a new internationalist and universalist paradigm” (ibid. 155-156). It is because of this last idea that many critics have rejected the methods of metropolitan analysis as perpetrators of the colonial condition. On the contrary, others believe in the possibility of a successful transplantation into the post-colonial context through their transformation. This is an important controversy that has characterized debate inside postcolonial studies for many years and has reached an in-between position rather few times.

² Emphasis mine.

The first approach to Western theory by postcolonial studies originates in a particular understanding of the imperial activity. Colonialism, as the cultural and political exploitation that arose from the expansion of Europe to American, African and Asiatic territories, “could only exist at all by postulating that there existed a binary opposition into which the world was divided” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002: 36). The idea of binarism was first studied inside the European academy by Ferdinand de Saussure, whose main thesis was “that signs have meaning not by a simple reference to real objects, but by their opposition to other signs” (ibid. 23):

Cuando se comparan los signos entre si [...] ya no se puede hablar de diferencia; la expresión sería impropia, puesto que no se aplica bien más que a la comparación de dos imágenes acústicas por ejemplo padre o madre, o a la de dos ideas, la idea de “padre” y la idea de “madre”; dos signos que comportan cada uno un significado y un significante no son diferentes, solo distintos. Entre ellos no hay más que oposición. Todo el mecanismo del lenguaje [...] se basa en oposiciones de este género y en las diferencias fónicas y conceptuales que implican. (Saussure 1983: 194).³

Although his work was mainly devoted to linguistic analysis, Saussure’s ideas became attractive for the description of Western human formation of reality; this way, cultural conceptions started to be explained in terms of opposition such as life/death, man/woman or colonizer/colonized. However, this project occults some fundamental problems. On the one hand, it “supress[es] ambiguous or interstitial spaces between the opposed categories so that any overlapping region that may appear [...] becomes impossible according to binary logic, and a region of taboo in social experience” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002: 23-24). On the other hand, the opposition hides a relation of inequality as one of the poles always dominates over the other.⁴ Imperialism clearly reveals violent oppositions in which the notions of “white”, “civilised”, and “colonizer”, for instance, are dominant as opposed to those of “black”, “primitive” or “colonized”.

As a consequence of these examinations, it became a priority in part of postcolonial criticism to destroy such binary oppositions in order to end imperial impositions. Only through the negation of western essentialist categories integrating these hierarchical relations, could it be possible to define them as culture-specific and therefore, mutable and contentious. A very similar task occupied European feminism when it sought

³ The concept of opposition is briefly defined in the lines above, for a complete explanation see Saussure 1983.

⁴ See Derrida 1976 and 1978.

to dismantle the dualistic constructs which perpetuated masculine dominance over feminine.

The sharing of this same concern and of a will to change a society stuck in violent inequity are clear proofs of the connexions existing between postcolonial and feminist studies. As suggested above, both forms of criticism have an incredibly contestatory character, and this may in fact have a common, or at least very similar, source in the two cases. It originates out of the necessity to defend a marginalized subject who is affected by violent and destructive forces of power, be these patriarchy or imperialism: “[Women] share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression” (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 174) which leads to a search “to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant” (ibid: 175). Moreover, both forms of criticism see the necessity to change a literary canon which has been constructed by “the intersection of a number of readings and reading assumptions legitimized in the privileging hierarchy of a ‘patriarchal’ or ‘metropolitan’ concept of literature” (ibid: 176). A canon which is also, and as a consequence of the latter, the key that perpetuates a binary understanding of literature, explained in terms of centre/margin.

According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989), the intersections between postcolonialism and feminism must be understood as a confluence of interests and ideas; “[f]eminism has not in general provided post-colonial criticism with a model or models because its development has been rather as a coincidental and parallel discourse” (ibid: 177). As Deepika Bahri puts it, “feminist perspectives have been central to postcolonial studies from its inaugural moment, sharing many of the broad concerns of postcolonialism, but also revising, interrogating and supplementing them” (2004: 200). In spite of this, however, she notes that there are tensions arising when some forms of analysis are not as rigorous as they probably should.

On the one hand, thus, feminist sometimes complain that analyses of colonial or postcolonial texts fail to consider gender issues adequately, bracketing them in favour of attention to supposedly more significant issues, such as empire building, decolonization, and liberation struggle. [...] On the other hand, postcolonialists are apt to be critical of mainstream (Western) feminism, focusing on its failure or inability to incorporate issues of race, or its propensity to stereotype or over-generalize the case of “Third-World women” (ibid: 202)

It was because of this confrontation that the so called “postcolonial feminist studies” appeared. This area explicitly sought to shorten the distance that such analyses had

originated by primarily studying representation in literature, the double colonization of women and their creation of identity, and Western essentialist constructs (ibid: 203). For this task, not only general feminism was central but also European poststructuralist theory, which had already influenced feminist critics such as Margerite Duras or Luce Irigaray.⁵

Some postcolonial analysts found many of the tools which helped sustain their readings in general poststructuralist theory. In it, as feminism had done, they discovered a similar reaction against the abusive practices of the dominant, a method for the destruction of binarism and the support to consolidate the active role of criticism. Postcolonialism and poststructuralism for example, “have always generated heated questions about their political efficacy, their location within intellectual traditions informed by unequal relations of power, and their validity as theoretical categories that can provide us with useful knowledge about the cultures and literatures of previously colonized countries” (Gikandi 2004: 97). In Boehmer’s words, both “critical approaches cross in their concern with marginality, ambiguity, disintegrating binaries, and all things parodied, piebald, dual, mimicked, borrowed, and second-hand” (1995: 244).

Critics such as Said or Bhabha were among the first to see in poststructuralist theory a key that could help analyse the postcolonial context, while Spivak became a pioneer in articulating the three methods together, feminism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 32). This way, European constructs such as “discourse”, “ideology” and “metanarrative” for example, became essential in some approaches to postcolonial criticism, and so did authors such as Foucault, Lacan, Sartre, Derrida or Jameson. However, as Gikandi collects, postcolonialism not only took from poststructuralism that which was interesting and helpful, part of the former was actually conceived inside the latter; “[...] postcolonial discourse emerged within the larger institutions of European, specially French, theory after structuralism. In this respect, a postcolonial discourse is unthinkable without poststructuralist theory” (2004: 98). Other critics, however, never speak of dependency in any stage, and prefer to understand postcolonialism and poststructuralism as being primarily interactive and mutually influential (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989). They necessarily come to highlight the anticipation in the postcolonial context of some central notions for poststructuralism: “The conditions of

⁵ See Irigaray 1985.

post-colonial experience encouraged the dismantling of notions of essence and authenticity somewhat earlier than the recent expressions of the same perception in contemporary European post-structuralist theory” (ibid 41). Some, like Young (2001), have explicitly recognised poststructuralism as a continuation of a movement which had its origins in the postcolonial context.

Be it necessary or only enriching, it is obvious that the relationship between postcolonial and European theory exists and that it reveals itself as controversial. Apart from the lack of agreement in defining the nature of the bond, there are two general and greater problems. On the one hand, the adoption of a poststructuralist (and even mainstream feminist) perspective could be contemplated as a continuation of European dominance over the postcolonial world, contributing to its persisting marginalization and disempowerment. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin recognise, “[i]t is perhaps an indication of the persisting hegemony of Europe that theories such as poststructuralism are adopted more readily than similar views derived from the conditions of post-colonial experience” (1989: 164). On the other hand, the practice of poststructuralism could inevitably lead to the endorsement of those ideas postcolonial critics sought to undermine in the first place, because these theories, having its roots in Europe, tend to project metropolitan patterns of thought in the rest of the geography (Boehmer 1995: 246).

It was because of this that many critics categorically opposed the continuation of a method based on European ideas. Still, there were those who saw on it a potential for the destruction of the very European authority and an instrument, that through appropriation, could increase the subversive power of postcolonial criticism, in the same way as literature itself had done: ⁶

It is quite understandable that many postcolonial critics have felt an urgent need to reject European theory (and even theory as such) as irredeemably Eurocentric in both its assumptions and political effect. Both to reject the possibilities of appropriation in his way is to refuse to accept that the same condition of hybridity as exists in the production of the postcolonial text also exists in the production of theory. Critical texts as well as creative texts are products of post-colonial hybridity. In fact, it is arguable that to move towards a genuine affirmation of multiple forms of native difference, we must recognize that this hybridity must inevitably continue. This is a prerequisite of a radical appropriation which can achieve a

⁶ The term *appropriation* refers to the aspects which the once colonised countries’ cultures take from the metropolitan’s in order to interiorise them, change them and then include them as part of their own.

genuinely transformative and interventionist criticism of contemporary post-colonial reality.
(Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 180)

The appropriation of poststructuralist theory by postcolonial criticism must be done through a significant reconsideration of the former, allowing to take only those tools which contribute to a fair treatment of the colonial and postcolonial text and admitting new strategies when these become insufficient. It is interesting to note that the process of critical appropriation allows for the birth of a critique of imperialism that aims to revert the metropolitan ideology through the use of its own methods; something that definitely increases its critical potential. Poststructuralism, therefore, allows not only the possibility of critique but also of a self-criticism, which may well be understood as an attempt to depart from its imperial past. Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) allows the application of this combined method in which poststructuralism and feminism are transcended by new and more genuine postcolonial strategies. However, this analysis must be understood as one possibility among many others and as the result of a particular and even personal choice facilitated by the marvellous nature of the literary text, which allows the successful application of very distant and even divergent forms of criticism.

2. Discourse and the Postcolonial Context

2.1 Foucauldian Discourse and Colonial Discourse: The Textuality of Power

The first studies on rhetoric in Ancient Greece conceived power as the primary and fundamental quality of language. Classical poets, orators and of course, audiences, conferred a special authority to the formal and ritualised ability of discoursing or communicating which always assured the possession of truth. This is the principal idea that permitted Michel Foucault to trace a historical change which he understood as triggering the birth of the so called “discourse of modernity”. According to him, in Hellenic times the attention was directed to the way of communicating, to the essence and performativity of language, which was endowed not only with intellectual authority, but also with a direct influence on the world:

The discourse which inspired respect and terror and to which one had to submit because it ruled, was the one pronounced by men who spoke as of right and according to the required ritual; the discourse which dispensed justice and gave everyone his share; the discourse which in prophesying the future not only announced what was going to happen but helped to make it happen, carrying men’s minds along with it and thus weaving itself into the fabric of destiny. (1981: 54)

However, only a century later, the interest for the “expression” was substituted by the interest for the “expressed”; “the highest truth no longer resided in what discourse was or did, but in what it said [...] the truth was displaced from the ritualised, efficacious and just act of enunciation, towards the utterance itself, its meaning, its form, its object, its relation to its reference” (ibid.). The necessity for the production of truth was thus born, it “came to dominate discourse and statements were required to be either true or false” and therefore, “it was no longer the act of discourse but the subject of discourse that became important” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002: 72-73). This temporal cut marked the birth of “our will to know” which, according to the French philosopher, is a will to truth (and a will to power), and consequently originated the birth of discourse as it is known at present (Foucault 1981).

Although Foucault’s conception has imposed itself in social sciences and the humanities, his use of “discourse” is definitely not related with the usual definition of the word, referring to a formal narration or oral exposition. It is neither associated with the notion more recently constructed in linguistics which defines discourse as the ultimate unit of speech, nor to semiotic and other structuralist usages of the term earlier introduced

in the field of literary theory and criticism.⁷ Foucault's concept is wider, elusive and very complex probably because the author never gave an explicit and transparent definition of it, but also because of comprising, with all its implications, two different but related dimensions, the semiotic and the social, as Hunt and Purvis say:

“Discourse” refers to the individual social networks of communication through the medium of language or non-verbal sign-systems. Its key characteristic is that of putting in place a system of linked signs. Whilst the more important examples are speech systems or written language (texts), discourse can be non- verbal; for example, practices in which males open doors for females, rise when females enter rooms, etc. are elements of a discourse whose organizing framework is a strict sexual division of labour, in which females are both secondary but valorised as in need of male care and protection. (1993: 485)

Be them verbal or not, the instances of discourse are always regarded in connection to the creation of frameworks which control the generation of knowledge and the constitution of experience. According to Chris Weedon (1987: 108), foucauldian discourse is a way of “constituting knowledge, together with social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges [...] Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, the unconscious and conscious mind [...] of the subjects they seek to govern.” More simply put, “[f]or Foucault, a discourse is a strongly bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known [...] It is the complex of signs which organises social existence and social reproduction” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002: 70-71).

In the inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Foucault concentrated on defining the procedures that organise the production of discourse, that is, the apparently invisible rules which control it. As he puts it, “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality” (1981: 52). This suggests that what interests Foucault is not the definition of what power is; he rather seeks to explain how it is exercised in or behind discourse (Hernández Castellanos 2010: 47). In his analysis of power, therefore, Foucault proposed a model for the functioning of power in general terms, which will be successfully applied to –and appropriated for – the study

⁷ Russian critic Iuri Lotman (1970) first employed the term within the field of literary studies to account for the specificity of literary language.

of almost every type of discourse, dominant or not, be it colonial, medical, patriarchal or even legal. Once he identified such procedures with the idea of power, Foucault decided to group them in three different categories, being the first (procedures of exclusion) the most interesting ones to the purpose of this dissertation.

According to the French philosopher, discourse is articulated in terms of a series of prohibitions which control what the subject can say or do in every situation: “We know quite well that we do not have the right to say everything, that we cannot speak of just anything in any circumstances whatever, and that not everyone has the right to speak of anything whatever” (1981: 52). Discourse is, therefore the originator of a series of prescriptions which may complicate and even prevent the questioning of any idea constructed inside any of its forms. Although prohibition is a clear principle of exclusion, there is a second procedure which has been, at least, more evident in the course of history and that Foucault calls rejection. Although he analyses it in relation to “the opposition of reason and madness”, it is a principle that extends to the encounter with, and consequent rejection of, every form of alterity. What is ascribed to the madman could actually apply even to women in certain moments of history, to the colonised or any marginalised subject perceived as alien or improper: “The madman has been the one whose discourse cannot have the same currency as others; his word may be considered null and void, having neither truth nor importance” (ibid. 53).

These two procedures are however directed by the will to truth; this “assimilate[s] the others, both in order to modify them and to provide them with a foundation” (ibid. 56). As commented above, the will to reach truth, linked to the quest for knowledge, is the characteristic feature of modern discourses. This fact brings about an erroneous logic which can be found in the core functioning of many forms of discourse: all ideas conceived inside discourse are conceived inside truth and therefore, are true. Truth becomes the justification for every idea constructed inside discourse even if it is overtly atrocious from the outside, as colonial discourse theory proved. The possession of truth guarantees rightness and therefore becomes a clear mechanism of power. Because of this, it is very difficult to question the validity of such discourses, especially when these have become dominant ones.⁸ But part of this power also relies in the process of

⁸ Foucault understands discourses as being in a constant struggle, ones being dominant at the expense that others are excluded. This has led many critics and philosophers to believe that society for Foucault is only a field of struggle, in which a dominant discourse is eliminated by another that soon assumes the privileged position.

institutionalization, which assures the efficacy of discourse, making it less visible and more complex:

This will to truth, like the other systems of exclusion, rests on an institutional support: it is both reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practice, such as pedagogy, of course; and the system of books, publishing, libraries; learned societies in the past and laboratories now. But it is also renewed, no doubt, more profoundly, by the way in which knowledge is put to work, valorised, distributed, and in a sense attributed, in a society. (ibid. 55)

The main purpose of Foucault's analysis of discourse, and the relations of power that control it, is to restore its condition of event, showing at the same time that meaning is always relative. This is somehow what Edward Said intends to do in *Orientalism*. Drawing from Foucault's model, Said moves on to an analysis of colonial and postcolonial contexts, aiming to define orientalism as an arbitrary construction designed with the exclusive purpose of satisfying the imperialist thirst for domination of European countries. Said believes that the only way to demystify the assumptions and attitudes imposed by the orientalist enterprise is precisely to conceive them as working parts of a discourse, in the foucauldian sense:

[...] Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism. My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively [...]. (1979: 3)

Orientalist discourse, as Said explains it, establishes the existing relations of dominance between what are known as Occident and Orient. However, because of the similar behaviour of the colonial enterprise in all colonised territories, the notion has been extended to meet the analysis of every colony's situation, whether they are located the so-called Orient or not, as is the case of South Africa, the West Indies or Australia, for example. Consequently, the phrase "colonial discourse" was preferred as more appropriate and inclusive to denote generically the discourse of the colonizer. As reported by Boehmer, colonial discourse

can be taken to refer to a collection of symbolic practices, including textual codes and conventions and implied meanings, which Europe deployed in the process of its colonial expansion and, in particular, in understanding the bizarre and apparently unintelligible strangeness with which it came into contact. Its interpretations were an expression of its mastery, but they also reflected other responses: wonder, bewilderment, fear. Colonialist discourse therefore embraced a set of ideological approaches to expansion and foreign rule [...] thus constituted the systems of cognition – interpretative screens, glass churches – which Europe found to guarantee its colonial authority. (1995: 50-51)

According to Boehmer, colonial discourse was born out of the encounter, through occupation, between Europe's epistemologies and the alterity of a great deal of cultures. The problem is that, as Foucault claims, difference is never admitted by discourse; it is not only understood as an excuse for exclusion, but also as something to be savagely condemned. As Bhabha understands it (1995: 67), in the colonial context difference is directly used to create a series of prejudices with the function to support a supposed superiority of the coloniser: "[Colonial discourse] is a form of discourse crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization." Therefore, what colonial discourse does is to understand the colonisers' culture, beliefs and practices as being superior to those of the colonised, coming even to support racial theories of white supremacy. Such convictions lead to a will for civilization, understood and promulgated as a need and sort of moral obligation. However, as Boehmer notes (1995: 36), they were instead the main justification for the economic exploitation and political repression installed in the colonies: "Motives and justifications for imperialism can perhaps best be seen as having formed a complicated interlocking matrix, comprising many layers. Within this matrix, justifications – such as the need to civilize natives, or the appeal to the technological superiority of the West – could transmute into motives." (ibid.) The most serious consequence of the racial, cultural, and linguistic discrimination and political oppression exercised through such discourse can be found in the realms of identity formation within the colonies, as will be commented later on.

Although colonial occupation was made possible through the military defeat of native groups of resistance, it seems that colonial discourse was rather imposed through a series of subtle and less visible procedures, probably more effective than militarised action itself. The imposition of European discourses has been described through the study of the extensive net of elements on which colonial discourse settles: "institutions,

vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (Said 1979: 2). Clearly, a great deal of its power relies on its infiltration in every level of ordinary life orienting every production in the colonies, from clothing to culture, towards a European model.

The literature of the coloniser is undoubtedly one of the realms in which colonial discourse more powerfully flourishes. Being the one privileged by patronage in the colonial world and the one consumed in the metropolis, it becomes an easy tool for the transmission and perpetuation of all the prejudices that characterise colonialism. As Boehmer says, “literary texts helped sustain the colonial vision giving reinforcement to an already insular colonial world” (1995: 44). This fact brings forth the inherent textuality of colonial discourse, which is not only perpetuated in the written space, but also in part originates there.⁹ As a result, the literary text constitutes itself as a site of representation affected by dominant ideology, in the traditional sense of the word, and consequently, as an instrument of power. It is because of this that critics such as Said have studied literary works in an attempt to analyse the different discourses which orient the imperialist practice. Nevertheless, the text is also the site for the subversion of dominant powers, that is, for the construction of new discourses of resistance or counter-discourses.

Stories are at heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonised people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history [...]. The power to narrate or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection [...]. (Said 1994: xii-xiii)

Literature, therefore, conforms itself both as a tool for the discursive exercise of dominant power and as a weapon to dismantle it, as the next sections of the present essay will try to prove.

⁹ An important part of the production and perpetuation of colonial discourse resides in the reading activity and not in real experience. Many writers in the metropolis wrote about the “colonial world” thanks to what they could interpret from previous texts. (See Boehmer 1995: 15)

2.2 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Discourse, and the Politics of Subversion

*I've read and re-read "Jane Eyre" of course, and I am sure that the character must be "build up". I wrote you about that. The Creole in Charlotte Brontë's novel is a lay figure – repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive which does. She's necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry – off stage. For me (and for you I hope) she must be right on stage. She must be at least plausible with a past [...]*¹⁰

The previous lines correspond to a fragment from a letter that Jean Rhys sent to her friend Selma Vaz Dias. On it, Rhys stated her wish to create a story for that forgotten character, that "figment of the gothic imagination" (Thorpe 1977: 173), the "mad woman in the attic" of British canonical novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). Charlotte Brontë's flat character Bertha Mason becomes Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the complex and dynamic protagonist of a passionate story of struggle, power and emotional change. It is because of this that many critics have sought to analyse both novels from a comparative perspective, confronting not only the feminine heroines, but also the two different "Rochester" characters, the environments, the narrative perspective, etc.

Being in its condition of prequel of another text or in isolation, Rhys's piece has been successfully contemplated from feminist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic and deconstructionist approaches. According to Panizza (2009), it was the representation of the racial conflict, the treatment of slavery and the Afro-Caribbean folklore which first attracted the attention of postcolonial critics to Rhys's novel. However, the relationships of characters with the incredibly accurate surrounding colonial context depicted in the novel make of *Wide Sargasso Sea* an interesting material for the study of colonial discourse in its most textual level. At the same time, the patriarchal forces that affect the protagonist require a profound analysis which shows the connection of colonial and masculine domination. In any case, the application of general theoretical concepts to the particular level of the individual/character is necessary and provides an understanding of both, their functioning and their consequences for the subject, which may assimilate or be constituted against them. This is the method Edward Said himself uses in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), his aim being "to focus as much as possible on individual works, to

¹⁰ Jean Rhys's letter to Selma Vaz Dias and collected in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1999), the edition quoted from now onwards and signalled with the initials WSS.

read them first as great products of the creative and interpretative imagination, and then to show them as part of the relationship between culture and empire” (1994: xii).

As has been already mentioned, the central and originating feature of colonial discourse is certainly the construction of an “ontological distinction between the West and the rest of the world” (Said 1994: 108), a distinction which results from a simplistic binary, or violent opposition in Derridean terms. Following Foucault, it could be said that this confrontation originates as a reaction to difference or to what the colonisers understood as absence. Here an “impressive circularity” is born: “we [the colonisers] are dominant because we have the power (industrial, technological, military, moral), and they [the colonised] don’t, because of which they are not dominant; they are inferior, we are superior [...]” (ibid. 106). This hierarchical logic was understood from the beginning of the colonial activity in racial terms too. Linked to the economic interests at the heart of imperialism, this led to the commercialisation of human beings, to slavery, a very complex topic whose detailed explanation clearly exceeds the aims of this essay. Nevertheless, the relationship between the slave population and the white masters is the clearest instance, because of its radicalness, of the functioning in society of the coloniser’s supremacy. *Wide Sargasso Sea* perfectly represents the distance that separates both groups, further adding, however, a complexity directly derived from the very historical circumstances that creates a third hybrid space between the two.

Jean Rhys’s novel is set in the Caribbean islands of Jamaica and Dominica “in the years immediately following the Emancipation Act (1833) when race relations were very tense and conflicted” (Cappello 2009: 48).¹¹ The Act intended to abolish slavery, but the reality was that during several years, former slaves were forced to work in apprenticeship systems, just before indentured workers were taken from India and Ireland. One of the consequences of the passing of the act was the ruin of several plantations which were in the hands of Creoles, the descendants of former colonisers, brought up in the colonies. The situation of the plantations attracted the interest of new British investors who settled in the islands, perpetuating the movement of population from the metropolitan centre. This way, the already diverse social fabric of the Caribbean was further nourished with the course of time as new groups were integrated in a vertically arranged structure, whose rigidity was the cause of a tumultuous atmosphere.

¹¹ The novel is divided in three parts, the first two take place in the Caribbean; the last one is set in England.

In this context, colonial discourse needs to incorporate an intermediate space comprised between the extremes white coloniser/black colonised, namely, the place occupied by the Creole population. Discourse is, however, always reluctant to abandon its foundations and therefore, its binary logic, probably because it is the only guarantor to maintain and secure white supremacy. The Creole's position usually implies a destabilization of binaries and its recognition by discourse would lead to its own negation. As a consequence, this in-between position tends to be projected in either one of the extremes, more commonly it is in that of the colonised or slave population. The Creoles in the Caribbean find an impossibility of complete identification with the black community and with the group of white new colonisers because of their hybrid position.¹² At the same time, several stereotypes are constructed against them from the dominant centre while the new discourses of resistance use them as a reversed strategy to combat the former colonial elite's mastery imposed through slavery.¹³ Antoinette Cosway, Rhys's heroine, is kept in the middle of these discursive pressures which not only limit her subject but also affect her sense of self, especially when the colonial power configures itself as explicitly patriarchal.

2.2.1 "Like in a Looking Glass": Between Coloniser and Slave

Wide Sargasso Sea has a complex narrative structure as it includes three different narrators with their respective understanding and presentation of the events: Antoinette, her nameless husband who many critics rename Rochester, and Grace Poole. In Part One of the novel, the protagonist recounts her childhood experiences from her life at Coulibri, the family estate, to her departure from Mount Calvary Convent in Spanish Town. After the Emancipation Act and having lost their economic privileges, Antoinette and her family suffer the rejection of the new colonial elite and become consequently isolated in a ruined estate, seeing the progressive deterioration of their situation. It is the arrival of Mr Mason, an Englishman in search of economic profit in the West Indies, which ends

¹² The term 'hybrid' or 'hybridity' is here understood as explained by Bhabha (1995).

¹³ The ex-slave population mimicking their own oppression, as Susana Bornéo (2011: 79) points out, use stereotypes to articulate a specific form of resistance, recurring especially to the Creole's loss of economic power. This is accurately represented in Rhys's novel and exemplifies the problematic relations of power existing in the Islands.

their misery. Through his marriage to Anette Cosway, Antoinette's mother, the family recuperates financially but is ultimately destroyed.

Mr Mason (and Antoinette's husband in Part Two) is the representative of the metropolitan gentleman who comes to the Caribbean fresh with British imperialist ideology. He has no qualms about showing his racial beliefs based on the idea of white superiority, as his attitude and use of stereotypes suggests. When discussing with her wife the possibility of leaving Coulibri after several years of conflict between Anette's family and the black population, he irresponsibly affirms that the former slaves "are too damn lazy to be dangerous" (WSS: 19) and refuses to believe the warnings of his wife. As Antoinette's husband will do, Mr Mason does not understand the racial relations of the island, something Antoinette highlights, marking the separation between Creoles and new colonizers, when she thinks to herself "[n]one of you understand about us" (WSS: 20).¹⁴ Mr Mason believes that his metropolitan knowledge is more accurate than the Creole's as he seems to suggest when talking to Aunt Cora about the ex-slaves: "Live here most of your life and know nothing about the people. It's astonishing. They are children – they wouldn't hurt a fly" (WSS: 21); but when the slaves are hiding to fatally surprise the family, he believes, to the amazement of Antoinette and Cora, that they are in a wedding: "There is some festivity in the neighbourhood. The huts were abandoned. A wedding perhaps?" (WSS: 20). Contrary to Mr Mason's beliefs, the events proved that 'children do hurt the flies'. The black population rebelled against the new abusive practices imposed by the new planters such as Mr Mason, set Coulibri on fire, and sorted out their debt with the slave-owner family.

It seems apparent that the Creole population recognises, positively or negatively, an active character in the slave community which the new planters do not. However, many have understood the attitude of the Creoles in the novel as equally racist, reading Antoinette as a prejudiced character and *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a racist text or, at least, one which cannot easily escape the power of the colonial machine. Jennifer Gilchrist in her article "Women, Slavery, and the Problem of Freedom in *Wide Sargasso Sea*" describes Antoinette's supposed "nostalgia for the culture of slavery" (2012: 467). According to her, the novel constructs the Creole class as being overtly contrary to the new laws imposed from the metropolis, which only intended to "restrain planters and

¹⁴ "You" here refers to the newly arrived white colonisers such as Mr Mason.

civilize freed slaves” (ibid. 470). Gilchrist admits that such beliefs cause in the Creoles a yearning for a previous situation in which they not only had more authority but also were at the top of the social scale. Economic factors are clear features that define the limits of each social group, something that became progressively central, especially in the construction of counter-discourses such as those at the heart of the anti-slavery movement.

The financial situation becomes relevant for the explanation of such nostalgia, as shown in characters such as Antoinette. However, Gilchrist elaborates an explanation very much depending on racial stereotype. She explains how Antoinette’s comparison of the slaves with animals, “[a] horrible noise swelled up, like animals howling, but worse” (WSS: 23), perpetuates “planter racism, which denied the humanity of African West Indians in order to justify slavery” (2012: 469). At the same time, she understands that the text itself represents black population as devoid of humanity. After setting fire to Coulibri, the rioters intend to kill the family. They are asked to abandon violence but their rejection proves, according to Gilchrist, their lack of “interest in meeting other’s conceptions of humanity” (ibid. 470) being described therefore as possessed by extreme evil feelings of anger.¹⁵

The use of racial stereotypes by Creoles is apparent in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but it is usually represented more as part of a social reality than as part of the text itself or certain characters. It is true that Antoinette uses white prejudice against the black population in several occasions, but many critics have associated them with an assimilated attitude or even a defensive strategy against what she perceives as an abuse, and not exactly with racial discrimination. When visiting the pool with the young Afro-Caribbean girl Tia, Antoinette accepts a bet “to turn a somersault under water” (WSS: 14). When her friend takes all her money unfairly, as she understands, Antoinette reacts aggressively calling Tia “cheating nigger” (WSS: 14). To this, Tia responds with the same attitude and refers to the Creole’s loss of economic power and authority in general: “Real white people, they got money. They didn’t look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people are nothing but white nigger, and black nigger better than white nigger”

¹⁵ As Lee Erwin (1989: 150) informs, the evil character of the African population was a common stereotype. Père Labat who, according to him is recalled in *Wide Sargasso Sea* through the fictional author of Père Lilièvre, wrote in the eighteenth century: “the Negro [is] a natural child of the devil, a born sorcerer, an evil spirit wielding occult power”. The nature of black population was not only related with the devil, but also surrounded by a dense mystery and, therefore exoticised.

(*ibid.*). It seems that the tense situation existing between the community of ex-slaves and former plantation owners is translated to the relation between the young friends. More than out of true prejudice, their reaction springs from a learned behaviour. As Panizza admits, their confrontation is “but a product of their society and of what they have been taught” (2009: 9).

However, the conflictive social atmosphere becomes a personal matter for the protagonist. She not only feels rejected, but also abused and disempowered by the ex-slave population.¹⁶ In Part Two of the novel, there is a moment in which Antoinette, after hearing one of the housemaids, Amélie, singing a song about a ‘white cockroach’, explains to her husband:

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 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. (WSS: 61)

Antoinette reacts to Amélie’s offence with the usual excuse given by colonisers and slave owners to elude their responsibility in the process of slavery. That the planters were to blame for the enslavement of African population is an undeniable truth supported by historical evidence. Antoinette’s assertion is, therefore, not accurate and only causes her own victimization. What she says in the previous lines is, however, common in colonial discourse. She does not speak out of racism, but out of the desperation due to her confused subjectivity. Antoinette reacts against black population not because of rejection in the Foucauldian sense, but because she blames them for the constant attacks that prevent her from finding a place of her own.

Antoinette, in the middle of a serious socio-historical and consequently identity conflict, finds in prejudice the easiest tool that the immediate context has provided her with to combat the injustices that pursue her. The fact that racism does not constitute the obvious explanation for her use of stereotypes does not mean that she is completely independent from the frame of thought imposed through practices of power. Jean Rhys

¹⁶ Antoinette’s disempowerment is not only obvious through the progressive alienation that she suffers after her marriage with the Englishman. There are several instances in which Rhys’s heroine loses power before the Afro-Caribbean people. After their confrontation in the pool, Tia takes Antoinette’s dress before departing and leaves her hers. This exchange of clothes along with Antoinette’s “verbal defeat” in the hands of Tia’s reversed discrimination, causes a change of roles; the traditionally sovereign subject becomes discriminated and devoid of her properties. This change of place highlights the ambivalence and mutability of Antoinette’s position as a Creole.

constructs a reactionary character that indirectly defies the most central impositions of colonial discourse while being at the same time the victim of its historical constructions. She creates more clearly an ambivalent character with an ambivalent behaviour, who feels the necessity to separate herself from the black “they” but who inevitably feels a powerful wish to identify with them.

As a solitary child, rejected by her mother and isolated from both the Creole and white communities, Antoinette found company only in Christophine and Tia, both part of the Afro-Caribbean population. After an unpleasant episode in which Antoinette feels afraid and offended by the insults of a “little girl”, she begins her friendship, as she terms it, with Tia. They started meeting “nearly every morning at the turn of the road to the river”; in the bathing pool, they boiled and ate together “green bananas,” and “lay in the shade” seeing the water (WSS: 13). Antoinette feels that their relationship is harmonious, one of equals who can encounter although belonging to different groups; she thinks that she could live with Tia and be like her (WSS: 27). In spite of what the protagonist believes, the novel admits a bigger force which makes their communion in society impossible.

After the fire at Coulibri, Antoinette sees “Tia and her mother” and runs “to her, for she was all that was left of [her] life as it had been” (WSS: 27). This is a central moment in the novel which, as Silvia Capello says, “reveals the complexity between the white Creole and the black community” (2009: 49). Antoinette narrates:

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 be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. 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. (WSS: 27)

According to Gilchrist, when Tia “throws a stone at Antoinette, there emerges an identification “out of the pain of finding themselves in opposite sides of history” (2012: 471). But this “identification” created through the powerful image of the looking glass is, better said, a recognition and at the same time a sense of disconnection. On the one hand, Antoinette sees in the mirror of her mind a subject who is in the same place with respect to the impositions of a discourse, a victim of the world she lives in (Panizza 2009 :9). On the other, in the way that the subject inevitably separates from her image in the mirror,

Antoinette is finally separated from Tia by a historical barrier originally derived from the imperialist enterprise which prevents their genuine identification. As Silvia Cappello summarises: “[a]s the image in a mirror is not exactly the same as reality, so the two girls are somehow similar but still different, they are separated as reality is separated from its image in the mirror” (2009: 49). Quoting Brathwaite, she adds that Antoinette and Tia are separated by the invisible obstacles created by colonial discourses which are founded on ideas of white supremacy.

The depiction of Antoinette and Tia’s relationship is characterised by a strong rigidity, which is a clear consequence of colonial discourse’s constructions. The power of Rhys’s novel does not depend on the creation of a utopian story in which these two characters had the possibility of occupying the same place in reality. It resides on the contrary, in the creation of characters whose literary representation had traditionally omitted their agency, representing them as dependent subjects in need of colonial guidance and authority. Tia is a remarkable character in *Wide Sargasso Sea* not only for possessing an active role which permits her to confront the oppressor, but also because of recognising the limits of the discourses that control her world.

If Tia ends up becoming a memory for Antoinette, Christophine is a steadfast support until her departure to England. Their relationship acquires more relevance when described through the eyes of Antoinette’s husband, becoming more intimate. Here, point of view may cause an oversimplification of their attachment due to the imperialist constant identification of the alien, in an attempt to separate it from the self, which fills his narrative. However, Christophine does not occupy the same exact place that Tia does in her relationship with Antoinette. She is constructed as a sort of maternal figure from Part One of the novel, who not only takes care of Antoinette, but also of the whole family; as Anette admits, without her support, the family would have died (WSS: 12). According to Olausen, it is interesting to note that “the life of the white family is [...] in the hands of a person who once was part of their property” (1993: 71). As a freed slave, Christophine did not have to remain working for the Creole family, but two events make “her attachment to the white family seem natural” (ibid. 74). On the one hand, she is constructed as a character “free from social ties and responsibilities” (ibid.). She has no husbands and only an adult son; this supposes the lack of responsibilities of her own that could demand her departure from the side of the white family. On the other hand, as Olausen argues, in the Empire the relations of property are usually understood as

relations of blood by part of the black community. Therefore, it is not strange that Christophine understands her permanence in the house as a familial obligation, as the choice of a free woman who accepts a responsibility, after all, “she stayed [...] because she wanted to stay” (WSS: 12). However, the limits of discourse, as in the case of Tia, prevent Christophine from occupying the same place as her former masters, even if her situation is not as overtly oppressive as that of many of the slaves working at the plantations.

Nevertheless, in spite of her situation, Christophine preserves a certain degree of autonomy which permits her to “subvert the Creole address that would constitute her as domesticated Other, and asserts herself as articulate antagonist of patriarchal, settler and imperialist law” (Parry 2001: 63). According to Maria Olausson, the black woman is portrayed in Rhys’s novel as far more autonomous than the Creole. Not only is it possible for her to reject any attachment with men and live independently, but also “she is in the position to help the white woman in distress” (1993: 74), whose definition of womanhood negates her autonomy. Her subversion of patriarchal and imperialist discourses resides first in her independence from the law of man because, as she tells Antoinette’s husband’s when confronting him, unafraid, the Caribbean “is free country, and [she] is free woman” (WSS). Second, in her alternative epistemology, based on Afro-Caribbean tradition.

2.2.2 Patriarchal Colonialism and the Exotic Other

During several years metropolitans found in the visual arts material to supply their imagination with the “exotic” scenes of empire they will probably never meet, not only because of their being set in distant places, but also because of being reductive and manipulated representations of the colonised cultures. More than testimonies to native life, the so-called exoticist paintings are real portraits of the ones holding the brush, or the pen, as exoticism is as central to plastic arts as it is to literature; being a constitutive part of discourse, it could not be otherwise.

As part of an ontological process, exoticism accounts for the elaboration of dissimilarity within the colonial consciousness. If racism is concerned with its discrimination, as commented above, exoticism could be understood as the creation of difference, or at least as one procedure to do so. When the colonising subject encounters the “other-land” or the “other-subject”, he conceives of it on the basis of his or her own

self, as utterly alien and unnatural; as Porter and Rousseau put it: “Other cultures, other creeds, were not merely different, not even merely lower, but positively – even objectively – strange” (1990: 6). Such strangeness raises feelings of fear and rejection but also causes an irresistible attraction, all concealed by the desperate search for domination which guides colonial discourse. Kamala Kempadoo wonderfully explains the creation of the exotic, which Said had already considered in *Orientalism*:

The Orient was captured as the quintessence of the exotic: a strange and unfamiliar world, both fascinating and terrifying, inviting to the curious explorer yet threatening to all standards of civilization upheld in Europe, seductive in its paradise-like, unblemished ‘virgin’ state, yet bestial in its perceived barbaric cannibalistic moments. The eroticization of women of these different cultures was an integral part of this movement, whereby their sexuality was defined as highly attractive and fascinating, yet related to the natural primitiveness and lower order of the other cultural group. (2000)

It seems that through exoticism, colonial discourse immediately reaches to address women, constructing them not only as sites for imperialist imposition but also as objects of an already man-dominated imperial world. Colonial discourse is, therefore, imperialist in several respects, as a cultural and political force which subdues the native, and as a patriarchal power interested in the conquest of the female body and the feminized land. Constructed in opposition to the white body, the strange native female body became for the coloniser the object of extreme fantasies and practices which were overtly prejudiced in the metropolis.

According to Kempadoo, in the Caribbean, exoticism produced two stereotypes of femininity. On the one hand, native women were defined “as passive, downtrodden, subservient, resigned workers” (ibid.), whose obligated submissiveness permitted the master’s control. On the other hand, they were constructed on the basis of an exaggerate sexuality, more typical of the animal world than of the human. The colonised female was described “as sexually promiscuous, ‘cruel and negligent as a mother, fickle as a wife,’ and immoral [...] naturally ‘hot constitution’d,’ and sensuous in an animal-like way, lacking all the qualities that defined ‘decent’ womanhood [...]” (ibid). This animality, “licentiousness, immorality, and pathology” was used on the basis of racism to support native inferiority, and colonial rule; however, as Kempadoo admits (ibid.), it did not dissuade European males’ desire for and attraction to the native woman’s body, nor from their search to dominate it through sexual intercourse. But, again, the native’s licentiousness seems to speak more about the metropolitans than of the colonised peoples.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys reaches to represent this environment in which the discourse of colonialism is constituted as a double marginalising power where the opposition metropolitan man/native woman is much more violent than the traditional coloniser/colonised. The author creates a male prototype of the metropolitan settler, an embodiment of the patriarchal discourse of colonialism who comes to occupy Mr Mason's place in the second part of the novel as the second man who clips the wings of her creole wife. Antoinette's husband constructs a narrative well adapted to the point of view of the exoticising coloniser, which represents the native land as strange and dangerously seductive, and the sexually attractive native female as corrupted and blameworthy. However, it is important to note that, at the same time, Rhys's text originates several subtle yet powerful instruments of subversion, which in the first place revert the exoticism associated to the Caribbean land and, secondly, reconstruct the disempowered native woman's identity.

As Look Lai describes (2001: 26), "[t]he encounter between Antoinette and Rochester is more than just an encounter between two people: it is an encounter between two whole worlds" or even better, an encounter determined by two different worlds. This way, "Jean Rhys attempts to explore [...] the theme of the white West Indian's relation to England" (ibid.) or the English's relation with the West Indies. Their meeting is characterised from the start by the struggle of these two worlds which will never converge peacefully in the novel. There is a perpetual confrontation which could only end in the imposition of one world over the other - as happens during the last part of the story- or in the complete destruction of the relationship.

After Antoinette's moving account in the novel, the change in narrative voice of Part Two permits the entrance of the masculine colonialist mind which is representative of the English world. From the very beginning, the husband's contact with the Caribbean landscape and population is established in terms of exoticism. His first description of the place is associated with excess, strangeness and wilderness, all three defining qualities of the exotic:

We pulled up and looked at the hills, the mountains and the blue-green sea. There was a soft warm wind blowing but I understood why the porter had called it a wild place. Not only wild but menacing. Those hills would close on you [...] Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger. (WSS: 41)

The narrator describes the landscape in comparative terms; the supposed excess he perceives is constructed in relation to the “right” landscape, that he knows best, the landscape of England, whose colour and the height of its mountains are sufficient enough. This natural scene is not merely different for the narrator, it is more exaggerated than necessary, and it surpasses the correct qualities and proportions that nature should have. The place is wild for him, but more than wild, it is menacing. The reason for his fear is not probably found in the landscape itself (Antoinette does not seem to be afraid), but in the narrator’s inability to control what surrounds him, as used to be the case in his homeland. The impossibility of domination will guide, however, a desperate wish to recover control, which will be translated in the search for the secret in nature, causing him to feel disempowered.

In another moment of the narration, Antoinette’s husband admits: “It is a beautiful place –wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I’d find myself thinking. ‘What I’ve seen is not nothing – I want what it hides – that is not nothing’” (WSS: 51-52). The narrator finds at this moment a sensuous attachment to the place motivated by a necessity to possess that secret which will permit him to control it; it is apparent that, for him, that which remains unknown, remains also uncontrolled. However, it is not only the mystery that the landscape occults what he is looking for; it is also the supposed secret of Antoinette. In this sense, He creates an identification between both, the female character and the land, almost as if they were the same. This becomes very much clear towards the end of his narration when he says: “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” (WSS: 103).

What the narrator does not imagine is that the conception of such exotic place can belong to the colonised as well, but in this case with respect to the metropolitan territory. Jean Rhys’s introduction of passages as the following could be interpreted as a wish to mock Antoinette’s husband:

She often questioned me about England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made much difference. Her mind was already made up. 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. About England and about Europe. I could not change

them and probably nothing would. Reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality. (WSS: 56)

What he describes in this passage is exactly the same he, as part of the colonising population, does when constructing the Caribbean land and people. The fixed ideas he has about the strangeness and mysteriousness of the colony's nature may come as well from a romantic novel, a sketch, a picture or a song. The difference is that his have been integrated as part of a political practice and are by no means "stray remarks." On the contrary, they form part of a powerful institutionalised discourse, which when interiorised, "nobody could change and probably nothing would", not even practice, as the novel suggests.

There is a very interesting dialogue between Antoinette and her husband in which they discuss how they perceive England and the Caribbean respectively: "‘Is it true’, she said, ‘that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up’" (WSS: 47). To this, the narrator replies: "‘Well,’ I answered annoyed, ‘that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream’" (WSS: 48). It seems that the inversion of exoticism has a subversive power which causes the coloniser to confront the unreasonableness of his own discourse while, at the same time, it brings the two characters closer as participants of the same experience. However, such subversion becomes clearer when it is Christophine the one who elaborates it. Speaking about England, she says:

‘I never see the damn place, how I know? [...] I know what I see with my eyes and I never see it. Besides I ask myself is this place like they tell us? Some say one thing some different, I hear it cold to freeze your bones and they thief your money [...] Why you want to go to this cold thief place? If there is this place at all, I never see it, that is one thing sure.’ (WSS: 67)

In the previous lines, Christophine doubts the existence of England as a place, and her words thus acquire special significance in this context. She constructs herself independently from the colonial power, dissociating herself from the natives which accept the impositions of colonial discourse. Moreover, by doubting England, the centre of colonial power, she negates its very authority.

Exoticism, as has been already commented, also affects the representation of the "other-subject", and where women are concerned, it becomes a much more complex

invention. Antoinette's husband also participates in the exoticisation of women, especially his wife's. In the first description he gives of her, he says: "She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure descent she may be, but they are not English or European either. And when did I begin to notice all this about my wife Antoinette?" (WSS: 39). In tune with his descriptions of the natural landscape, he describes his wife as dissimilar and foreign in relation to what he knows. More importantly, he brings about the issue of her creole origin in a slightly negative way. From the very start of the narration, the husband is going to look for a justification of his English or European superiority over his wife, that is some proof which help him support his colonial stereotypes. This comes with Daniel Cosway's letter, which finally ends up provoking Antoinette's identification with the black population, but "here blackness is given an entirely new meaning" (Olaussen 1993: 75) and is used to transform the ambivalent area of the Creole in one of the extremes of a binary opposition.

After reading the letter and meeting Daniel Cosway, the narrator finds the source of that difference which distances Antoinette from the English or the European, namely, her contaminated blood. The contamination here, as Erwin points out (1989: 148), works as "a metonymy, attaching to Antoinette and her mother by way of the real transgressor, old Cosway", a planter credited for having raped slave women working for him. The narrator compares his wife with Amèlie, the young black housemaid, insinuating that they both could be even related through blood: "For a moment, she looked very much like Amèlie. Perhaps they are related, I thought. It's possible, it's even probable in this damned place" (WSS: 76-77). As is usually the case in Western appreciations of the black female, Antoinette becomes in her husband's mind sexually promiscuous after Cosway's words: "'Your wife know Sandi since long time. Ask her and she tell you. But not everything I think.' He laughed. 'Oh no, not everything. I see them when they think nobody see them. I see her when she...' [...] 'She start with Sandi. They fool you well about that girl'" (WSS: 75). Daniel Cosway suggests that Antoinette has had lovers before marrying while "disgust and rage" start to possess the narrator who, however, had "expected it, been waiting" (WSS: 59) for a news like that.

Still it is the narrator who finally performs the action with which he had incriminated his wife. Feeling desperately attracted to Amèlie, he does not avoid a sexual encounter with her, rewriting old Cosway's story of supposed racial corruption and starting his personal vengeance against Antoinette. Through the sexual domination of this

native girl, the narrator recovers part of the power he felt lost from the beginning of the narrative. His act proves that the licentiousness he attaches to Antoinette responds, in fact, to his own, to a man's who a mere dress left on the floor could make "breathless and savage with desire" (WSS: 55). Although Antoinette confuses this desire with love, in reality, for her husband she is only a sexual object he could never regard as an equal. As he admits: "I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did" (WSS: 55). Her strangeness he is going to punish after reconstituting his own authority. From that moment, he not only will repress her supposed exaggerated sensuality which had once attracted him, but also will destroy her entire being by turning her into a marionette. In part three, however, Antoinette will eventually raise against the husband's oppression and, although in England, she will find the path back to her native land, reverting the fate imposed on her thanks to a reconnection with her own identity.

3. Three Counter-Discursive Strategies and a Critique of Imperialism

The opposition to ruling discourses such as that of colonialism is not maintained through minor isolated practices but through organised non-dominant discourses. To these, many critics have referred to as counter-discourses. According to Stephen Slemon (1987: 11), “counter-discourses [...] inherently situate themselves as ‘other’ to a dominant discourse which by definition attempts to exclude heterogeneity [...]”. The most important feature of such “discursive others” is, therefore, their intention to subvert power, which constitutes, according to Helen Tiffin (1987: 18), an almost inherent feature to the postcolonial. Counter-discourses offer alternative fields organised according to very different strategies, which range from numerous appropriations to new ones, which operate in a dynamic way, that is, as Tiffin admits, they do not aim to occupy the dominant place, but rather to continually transcend their own prejudices (ibid.). With this idea in mind, Tiffin overcomes one of the major critiques to Foucauldian discourse theory, which, according to many, postulated an endless struggle between dominant and dominated practices, the last eventually occupying the place of the first and vice versa.

Tiffin (ibid. 22) cites Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an example of what she calls canonical “counter-discourse”. According to her, this is a strategy in which “one post-colonial writer takes up a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes.” This initial decision permits Rhys to incorporate other counter-discursive methods with the shared intention of dismantling colonial discourse, but with specific purposes each. The construction of an ambivalent protagonist, as commented in chapter 2.2, adds the possibility of negating the basic foundation of imperialist discourse, the binary opposition between coloniser and colonised. The representation of black characters as active and the reversion of exoticism, studied in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 respectively, permits the confrontation of colonial stereotypes with a living reality. But apart from these, there are three central counter-discursive strategies in Rhys’s novel which must be taken into consideration. First, the process through which Antoinette recovers agency; second, the change of narrative perspective; and third the use of language.

3.1 Antoinette's Conquest: A New Treatment of Subjectivity

One of Foucault's more interesting concerns in the relation between subject and power is the notion of resistance. Although his analyses of subjectivity have managed different positions along his career, it could be said that his conception of the subject springs from his theory of discourse. According to this, dominant discourses affect the construction of identity to the extent that the subject becomes only a function of it (Foucault 2008); otherwise said, the subject is no longer an originator but the product of several systems of knowledge. The problem is that in such a design in which the subject is only acted upon, it seems that agency becomes impossible. Does it exist the possibility for the subject to recognise the powers imposed on them and therefore the opportunity to resist them? In a conversation with Gilles Deleuze on "Intellectuals and Power", Foucault seems to respond affirmatively:

But if the fight is directed against power, then all those on whom power is exercised to their detriment, all who find it intolerable, can begin the struggle on their own terrain and on the basis of their proper activity (or passivity). In engaging in a struggle that concerns their own interests, whose objectives they clearly understand and whose methods only they can determine, they enter into a revolutionary process. (Deleuze and Foucault 1977: 216)

Foucault admits in these lines that subjects not only can identify the forces of power which are imposed on them, but can also, in fact, raise in opposition to them entering a "revolutionary process". Therefore, if it is true that identity is constructed only by means of discourse, it is equally true that individuals can transcend its own limitations. Maybe, what happens is that discourse cannot avoid leaving a space that belongs only to the subject, which can finally be either recognised or not. Although not completely according to Cartesian ideology, it is obvious that some possibility of action has to inhere the subject.

Whether the exercise of resistance is done through social and political association or by the subject in isolation is another matter still to be debated (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002: 225). However, although it is a question that Foucault does not specify in his discussion with Deleuze, Jean Rhys does have a clear opinion about it. If she deliberately writes within an organised literary resistance, she creates two of the novel's central characters who symbolise individual agency, Christophine and Antoinette. In the case of the latter, resistance is achieved precisely after a process of re-appropriation of identity, for whose

explanation the concepts of “other” and “othering” are required.¹⁷ These psychoanalytic notions have been used in postcolonial theory to explain the process by means of which citizens in the colony become mere colonial subjects whose identity is provided by a distant colonial centre.

Traditionally, the “other” has been described as “anyone who is separate from oneself” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002: 169) but in the colonial context, it refers more precisely to those subjects who are constructed as separate from the “imperial self”, and therefore, created within the margins of colonial discourse. In other words, “the other is the excluded or ‘mastered’ subject created by the discourse of power” (ibid. 171). Based on this conception, Spivak’s “othering” refers to the means by which colonial subjects are conceived as separate from metropolitan ones. Such a process is inevitably represented in Rhys’s novel; however, according to Spivak herself, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* there is a very particular instance of othering which, transported to the individual level, becomes the only way to oppose the great othering of Empire or, which is the same, to appropriate that small space left for the subject’s resistance.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, identity is presented from the very beginning as a site determined by discursive powers. From her early childhood, Antoinette felt a frustrating lack of belonging; being a “white cockroach” for ones, and a “white nigger” for others, she was separated from the two communities that surrounded her. When speaking to her husband she confesses distraught: ““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. 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”” (WSS: 64). As identification with the ex-slaves and the new settlers is impossible, Antoinette grows progressively afraid of and disillusioned with people, recurring to nature and solitude. She says: “And if the razor grass cut my legs and arms I would think ‘It’s better than people: Black ants or red ones, tall nests swarming with white ants, rain that soaked me to the skin – once I saw a snake. All better than people. / Better. Better, better than people”” (WWS: 16). Loneliness however, rather than allowing her to develop an independent subjectivity, made her more and more confused, increasing her desperation, for in her mind, her much desired sense of identity is found in the possibility

¹⁷ Following Lacan’s distinction, the capital letter “Other” represents the imperial and not the colonised “other”. Still, many critics use to refer to the second with the spelling of the first.

of acceptance within either of the groups. It is because of this that Mr Mason's marriage to Annette implies Antoinette's salvation in many senses:

Yes, she [Annette] would have died, I thought, if she had not met him [Mr Mason]. And for the first time I was grateful and liked him. There are more ways than one of being happy, better perhaps to be peaceful and contented and protected, as I feel now, peaceful for years and long years, and afterwards I may be saved whatever Myra says. (WSS: 21-22)

The protagonist feels Mr Mason has saved them from the state of poverty in which they were; however, it is interesting to wonder why he brought security to the protagonist if his arrival made the confrontation with the black population worse, as Antoinette herself admits: "In some ways it was better before he came though he'd rescued us from poverty and misery. 'Only just in time too'. The black people did not hate us quite so much when we were poor" (WSS: 20). The reason to her feeling protected with Mr Mason's presence might therefore be found in Antoinette's sense of identification with the English community, "[w]e ate English food now, beef and mutton, pies and puddings. / I was glad to be like an English girl but I missed the taste of Christophine's cooking" (WSS: 21). Mr Mason took her out of that dangerous place which everybody marginalised, the place of the "white nigger". However, just in the same way that she cannot avoid missing Christophine's cooking, she cannot negate her own origins and, as in her experience with Tia, Antoinette will be forced to acknowledge the impossibility of total communion with the new settlers too. The truth is that what is actually dangerous is not to live in the place of ambivalence, but rather to make a clear cut between the two worlds (Panizza 2009: 6).

Looking for the same protection and still insecure of her identity, Antoinette arrived to marriage. In the words of her husband, her condition of colonial other will be even more apparent. According to Panizza,

[...] Rochester will, in his confrontation with Antoinette, emphasise the "Western" traits in him and, at the same time, perceive her as his perfect opponent, a specimen of the "other side", not knowing that she also belongs to both. In her he will embody all that he fears, the world he feels threatened by, the feelings and passions that his rational mind will not acknowledge. (2009: 4)

He understands his wife's difference – her attachment to *obeah*, her sensuality, her "blackness" – as being out of his control and, therefore, as a source of potential subversion: "He accusingly implies that she is a sensuous black savage, wild because of her enjoyment of the open air and her familiarity with the island's lakes and mountains,

lustful because of her giving herself to him unrestrainedly” (ibid. 10). His incapacity to understand her, as Panizza admits, “widens the chasm inside her” (ibid.) until he finally destroys the source of such “subversion”, her very identity.

Once he has found the proofs which justify his colonial stereotypes and has recovered control thanks to the use of his “masculine force”, the husband starts to arrange the plans which will permit him to turn his wife into the prototype of the English submissive woman, to turn a devil into an angel in the house. After a conversation with Christophine, he confesses that his intentions are taking Antoinette to the doctors, to which the servant responds “[i]t is in your mind to pretend she is mad. I know it. The doctors say what you tell them to say” (WSS: 96). Apparently, the husband’s wish is to make Antoinette mad in the eyes of everyone, inventing now another motive for his revenge. To do so he needs, however, to deprive her from action and agency in order to turn her into a mere object of which only he is master, into a doll taking advantage of her “marionette quality” (WSS: 90). He will be the masculine coloniser and make of her his colonised object for “she’s mad but mine, mine” (WSS: 99). He will take the sun off her, because “she has the sun in her” (WSS: 95), he will change her name for Bertha, Antoinetta or Marionetta and will finally distance her from the loveliness and the magic of the Caribbean to which she belonged (WSS: 103). In a fragmentary way, this last part of his narration records the words of this man, determined to use his European patriarchal authority against a woman guilty of being different from him. He is resolute to turn her into a ghost: “I did it too, I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness” (WSS: 102).

A ghost is what is left of Antoinette in Part Three of the novel. Her initial emotional account is in these pages a fragmentary speech in which she records faint memories mixed with objective descriptions and conversations with Grace Poole, the woman who looks after her at Thornfield Hall. Antoinette’s confusing ruminations bring to mind madness and mental instability. Although her mind is still capable of maintaining some reason, her confusion after such a long imprisonment is astonishing. In the cold attic of her husband, she has lost her Caribbean warmth and, not having even a mirror, she has lost the connection with herself: “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 [...] Now, they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who

am I?” (WSS: 107). She has seen “Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass” (ibid.) and now she feels that she is no longer that Antoinette, “they” have forbidden her to be. As Panizza says:

The fact that her brother, having come to see her, fails to recognise his sister in the woman he meets in the cold attic, indicates the state of dispossession Antoinette has reached. Nothing is left to help her remember who she is, there is not even a mirror in her room, lest she might see her own image and realise that she is not mad Bertha but sane and healthy Antoinette, not a raving English wife but a joyful Creole girl. (2009: 11)

In this state in which she no longer knows if she is Antoinette or Bertha, if she is “intemperate and unchaste” or the “infamous daughter of an infamous mother” (WSS: 110), she feels a powerful connection with her own past. She remembers her red dress, she “saw it hanging, the colour of fire and sunset. The colour of flamboyant flowers” (WSS: 109) and perceived the scent that came from it, “the smell of vetivert and frangipani, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain” (ibid). With the Caribbean in her mind, she remembered Sandi, the young boy who gave her “the life and death kiss” (WSS: 110) before letting her go, although unhappy. The red dress as a powerful connection with the West Indies anticipates the protagonist’s sudden recovery of her selfhood, which arrives through the third dream. On it, Antoinette goes out of the room in which she was kept after having stolen the keys from Grace Poole. Through the stairs and the hall she recollects the day she first arrived to the house, and she eventually enters a large white and red room. She is so cold that decides to lit some candles, hoping probably that the red colour of the fire could make her more comfortable; feeling instead miserable, she leaves the room and in the hall she finally finds what she most longed for, herself:

I went to the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. 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. I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of the tablecloth and I saw flames shoot up. As I run or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped (WSS: 112)

In “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985), Spivak interestingly analyses this scene in the light of the theme of identity, recurring to the process of othering and the myth of Narcissus. As Panizza admits, Spivak maintains the idea that “it is precisely in the moments when Antoinette sees herself in a mirror that she comes closer to understanding her true identity” (2009: 12). The ghost Antoinette sees

surrounded by a gilt frame in the previous lines is actually her own reflection in a mirror. However, that vision is not a simple one. In Spivak's terms, the reflection corresponds not quite to Antoinette's self but to Antoinette's "Othered self" (1985 a: 250). This other self is the identity that her patriarchal English husband has imposed on her, the ghost he turned her into. When she looks at the looking glass she does not see Antoinette, what she sees is Brontë's Bertha (ibid.).¹⁸ Antoinette is capable of seeing in her image the "woman with streaming hair", someone who is other than herself but still, someone she remembers. Through this process of turning her present self into a separate self, she is capable of separating from it and therefore, of recovering her identity. In Panizza's words:

[W]hat the mirror actually shows her is the objectified "Othered self" from which Antoinette can now separate herself, the self that was imposed on her by Rochester but that never belonged to her. The schizophrenic identity is objectified in the mirror through the image of a mad, ghostly figure, embodying the extremes of aggressive insanity and evanescent fragility which others saw in her but did not define her. (2009: 12)

After she has recovered herself, she unobstructedly goes to the past and freely recovers her experiences.

Then I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it. I saw the grandfather clock and Aunt Cora's patchwork, all colours, I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames. I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver, and the soft green velvet of the moss on the garden wall. I saw my doll's house and the books and the picture of the Miller's Daughter. I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, Qui est là? Qui est là? (WSS: 112)

This return to her past through images signifies the ultimate acceptance of her life as it has been, and consequently, of her identity. Antoinette not only transcends the impositions that had affected her subjectivity, but also ends up accepting her Caribbean self after a whole life of confusion. She has recovered her sense of self, and she sets her husband's house in fire just as the ex-slave population had done with Coulibri, in an attempt to act against an oppression. If the Afro-Caribbean used fire to end colonial tyranny, Antoinette does it against her patriarchal metropolitan husband. Antoinette is

¹⁸ In relation to the process of othering, it could be very interesting to study the interpretation Gilbert and Gubar make in *The Madwoman in the Attic* of Bertha Mason as Jane Eyre's other, which must, nevertheless, be left out here.

free to jump now and return to her Caribbean, but not the black Caribbean, nor to the white, but one that is only hers, that ambivalent space which made her as she is.

If her experience at Thornfield served to reclaim her identity and show her at last who she was, then the final jump towards selfhood takes her to her real homeland, inhabited by her alone but where she can finally be truly herself. After all her impossible attempts to be accepted by two different communities she realises that her strength lies in her uniqueness, in the complexity of her personality [...] (Panizza 2009: 15)

Antoinette's transformation is condensed in the protagonist's imagination; but the prophetic quality of dreams in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well as Antoinette's final words foster ideas about the possibility of materialising it in reality: "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage" (WSS: 112). However, Jean Rhys wanted her novel to have an open ending, and the truth is that the realization of the dream is not even necessary, as the relevance of the change is concerned with the heroine's internal acknowledgement of that space of identity that belongs exclusively to the subject.

3.2 The Madwoman's Account

Helen Tiffin's notion of canonical counter-discourse (1987) is explained in the use of intertextuality, a term that refers to the relation, whether voluntary or inevitable, of a literary piece with other known texts. According to Tiffin, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is fundamentally related with canonical novel *Jane Eyre* through the transposition of certain events, details and, more importantly, characters, with a clear subversive result. The pair intertextuality and subversion though, is connected in a way in Rhys's novel with the treatment of narrative perspective. Charlotte Brontë's story is transmitted through one single point of view, that of a poor young English woman who, after a difficult childhood, arrives as governess to Thornfield Hall. It is through her eyes that readers first meet her beloved Mr Rochester, a tormented man victim of a disastrous past who cannot but correspond sweet Jane's feelings too. However, their love has a great hindrance, Rochester's mad Caribbean wife imprisoned in the attic. Bertha Mason is in Brontë's novel only an obstacle to the realisation of the protagonist's dreams and, therefore, her portrait acquires negative tinges; she becomes the animal-like devil, who cannot even utter words and who violently mutilates the male character in a fire.

Through Rhys's transposition of this character, Antoinette/Bertha becomes the narrator, owner and protagonist of a story. As is usually the case in most first-person narratives, Antoinette's account aims to create a close relationship with the reader, who tends to empathise with what is being told. The unfavourable events of the protagonist's childhood, her solitude, social rejection, and the attacks on her family, confer to the narration a touching tone and produce Antoinette as a victim of such circumstances. As González Escudero admits, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, "this character ceases to be an obstacle to automatically become a victim, and a victim is someone who is considered with benevolence. This way, the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* is turned into an innocent and persecuted character" (2008).¹⁹ At the same time, Rhys is capable of providing her heroine with the humanity that Brontë had negated to her, as a speaking subject and a developed individual with a very complex personality. In accordance to this, the final act of the fire becomes a purifying event which liberates a long-abused individual, ceasing to be attributed to the violence of an animal-like character. There is a second silent character in *Jane Eyre* to whom Rhys gives direct voice, Mr Rochester. His account arrives at a point in which readers already know Antoinette's circumstances, have formed a firm idea about her, and consequently, understand the husband's descriptions of Antoinette as unsympathetic considerations. The lack of any intermediaries in love make of the supposed Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea* an intolerant man and authoritarian husband, responsible for Antoinette's final distress. In Rhys's novel, this character undergoes the opposite process of his first wife: from victim in Jane's eyes to persecutor in his own account.

As a result, the construction of a first-person narrative enables Rhys to turn Antoinette (and Rochester) into an active character, a creator, just in the same way Jane is with respect to her story. At the same time, the transposition of characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides them with great complexity and more testimonies to the events, which had happened to be untold for many years. In this sense, Rhys's novel enables the existence of an enriching dialogue with a text written more than a hundred years before. But intertextuality allows Rhys not only to rewrite a story, but also to provide an interpretation of it, which, respecting Brontë's literary achievements, opens a new critical

¹⁹ Translation mine.

possibility and reveals the injustices of nineteenth-century British mentality as represented in a canonical literary piece.

3.3 “Debased” Varieties: Linguistic Appropriation in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Through imperial expansion, the English language managed to arrive to very different territories and peoples, lived along diverse languages, and evolved into new natural languages and varieties. However, the colonial enterprise never understood linguistic diversity as something enriching or of great value. Instead, it has always been a major imperialist interest to establish control not only through language, but also on language.

The imposition of a fixed or standard variety of metropolitan origin has been a tenor in most European expansionist movements and has led in all cases to indiscriminate marginalization of native languages, pidgins, creoles and diverse varieties. This way, “language [became] the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions such as ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice” (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 7). This postcolonial voice raises against the dominance of the standard variety through two dependent processes: abrogation and appropriation. The first is more properly a political attitude that permits the consecution of the second; at the same time, the second is predominantly a textual tool through which the first can have effect. Abrogation therefore “refers to the rejection by post-colonial writers of a normative concept of ‘correct’ or ‘standard’ English used by certain classes or groups, and of the corresponding concepts of inferior ‘dialects’ or ‘marginal variants’” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002: 5). Although appropriation is a term which exceeds the domain of language, in this context it could be defined as “the process by which the language is taken and made to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience” (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 38), which means that the English language is seized to express the colonies’ differing experience. In some way or other, most postcolonial literary pieces written in English participate in the process of appropriation and through it, authors not only achieve the decentring of the standard variety, but also make their specificity, “the outsider” (ibid. 57), into the heart of empire; two reasons which definitely help define appropriation as a counter-discursive strategy.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the author's most usual technique to make the reader confront Caribbean linguistic alterity through appropriation is code-switching, a term which refers to the process through which a narrator reports in standard English, but moves along the continuum to represent other character's interventions (ibid. 72). Both Antoinette and her husband's accounts are written in standard English, but the two include in their respective narratives transcriptions which reflect the different linguistic varieties, especially those of the ex-slave population. At the very beginning of her account, Antoinette already introduces a phrase in Caribbean English, "she pretty like pretty self" (WSS: 9), which means "she is pretty like prettiness itself". However, this is not translated in the text, adding a first element of strangeness which many readers will have to confront. Apart from direct speech to transcribe African vernacular, Antoinette uses free indirect speech when she records Tia's words:

That's not what she hear, she said. She hear all we poor like beggar. We ate salt fish - no money for fresh fish. That old house so leaky, you run with calabash to catch water when it rain. Plenty white people in Jamaica. Real white people, they got gold money. They didn't look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger. (WSS: 14)

Her husband's narrative follows this same pattern, exemplified at least in his final conversation with Christophine, in Daniel Cosway's letter, and in his dialogue with Amèlie. However, he also includes the transcription of some forms in patois or, as he unsurprisingly calls it, in "debased French patois" (WSS: 39): "'*Doudou, ché cocotte,*' the elderly woman said to Antoinette. I looked at her sharply but she seemed insignificant" (WSS: 43); or "'*Que Komesse!*' Baptiste said. 'I get Christophine'" (WSS: 87). In all these cases, the patois form remains untranslated certainly because the narrator ignores their meaning but also because they have been placed "in the English text [to] signify difference" (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 65). This way, the metropolitan reader will occupy the narrator's place as someone who finds an impossibility in a complete comprehension, motivated by their lack of knowledge about the Caribbean. Something very similar happens with those terms which denote Caribbean reality, such as "mash plantain" (WSS: 61), "*Coralita*" (WSS: 47) or *ajoupa*, a Carib word which denotes a shelter the narrator prefers to call "summer house" (WSS: 52).

The inclusion of linguistic diversity in *Wide Sargasso Sea* certainly contributes to the creation of an accurate representation of the Caribbean multilingual society in which

every group speaks differently and receives the influence of the surrounding others. As a more compromised strategy, the apparition of non-standard forms in a text written in English responds to the purpose of abrogation; that is, it helps to obscure the standard's dominance in the written form. Before this, readers of novels such as Rhys's, which participates in the process of appropriation, are obliged to confront alterity directly in the act of reading. This way, the post-colonial, which has been left at the "margins of power, of authenticity, and even of reality itself" (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 77), is placed at the imperial centre, and consequently, linguistic appropriation becomes an obvious counter-discursive strategy.

4. Conclusions

This essay started by analysing the existing relationship between European methods of literary criticism and postcolonial theory with the purpose of questioning the controversies that had defined for a long time such a connection. It followed a declaration to pursue a combined method that could seize those notions specifically created for the analysis of the colonial and postcolonial contexts, while choosing those others of European theory which served a common purpose. From the second group came the notion of discourse which, as formulated by Michel Foucault, was appropriated by several postcolonial critics who saw in the mechanisms of power that the French philosopher had described a similar behaviour with those at the heart of the imperial process. It was through such an observation that Edward Said put forward a theory of colonial discourse, among whose main theses was the idea that literary texts were essential contributors to the perpetuation of imperialist discourse. However, it soon became apparent that, as instruments of power, texts could not only support dominant authority but also constitute an independent, although not principal, power whose main objective was to subvert the former.

As a text of resistance, *Wide Sargasso Sea* seems to incorporate several strategies with which the most central assumptions of colonial discourse are easily dismantled and constructs, at the same time, a straightforward representation of imperialist ideology, achieved through the portrayal of metropolitan characters. By means of the representation of an ambivalent place in society, Rhys's novel has proved to be capable of questioning a foundational assumption of colonial discourse which, based on a binary opposition, postulates the division of the social space into two opposed poles, namely, that of the dispossessed colonised and that of the ruling coloniser. The Creole population as represented in the novel does not adjust to any such categories; however, their situation is never adequately recognised by a discourse which can only project hybridity in the dominated pole. This reveals that the ambivalent space is conceived as a destabilizing force which negates one of the most important assumptions of colonial discourse.

Foucault's idea of rejection provided a frame for the understanding of a second procedure within colonial discourse which *Wide Sargasso Sea* has specially proved to subvert. This is concerned with the discrimination of alterity, which leads in the imperialist process to situating the colonised population in a position of deficiency. It is

this conception that permits the objectification of the colonised subject, understanding it as lacking voice, culture and even agency. Contrary to this, Rhys portrays the colonised subject as active when she represents the ex-slave population as participants in a new discourse of resistance or an independent epistemology, when she builds a main character who recovers an identity lost in the hands of patriarchal imperialism, or when she endows her heroine with a story and a voice through an interesting process of intertextuality with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, unveiling colonial prejudice in the novel. All these strategies serve the purpose of articulating a powerful counter-discourse by explicitly subverting the dominant one and simultaneously provide a theory of the construction of subjectivity. *Wide Sargasso Sea* certainly opens up the possibility of conceiving identity as resistant to dominant discursive forces, and therefore constructs agency as inherent to the subject.

The subversive power of the novel also depends on the process of appropriation, which has revealed itself quite productive in the construction of counter-discourse. The use of English in the novel does not constitute a process of appropriation in the strict sense of the term, as the author was originally a native speaker of English. However, it has a destabilising effect because it permits the transplantation of the language into a new context and thus allows the entrance of alterity into the corpus of English literary works through the codification in the text of Caribbean varieties and languages. But the concept of appropriation is pertinent in a second sense too, with respect to the methodology of post-colonial studies. The use of originally European concepts and critical methods can be also regarded as a form of appropriation in which European theory is adapted to a new context, including, at the same time, a subversive intention which enables a critique of imperialism through its own methods. It seems that in this academic process resides the possibility of a self-criticism that allows Europe to withdraw from the position of the tyrant in its relation with the rest of the world. In this sense, both the literary text and the critical narratives unfolding its complexity reveal themselves as compromised.

Through the course of this dissertation *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been mainly looked into taking into consideration its potential for subversion, with special attention being paid to the textual dimension. Nevertheless, it could be interesting to study Rhys's novel from an external perspective: The analysis of the novel in the European and Caribbean literary canons, respectively, could reveal the success or failure in the institutional recognition of the counter-discourse contained within it, something which is certainly

necessary for understanding the range of textual power in literature and its surrounding conditionings.

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