The Politics of Gender, Class, and Race in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*

*Rula B. Qawas* *

**ABSTRACT**

The issues of gender, class, and race informed modern social as well as literary discourse and along with two world wars provide a backdrop and a context for Rhys’s fictive narratives. In writing *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys exposes and indict the operations of colonialism and decolonization. She looks closely at the lives of Creole women, both black and white, to determine the politics that account for their economic and psychological alienation. She illustrates the political construction and limits of the categories of race and gender and the overlapping oppressions that occur within them. She also examines the construction of the “proper subject,” the new white English settlers who begin building a new empire on the back of the old one by positing themselves as both innocent and entitled. By all accounts, *Wide Sargasso Sea* serves as a model and a guide for investigating the crisscross oppressions and intersections of race, gender, and class which are three visible intermeshing forces that result in and depend on the colonial vision of alienation and othering.

**Keywords:** Politics of Race, Gender, and Class; Colonialism, alienation, Othering; Proper Subject; Decolonization.

The emergence of Jean Rhys as a major literary discovery of the twentieth century, after many years of obscurity, is now almost common academic knowledge. Although Rhys had published four novels between 1911 and 1939, it was not until the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in 1966, that the prominence predicted forty years earlier by Ford Madox Ford in a preface to her collection of short stories, *The Left Bank*, was realized. Her writing itself, focusing as it does on male exploitation of women, on women’s resistance and collusion with that exploitation, on marginalized, exiled figures from the Third World, on the power politics of colonialism, and on class antagonisms and conflicts, makes her a writer much in tune with contemporary critical concerns in the literary academy. Since the publication in 1978 of Louis James’s and in 1979 of Thomas Staley’s full-length studies, critical attention to Rhys’s oeuvre has not only grown in volume but has undergone a shift from general overviews to more theoretically inflected, generally feminist approaches, and, increasingly, particularly in the West Indies, to assertion of Rhys’s status as a West Indian writer attentive to the social and cultural complexities of the former British colonies in the Caribbean and the alienation experienced by the expatriate former colonial in the “mother land.”

Current literary criticism, encouraged by the insight gained from poststructuralism, particularly feminist and postcolonial theory, has promoted a challenging investigation of Rhys’s work and resulted in a profusion of criticism in the last few years. Interesting work has been done in recent years, by critics in the United States, around the relation of Rhys’s novels to their modernist literary contemporaries (Bender; Gardiner); the culturally and socially induced “schizophrenia” of the female subject in the novels (Abel); the power politics of gender in novel after novel (Miles; Dash); the sociopolitical implications of Rhys’s modernist techniques (Emery); the linguistic aporias and excesses staged around the mother’s loss and retextualization (Kloepfer), and the “mirroring” of mothering (Scharfman). At the same time, largely, though not exclusively, in the West Indies, important “re-visions” of Rhys’s novels--most often, for obvious reasons, *Wide Sargasso Sea*--have placed them in a historical and cultural context too often elided in “first-world” studies. These “re-visions” examine the ways in which Rhys’s work explores the anomalous position of the white West Indian woman (Nunez-Harrell)
and her position in the “half-slave” and “half-free”
culture of the early nineteenth-century Caribbean
(Bruner; Lai), exposes the interrelations of domination
and submission between England and its colonies, male
and female, and black and white (Tiffin; Smilowitz;
Ramchand; Naipaul), and makes a critique of the
ting” imperialist plot of Jane Eyre with Wide Sargasso Sea (Spivak).
In fact, it is only of late that critics have begun to
acknowledge and appreciate the complex multipositional
status of Rhys’s work, moving away from earlier one-
dimensional readings of her work that concentrated on its
autobiographical and “confessional” elements and her
presentations of women as passive victims or underdogs.
More recent critics such as Teresa O’Connor (1986),
Benita Parry (1987), Mary Lou Emery (1990), Coral
Raiskin (1996), Elaine Savory (1998), Delia Caparoso
Konzett (2002), Erica L. Johnson (2003), and Anne B.
Simpson (2005) are now taking into account both Rhys’s
cultural origins and her understanding of an identity
marked by ethnicity, gender, class, displacement, and
religion and are beginning to give credit to many
previously neglected aspects of her work, especially the
intersecting colonial framework of race and gender that
Rhys foregrounds in what has come to be known as her
West Indian Fiction: Wide Sargasso Sea, Voyage in the
Dark, and many stories from her last short story
collections, Tigers are Better Looking and Sleep it off
Lady. Because colonial and postcolonial theory (and in
this I not only include but stress the importance of
postcolonial fiction) focuses on the in-between and often
indeterminate status of the Creole and the colonized, not
only the history but the complicated economic, social,
and psychological legacy of colonialism have become an
important focus of inquiry and investigation, resulting in
“new ways of seeing the world, of constituting identity in
the previously occluded, marginalized, or in-between
social spaces” (Emery Jean Rhys at “World’s End” 35).
As Helen Carr notes, this more recent change in critical
response has been brought about by Caribbean thinkers
who “rather than evoking notions of a ‘Rhys woman’” in
their criticism instead “recognized that those fictions
were exploring a troubled and divided subjectivity at a
very particular historical and social nexus” (14).
Understandably so, critics and readers have
difficulties in classifying Rhys’s work as that of a
European modernist, feminist, expatriate, or, more
recently, postcolonial and West Indian writer. Rhys’s
status as foreigner and literary outsider has played a
major role in the reception of her work as well as in her
fiction. A white West Indian who spent most of her life in
Great Britain and other European countries, Rhys never
really belonged anywhere, nor did she claim membership
of any group of writers, not even that of the Anglo-Saxon
expatriate women writers and artists in Paris with whom
she mingled in the 1920s. For Rhys the problems of
situating herself as a speaking subject are multiplied:
within which cultural discourse does she belong, either at
home in the Caribbean or in England, the mother
country? Perhaps, it has been Rhys’s fate to be regarded
as an outsider in both cultures. Antoinette in Wide Sargasso Sea speaks for Rhys’s personal crisis of identity
when she asks the question, “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?” (102).
As a poor, white Creole woman from the West Indies,
Rhys understood the precarious position of the outsider:
the restraints, insecurity, and threat that lack of status,
class, and family can inflect on a woman and yet the
scope and liberty such a position could provide a writer.
This outsider position also entailed for her an obligation
to write, which for her became a way to “earn death”
(Smile, Please 133). Just as she felt an obligation to
Bertha Mason—an obligation to “write her a life”—she
also had to write about other hidden lives, and in the
telling foregrounded the seams of their social and
psychological construction. Certainly, Rhys is able to
fissure Eurocentric discourses, to appropriate subaltern
viewpoints, and to insert a narrative that defines the
Creole subject space.
It is no wonder then that the work of Jean Rhys,
whose female protagonists so clearly exemplify the
postcolonial social and psychological state of alienation,
have now become an important site of literary and critical
investigation. It is also no wonder that Wide Sargasso
Sea, a novel that takes place in the Caribbean soon after
the Emancipation Act of 1833 and gives Charlotte
Bronte’s “mad woman in the attic” an identity and a
background, “a story,” is the work that has received the
most recent and comprehensive critical attention. Rhys
redeems the lost Antoinette from Bronte’s “horrible
Bertha” and in the telling redeems and explains all the
“Antoinette’s” from history and from literary history as
well. For in the writing of Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys
enacts a moment of intertextuality between the
nineteenth-century novel of *Jane Eyre* and her own. At the same time, in telling the story of the “subaltern” of Thornfield, she not only challenges *Jane Eyre*, which conceals its use of the Creole Bertha Mason as the Other (mad, sexual, and foreign) who must be reviled and killed in order for Jane Eyre to marry Rochester and become the “proper” wife and nineteenth-century individual, but she also exposes the colonial project *Jane Eyre* hides and reinscribes.

The themes and formal strategies in *Wide Sargasso Sea* help us understand the way subjects come to experience themselves through the discourses that shape them. The polyphonic nature of *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s narrative style and its stories illuminate a complicated social, political, and psychological situation that is dependent on the structural framework of intersecting gender, race, and class oppressions. This narrative structure, which follows Antoinette’s (Bertha) Mason story from Jamaica to Britain, fleeing the burning colonial estate of her childhood, which represented slavery to so many others, to setting herself fire to Thornfield Hall, the English estate that enslaved her, is organized through a layering of discourses which often narrates the same event from slightly different perspectives. These discourses interrupt, extend, or challenge each other, enacting what Gayatri Spivak calls, in “Imperialism and Sexual Difference,” a “performative deconstruction,” one which always points to “another troping” (234).

The issues of gender, class, and race informed modern social as well as literary discourse and along with two world wars provide a backdrop and a context for Rhys’s fictive narratives. The violence of the colonies came home to Europe in the form of two world wars and through what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call “the war of the words,” words which waged war through legal, psychoanalytical, and literary discourse in which suffrage, sexuality, and subjectivity were all at stake. In Rhys’s case, her last novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* sets up, explores, and exposes at least a partial history and pattern of the social and psychological engineering of women’s subjectivity through English law, the legal and economic rights of women and blacks, colonialism and neocolonialism, which is a sinister form of oppression that is very much alive. This novel serves as a model and a guide for investigating the crisscross oppressions and intersections of race, gender, and class which are three visible intermeshing forces that result in and depend on the colonial vision of alienation and othering.

Because Rhys writes about women, alienated not only by gender and class operations but colonial ones as well, her work provides an important addition to the modernist literary canon not necessarily because it addresses issues outside the English literary purview but because it also addresses them differently and from a unique vantage point, a vantage point that is associated with her West Indian or Creole Caribbean consciousness which makes her see her English culture and Englishness critically and feel its domination and imperialist sensibilities as “arbitrary, unjust, and foreign” (Gardiner “Exhilaration of Exile” 134) By tying modernist alienation to the effects and prevailing operations of colonialism, Rhys challenges male modernism’s repression of history by suggesting that the existential alienation male modernists experience is a form of alienation that women and disenfranchised “foreigners” have already experienced and are still experiencing through political and linguistic exclusion.

A “typical” modernist in terms of her experiments with form which uses fragmentation and psychological rendering to produce new subjective possibilities, Rhys adds an important voice to modernism, a voice that displays a postmodern consciousness by not only politicizing subjectivity but also by historicizing alienation and recognizing difference in its effects. Like other women writers of the time such as Virginia Woolf, May Sinclair, Dorothy Richardson and others, Rhys writes about alienation, inertia, and ennui, a time in which “the center cannot hold”; however, unlike many of her male modernist contemporaries, Rhys has no illusions about the “center” or a mythical time of wholeness in history, literature, or subjectivity. Although the young narrator at the beginning of *Wide Sargasso Sea* parenthetically remarks “(My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed—all belonged to the past)” (17), she shows us through the course of the narrative, which is disrupted by dreams, songs, unspoken thought, letters, parenthetical repetitions, and italicized remarks, that colonial history was not a time of wholeness or progress for those on either side of the equation. *Wide Sargasso Sea* suggests that wholeness was always a fiction, that whenever one examines the history of Western expansion and takes a synchronic look at the forces that sustain it, one sees the operations of colonialism in progress, the structure of imperialism violently imposed through a myriad of complex and changing discourses and institutions: slavery, marriage, the law, religion, and
literature.

Instead of a wholeness that has fallen apart, Rhys shows us instead a pattern or structure of imperialism that has held even as the discursive practices by which it is maintained shift, proliferate, and adapt. By exploring the relationship and affiliative connections among subjectivity, colonialism, and capitalism, she produces and reinscribes gender and race as fundamental divisive agents in the operations of imperialism, delineates the debilitating effects of alienation and displacement, and shows how the old colonial system is nourished and maintained through a new but equally hegemonic discourse of imperialism in the modern world, even as the old one declines. Clearly, Rhys is preoccupied with a kind of colonialism whose power is maintained through its continual construction of a “proper” subject—a subject whose power rests on the production of another type of subject, an alienated or exiled one, and their increasing dependence on each other.

Although Wide Sargasso Sea is the story of a young, white Creole woman, it is set against the background of slavery and within the colonial race relations of the West Indies that her life is structured and interpellated. It is no accident that Antoinette, the young narrator of part I, begins her story and the novel with an introduction to the race relations on the island: “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did” (17). Or that near the novel’s end, with the narrator now removed to the top floor of an estate in England, she calls out to her would-be childhood black friend: “Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, you frightened? . . . I called ‘Tia!’ and jumped and woke” (189).

The politics of race and gender, the way they interact, crisscross, and overlap are central to Wide Sargasso Sea. The multiple operations and their effects—subtle and overt, violent and hidden—that engineer and structure these politics are foregrounded throughout the novel and account for Antoinette’s cultural history and psychology, her own internalized racism as well as her passivity. Yet this same background and mixed cultural milieu have also endowed Antoinette with a kind of insight into colonial politics and the subjects it produces. Despite Antoinette’s background of privilege as the daughter of a plantocraat, it is the former slave Christophine, who cared for her mother and her, whom she most consistently trusts and loves.

Although Antoinette’s education and conditioning have taught her that it is her destiny to marry, to attach herself in love to the security and safety that being married to a white English man will ensure, she can never understand, trust, or accept the English version of truth or justice: “‘Justice . . . I’ve heard that word. It’s a cold word. I tried it out . . . I wrote it down. I wrote it down several times and always it looked like a damn cold lie to me. There is no justice’” (146). Despite her inability to have control over her life and despite her passivity in the face of injustice and injury for herself and the Blacks around her, Antoinette, in the last pages of the novel, finds the courage to put an end to her own enslavement as the incarcerated tenant of Thornfield Hall and as the prisoner of Bronte’s “cardboard house” (181), the “other” to Bronte’s Bertha. In a moment that should be read as solidarity and respect for a friend she could never have in life, separated as they were by the discourses and effects of colonialism and racism, Antoinette calls Tia’s name in order to gather strength and courage. Aligning herself with the many who resisted slavery, not through flight or passive resistance, techniques she has used previously to no avail, Antoinette performs the most dramatic act of resistance of any of Rhys’s heroines. Like the resisting ex-slaves at the opening pages of the novel who burn down the master’s estate, which is the symbol of white exploitation and colonialism in Jamaica, Antoinette too sets fire to Rochester’s estate, which is a symbol of white male domination and exploitation in England, with its economic basis in the oppressions of colonialism, before she leaps to her death, choosing suicide over incarceration, an act of self-affirmation.

Situated between the white colonial values and privileges of both her slave-owning Creole heritage and her new English husband and her black caretakers, Antoinette’s position in the novel works strategically to articulate the power relationships between black and white and male and female, the crisscross relations, the overlapping operations. In her position as both oppressor and oppressed, Antoinette articulates the boundaries and limits of race and gender in the discourse of colonialism as she negotiates her power and her powerlessness in this ever-shifting equation.

Antoinette’s outsider perspective has made her aware of the precariousness of the categories of whiteness (“But we were not in their ranks”) (17). Her position as female, unable to own property or to ensure her own physical safety, has put her in another subcategory of whiteness as well. The male of her race can still reap the benefits of
slavery and even the property and status it engenders after slavery is over, as Mason and Rochester have done through their marriages to white Creole women. Her youth and femaleness allow her to talk and be comforted by Christophine and even to have a temporary friend in Tia. However, her whiteness limits and circumscribes the potential of these relationships. Christophine cannot save Antoinette from her husband’s hostility and abuse of power. Being black and female restrict Christophine’s power to save Antoinette, but Antoinette’s own prejudices and her racialized perception of people keep her from listening to Christophine’s important advice: “but how can she know the best thing for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate old negro woman” (112). Christophine’s gender and prejudice limit her power to intercede; Antoinette’s gender and prejudice limit her power to act in her own best interest.

In the exchange with Tia at the pool, the political arbitrariness of the condition of blackness is highlighted and circumscribed by the economic disparity on which they rest. It is interesting that the fight with Tia revolves around Antoinette’s three shiny pennies which drop from her dress pocket one day: “They shone like gold in the sun and Tia stared” (24). When Tia bets Antoinette that she cannot turn a somersault in the water, Antoinette replies: “bet you all the money I can” (24). Although Antoinette thinks she has won the bet after one choking somersault, Tia disagrees and takes the money. It is Antoinette who replies to this insult with one of her own, tapping into the racist rhetoric that is available to her and shapes her young sense of selfhood: “Keep them then, you cheating nigger . . . I can get more if I want to” (24). The categories of black and white may exceed and exist outside this category of “nigger” but “nigger” is divested of its racial attributes. It is unclear why Tia declares “black nigger better than white nigger.” Perhaps it is racial pride, or perhaps it is the acknowledgement that the black people still have a community on which to rely.

The understanding of the connection of whiteness to money and the power and luxury it engenders after slavery and even the property and status it engenders after slavery is over, as Mason and Rochester have done through their marriages to white Creole women. Her youth and femaleness allow her to talk and be comforted by Christophine and even to have a temporary friend in Tia. However, her whiteness limits and circumscribes the potential of these relationships. Christophine cannot save Antoinette from her husband’s hostility and abuse of power. Being black and female restrict Christophine’s power to save Antoinette, but Antoinette’s own prejudices and her racialized perception of people keep her from listening to Christophine’s important advice: “but how can she know the best thing for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate old negro woman” (112). Christophine’s gender and prejudice limit her power to intercede; Antoinette’s gender and prejudice limit her power to act in her own best interest.

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The technique of doubling and mirror images is one that Rhys uses often in this novel and in her earlier novels as well. In this case, Tia rejects any association with many of the whites on the island are rich because of the free labor from blacks extracted through slavery) that seals her fate and aligns her at the end of the novel with Tia. Just as Tia sheds light on the way whiteness is constructed, she simultaneously makes an even more powerful observation: a “nigger” is someone without money, whom rich people do not associate with. Now that the “old time white people” have been divested of their community and their money, they are also “niggers” (24). The categories of black and white may exceed and exist outside this category of “nigger” but “nigger” is divested of its racial attributes. It is unclear why Tia declares “black nigger better than white nigger.” Perhaps it is racial pride, or perhaps it is the acknowledgement that the black people still have a community on which to rely.

The alienation that Antoinette experiences because of her exclusion from every group and community is a key point in the novel and seems to bear out Tia’s words. As a Euro-Creole woman, Antoinette is caught in a net of non-being, a situation that Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell describes in her analysis of the “Paradoxes of Belonging”; that is Nunez-Harrell argues that while Jamaica is indeed Antoinette’s country, she remains a social outcast, a “white cockroach,” accepted by neither the landed and moneyed whites, nor by the recently emancipated black community. The constructed and thereby precarious category of “whiteness,” with its supposedly inherent attributes of superiority, is rendered useless without the attendant powers of money and community to keep it guarded and intact.

As Coulibri is being burned behind her, Antoinette looks to Tia as her last hope, a familiar face, connected with the land and the life she has known. Her outsider status will once again be reinforced, however, as Tia responds with violence that is around her, a physical manifestation of the verbal insults that had previously been their weapons:

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. (45)
Antoinette by throwing the stone. Her action reiterates and echoes her words to Antoinette earlier in the novel: “Old time white people nothing but white nigger now” (24). The parallel situation of the two girls highlights their differences as well as their similarities. If the girls themselves cannot, the reader can recognize the legacy of racism and its operations that will follow them, sometimes to empower and brutalize, sometimes to disempower and brutalize.

Tia may have rejected any association with Antoinette, but the reader as well as Antoinette will continue to see them connected through the violence at Coulibri. Just like Antoinette, Tia’s life and identity have been constructed through the racial discourse of colonialism. Their interactions illuminate both the effects of the operations of colonialism and the racist rhetoric and violence which continue to reshape and reinscribe it.

Although it is Antoinette and Rochester who occupy the space of the first-person narrators throughout the course of the novel, it is Christophine, Antoinette’s nurse and most trusted adult, who serves as the most trustworthy narrator in the book. It is Christophine who articulates most clearly for the reader and for the characters themselves (though they often choose not to listen) the issues that are at the heart of the past and present colonial “troubles” that frame and influence the personal story of the marriage of Antoinette and Rochester, as well as the political story of the island (and the West Indies) in transition.

Rhys is careful to posit Christophine as an outsider who has the respect of the Jamaican Black community but not their history (20-21). Surely, Christophine’s outsider status further disrupts and complicates the Black community of Jamaica. Black, but not from Jamaica, Christophine’s situation mirrors Annette’s who is white but finds no community in the white Jamaican society. Through these examples Rhys suggests that exclusion is not just a function of race categories but of place, nationality and statehood as well. Perhaps because of her own outsider status in both the black and white communities, Christophine’s insight reflects her understanding, not only of the effects of slavery and colonization, but of the underlying structure of imperialism as well.

Christophine’s words resonate not only in this novel but throughout all of Rhys’s work, as she reflects the cunning and insidious nature of an evolving imperial tradition. It is Christophine who signals to the reader, as well as to Antoinette, that the changing colonial powers brought on by the Emancipation Act will not necessarily bring an end to the racial injustice that has preceded it:

No more slavery! She had to laugh! ‘These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people’s feet. New ones worse than old ones--more cunning, that’s all.’ (26)

The power of the “Letter of the Law,” with its ability to change and adapt to empower those who write it, ensures that this new form of domination is indeed “more cunning.” As power becomes mediated through the “Letter of the Law,” those it serves are hidden along with its ideological operations.

Christophine knows that she cannot survive or communicate in the English symbolic “Letter of the Law” world. With the last words she speaks in the novel, she suggests to the reader, if not to Rochester himself, who can only fathom one truth and one way of expressing it, that there are other ways of understanding and negotiating life, parallel universes that are important and powerful but that can also be denied or eclipsed by a violently and temporarily imposed power such as the British symbolic: “Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know” (161).

We have seen glimpses of the power of the “other things” that Christophine knows through her obeah practices and the respect and awe she inspires among the Blacks on the island. The very fact that Christophine represents an “other,” outside of Antoinette and the author’s power of representation and understanding, informs the novel’s themes of “otherness” and its respect for other possibilities. The success of Rhys’s novel as a postmodern work seems to lie in its suggestion that there are other subjective possibilities outside of those interpellated by the European master text. Benita Parry has observed that “Christophine’s defiance is not enacted in a small and circumscribed space appropriated with the lines of [the] dominant code, but is a stance from which she delivers a frontal assault against antagonists, and as such constitutes a counter-discourse” (38). However, as Veronica Gregg observes, it is “right to suggest that the subaltern can speak. But it is also true that Christophine is constructed according to the stereotypes of black promiscuity and the black mammy who privileges the white child over her own. In short, there are several points in the novel at which Christophine is put back in
her ‘place’” (42-43). Both of these points are relevant to what Rhys is attempting in the novel in her depiction and representation of black subjectivity.

Christophine asserts herself as an articulate antagonist of patriarchal, settler, and imperialist law. The fact that she, as a resistant, and unhesitatingly blunt character and the source of the most powerful counter-discourse in the novel, cannot be contained in the colonial discourse, despite Antoinette’s treatment of her as “black mammy” or Rochester and Daniel’s portrayal of her as dangerous and manipulative, illustrates the limits of the ideological constructs of such categories. Rochester cannot respond to Christophine’s logic and sense of justice with an equally compelling one of his own. Instead, Rochester can only silence Christophine by threatening to bring in the police and have her imprisoned (something we know through Mr. Fraser’s letter to Rochester has happened to Christophine before).

It is not just Rochester, with the backing up of the law and his religion behind him who tries to silence Christophine, however. Even Antoinette, through whom we have come to know and trust Christophine, falls back on her racist discourse and the institutions that have circumscribed their relationship when she cannot accept Christophine’s insights or power. She lashes out at Christophine at two significant times in the novel. When Antoinette goes to visit her now incarcerated mother on her own, she sees her mother, pacing the floor, talking incoherently, and forced to drink rum by the “fat black man” (134) and his wife who are now Annette’s caretakers. When Antoinette sees the man kiss her mother, she runs away. When she returns home crying, Christophine asks: “What you want to go up there for?” (134). Antoinette’s reply not only signifies the direct transference of her hate and blame of the black man who is abusing her mother to Christophine but the ready racist dialogue that is within her reach and control: “You shut up devil, damned black devil from Hell” (134).

Later when Antoinette visits Christophine and asks her for something to make her husband love her again, Christophine tries to dissuade her. She encourages her to take her money and go away to Martinique. Antoinette, however, says that if she runs away, she would go to England, not Martinique. Her reaction to Christophine’s prophetic analysis of England seems to point to the influence that her husband has had on her (111-12). Antoinette cannot trust Christophine on many things, but not on the subject of England. That is the one dream that Antoinette cannot let go of. It is the one that has been produced since childhood through countless books, pictures, and stories.

When Christophine leaves the novel, Antoinette, as well as the reader, is left without the aid of interpretation or counter-discourse. With this obstacle removed, Rochester is free to carry out his unquestioned and unexamined plans without interference. When Christophine leaves the text, Antoinette’s removal to the attic of Thornfield comes quickly. Antoinette becomes the “marionette” that Rochester has been trying to make her and that Christophine has been trying to save her from. Only at the end of the novel, when Antoinette calls out once again for Christophine’s support, do we see Antoinette taking control of the narrative—with the symbolic if not the literal help of Christophine—and writing the end of her own story. It is significant that Antoinette calls to Christophine to help her escape the “cardboard house” (Christophine was right; Antoinette still has not found the England that has been represented to her).

Christophine occupies a position of outsider for Antoinette and Rochester which calls into question and shows the limits of their racist discourse. Her post-emancipation position as a “free” woman is called into question by the power of the new English colonists with their “Letter of the Law,” underscored by Rochester’s threat of the law that he uses to finally curtail Christophine’s freedom—freedom of speech as well as physical liberty. Rochester cannot refute Christophine’s logic when she tries to persuade him to give Antoinette some of her money back and let her go on her way. He cannot refute Christophine’s accusations, but just as Antoinette finds refuge in the racist discourse that empowers her, Rochester finds an outlet for his jealousy and rage by threatening to use the law. Christophine is cut out of the novel as a character, but her words of counter-discourse continue to suggest that there is an excess to the symbolic logic that cannot be contained or withdrawn: “Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know” (161). Christophine and the source of wisdom she inhabits are never fully explained or examined in the novel. As Gayatri Spivak asserts:

*Wide Sargasso Sea* marks with uncanny clarity the limits of its own discourse in Christophine. . . .

She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white
Creole rather than the native. No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self. ("Three Women’s Texts" 271-72)

As a woman and a “foreigner” (she too is from Martinique), Christophine serves to expose the limits of gender and race in the black community, just as Antoinette’s gender and “foreignness” have shown the limits of her power of whiteness. Christophine’s outsider status provides her with an outsider’s view of marriage and family as well. When Antoinette says that she cannot leave Rochester as Christophine advises her too, Antoinette replies: “But I cannot go. He is my husband after all!” (109). Christophine’s reply illustrates her understanding of the politics of gender as a subcategory of race and the institution of marriage that, like slavery or the “Letter of the Law,” ensures its legacy:

She spat over her shoulder. ‘All women, all colours, nothing but fools. Three children I have. One living in this world, each one a different father, but no husband, I thank my God. I keep my money. I don’t give it to no worthless man.’ (109-10)

Christophine seems to suggest that she can maintain her independence--both financially and psychologically--outside the confines of marriage. Her words highlight the economic security and even enslavement that Antoinette and her mother have attained through marriage and underscore the difference in their situations. Her philosophy on marriage does not speak for the entire black race, however. She emphasizes that it is “all women, all colors” who are “nothing but fools.” She asserts that, contrary to the lie that has been perpetrated, marriage is not the place from which to find the security and safety that Antoinette and her mother have sought within its borders. If it is only through marriage that Antoinette, and her mother before her, believe that they can find security and safety, it is outside of marriage that Christophine maintains her freedom.

Antoinette’s fate, like her mother’s before her, adds credence to Christophine’s words but also underscores the differences in their situations. Antoinette and her mother are not safe outside of marriage either. The law does not work alone; the discourses of morality and legitimacy also confine them, determine how others will treat them, and define the way they see themselves. Christophine seems to be somehow unaffected by these discourses, not because she embodies the “stereotypes of black promiscuity,” as Gregg suggests (43), but because she seems to understand the politics involved in the representation and deployment of “morality.” Just as it is Christophine who has pointed the subtle connections between the old laws of slavery and the new “Letter of the Law,” she also indict the institution of marriage as another legal institution designed to protect the male of either race. Her insights are once again prophetic as both Antoinette’s and her mother’s marriages prove to be not only inadequate in providing security and safety but the very avenue through which they are enslaved. Christophine understands that institutions which support unequal power can be used through subtle manipulation by real people with malicious results. When Antoinette insists that she has nowhere to go if she leaves Rochester, Christophine is incensed and indignant at the inequities of the legal and social arrangement of Antoinette’s marriage and at the ideology behind the law (110).

Christophine, as a character and a counter-discourse to the English master text, serves an important function in the novel on a number of levels. Doubled with Antoinette, Rochester, and the other Blacks on the island, she helps to point out the “worlding of the third world,” how colonial operations work to ensure an underclass in terms of race and gender. She also exhibits the indeterminate and fragile condition of her own state of independence. Just as she earlier pointed out the similarity between the old and new form of slavery--“same thing, more cunning, that’s all”--she also insists on her rights as a free woman and suggests to Rochester that he cannot harm her here in this Windward Island. In what seems like a reversal of her earlier speech, she tells Rochester: “’No police here. . . . No chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is free country and I am free woman’” (160). Rochester immediately replies by reading the end of the letter he has received from Mr. Fraser, the Spanish Town Magistrate: “If she lives near you and gets up to any of her nonsense let him know at once. He’ll send a couple of policemen up to your place and she won’t get off lightly this time” (143). Christophine’s words have come true: “These new one’s got Letter of the Law.”

Christophine must negotiate what she knows is the limitations to her freedom in terms of the new English law and the new economic reality. Presumably,
Christophine is able to maintain her economic independence by the small house Antoinette’s mother gave her and her place in the community as a woman with obeah powers. However, both her place and her occupation will remain at the mercy of the white English powers that still surround her.

The operations of gender also inform Wide Sargasso Sea. Available economic choices and possibilities are always delimited by gender and thus, like the colonial operations of race, are always political. Because every other operation–colonialism, economics, racism–is further broken down and figured differently in terms of male and female, it is often difficult to distinguish how gender operations work through discourse. Although Rhys foregrounds the economic disparity between men and women, she also makes clear that this disparity is often preceded by important legal and psychological operations that make it difficult for women to survive economically, socially, or psychologically alone or with other women. This is the situation for Antoinette and her mother at the beginning of Wide Sargasso Sea. The alienation that Annette experiences from the other white women on the island is noted early in the book: “The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother . . . .” (17). It is the alienation from the other whites and women on the island that sets Annette, and therefore Antoinette, apart. It is also clear, however, that the effects of this separation were not so apparent or dire when Antoinette’s father was alive: “(My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed–all belonged to the past)” (17).

The fact that Antoinette associates her father’s presence, not with love and affection, but with community and safety is significant. Later we will see her transfer this sense of security to her English husband. The association of love with security and safety, and of security with money, is one that persists in Wide Sargasso Sea. Antoinette sees the connection clearly in the history of her mother at Coulibri. Annette, though still land rich, has no access to visitors or control over the running of their large estate until she marries Mr. Mason. Only then does Antoinette see their lives change for the better. They now have clothes, food, and company. Most importantly, she sees her mother happy again, dancing and laughing (29).

Annette’s happiness is short-lived, however. Mason ignores Annette’s pleas to get away from Coulibri and with it the insight and understanding she has of the black/white relations on the island. However, although Annette has brought the value of her property to the marriage and although Mr. Mason has much more property and money besides, she is still poor. Unable to convince Mr. Mason of the impending doom and unable to control her own money, or the circumstances of their lives, Annette is driven mad by the death of her son in the fire, deserted once again by family and friends, and, foreshadowing the fate of her daughter, left to the care of paid employees where she is abused, abandoned, and dies.

Annette’s loneliness and alienation are central to her feelings of powerlessness and emotional coldness, but as Antoinette’s insights suggest, they are also intricately connected to poverty or the threat of poverty. When Rochester prompts Antoinette to tell him about her mother, he says: “I know that after your father died, she was very lonely and unhappy.” Antoinette quickly replies: “And very poor . . . Don’t forget that. For five years. And isn’t it long to live” (130). Annette’s only resource for pulling herself out of poverty is her beauty and the illusion of wealth. When the new Luttrells come to visit, the first thing Antoinette notices are their beauty and their clothes: “They were very beautiful I thought and they wore such beautiful clothes that I looked away down at the flagstones and when they laughed--the gentleman laughed the loudest--I ran into the house, into my bedroom” (25).

Annette, understanding that her only way out of poverty and loneliness is to attract and align herself with this crowd, rushes to adorn herself and her children with the markers of beauty and wealth. She has people mend and sew clothes for her and her children. Antoinette, who seems to be very naïve about the trappings of the European world of clothes and beauty, shows she has understood at least some of her mother’s teachings by the end of the novel when she has another dress made for her just like the one Rochester likes. Later in the attic room in England, she questions Grace Poole about her red dress which has become commensurate with her identity and the West Indies. Without her red dress, Antoinette thinks she will not be recognized. She says: “‘If I’d been wearing that [my red dress] he’d [Richard] have known me’” (184).6

More importantly, Antoinette fears she will not recognize herself. Her fear of losing the dress is associated with her fear of losing her identity. The dress seems to root Antoinette to a past, a present, and decisive action (186-87). It is Antoinette’s red dress that associates her self with her West Indian past, reflecting back to her
the moment she liked the reflection she saw in the eyes of Sandi, another childhood friend, suitor, and protector. The dress also works metonymically to bring her back to Christophine and Tia, who give her the strength and courage to set fire to her prison.

Clearly, the politics of race and gender have created economically powerless and dependent subject positions for the Blacks and women in the West Indies which continue to limit and circumscribe their lives as the old colonial system adapts to the Emancipation Act of 1833. The powerlessness they feel is evident in their alienated social circumstances but it has also left psychological wounds, which exhibit a “psychology of colonialism,” illustrated perhaps most powerfully in the character of Antoinette. But this condition cannot exist alone; it is dependent on and inscribed against an equally powerful “psychology of imperialism” which is produced through another dependent but economically powerful “proper subject” position of superiority. The economic situation which Rhys suggests is at the root of most inequalities illustrates the interdependence of both of these subject positions. The old British planter class could not attain its financial power without the free black labor violently procured and lawfully supported through the institution of slavery. The natives and Blacks left on the island after the passage of the Emancipation Act find it difficult to live without the food and board provided by the institution of slavery or the small wages provided after its abolishment.

Along with the Emancipation Act is an explicit promise to the white colonials of financial compensation for their loss of free labor to run their grand plantation as well as a promise of freedom for the blacks on the island who have been so badly used. The white planters, cut off from the legal sanction of slavery and the economic rewards it provided them, are moving back to England, closing ranks for protection, or ending their lives (17). Loss of a legal base for a system that was so profitable for the English colonists means death and destruction for many of the planter class. The wealth and property do not return to the native population nor to those who have worked it, however. Instead, we soon learn that there is a new breed of English “emperors,” untainted by the now disgraceful sin of slavery, who have come to enforce the new law and inherit the property.

Mr. Mason is the first example of this new “centipede” who, while distancing himself from the old planter class before him, maintains the old centipede’s sense of entitlement, strengthened by the convictions of his innocence. Mr. Mason also reveals his ignorance, however, when he disregards his wife’s warnings and refuses to leave Coulibri or to talk about his business affairs in front of his black help. Although Mr. Mason abhors the institution of slavery, his own representation of the Blacks as lazy children illustrates that the racism behind the institution of slavery has not disappeared. “Live here most of your life and know nothing about the people. . . . They are children--they wouldn’t hurt a fly” (35).

The Masons soon make room for Rochester who comes to the West Indies to marry Antoinette and secure his fortune. Rochester and the men who precede and follow him do not get their wealth and power by violence alone, a simple taking and using by brutal force what does not belong to them. Their right to invade and interfere must be carefully constructed just as others must be taught or forced to accommodate them. This right, which for them becomes a need, is based on a sense of entitlement and an equally strong sense of victimhood.

In Rochester this case is clearly developed. He transfers his feelings of resentment, feeling cheated and belittled by his father and brother, to Antoinette and the islanders. As Rochester, a Europhiliac, who has been kept unnamed throughout the entire text of Wide Sargasso Sea, begins his narrative, he reveals his feelings about his West Indian encounter by symbolizing them in terms of a battle: “So it was all over, the advance and retreat, the doubts and hesitations” (65). This change in tone and metaphors signals a different culture and subjectivity than that posited by Antoinette in the first section of the book. Although Antoinette chronicles the difficult times of her childhood, she does so with no sense of entitlement or bitterness. Rochester’s first words, invoking battle and war, also exhibit a cynicism and anger that Antoinette does not possess. Right away the reader is aware of a marked clash of cultures.

This clash of cultures is foregrounded throughout the novel and initially revealed through the imaginary letters Rochester writes to his father. This letter writing begins almost immediately (though it is never clear if Rochester ever sends the letters) and shows the context in which Rochester understands his life and his role in the West Indies. Almost immediately, we learn that Rochester is the unfavored and unendowed younger son, sent to the West Indies against his will to seek his fortune: “The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. . . . I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love. No begging
letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son” (70). As he tells of his arrival and marriage, Rochester portrays himself as a passive pawn carrying out orders: “It had been arranged that we would leave Spanish Town immediately after the ceremony and spend some weeks in one of the Windward Islands. . . . I agreed. As I had agreed to everything else” (66). Only once does Rochester suggest that he might have done something wrong, but he soon blames that too on his father: “I have sold my soul [to the devil] or you have sold it” (70).

Rochester’s feelings of resentment and bitterness toward his father and brother soon shift to Antoinette, on whom he can discharge his hatred and desire for revenge, and to all the alien forces that he thinks threaten to dissolve his fragile sense of self in this foreign culture. Soon, he is not the victim of his father’s plan but rather it is Antoinette who has deceived him: “I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks” (70); “A short youth mine was” (84). While the proper relationship between English self and ethnic Other is set out, so too are the implications of the destructive colonial/imperial relation laid bare. It may be, as Wide Sargasso Sea provocatively implies, that Antoinette is the living image of Rochester’s shame and guilt as well as his xenophobia that he can neither destroy nor forget. As a daughter of a former slave-owning plantation owner, she is a living reminder of the sordid origins of Rochester’s wealth; as an erotic and beautiful woman raised on a tropical island, she is associated with a warm sensuality and eroticism that both tempt and torment Rochester; as a Creole, the racial purity of her blood and the threat of “contamination” and bastardizing the English race will always remain suspect in Rochester’s eyes and pose a danger to his English cultural identity and to his English community at home. Hence, Rochester not only “wields imperial force against his wife” and denies her full humanity (122), but he also “dislodges not only his wife, but all the people” whom “she trusted . . . and I did not” (Sargasso 89), to cite Anne B. Simpson and Erica L. Johnson, respectively.

When Rochester moves into Mr. Mason’s room at Granbois, the place they have gone for their honeymoon, he also symbolically takes over his position as master as well. As he puts on the crown of frangipani that he finds in his room, Antoinette prophetically declares: “You look like a king, an emperor” (73). Although Rochester rejects Antoinette’s depiction of him as an emperor--“God forbid,” he says as he takes off the wreath--he nevertheless evolves in the course of the novel to fill that position (73). He begins by proving himself a skillful tactician not only by renaming Antoinette Bertha, thus claiming for himself the primacy of birthing and defining himself as a midwife in possession of the creation of language and the word made flesh, but also by waiting until the right moment to act, storing up ammunition to use in the battle ahead: “She trusted them and I did not. But I could hardly say so. Not yet” (89); and later, “sometimes a sidelong look or a sly knowing glance disturbed me, but it was never for long. ‘Not now,’ I would think. ‘Not yet’” (90).

Although Rochester begins to appreciate the beauty of Granbois, he still experiences it as an ‘alien’ place, a place to be conquered and controlled: “It was 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 see is nothing--I want what it hides--that is not nothing’” (87). But Rochester cannot see what it “hides” because the alternative culture that Granbois represents cannot be contained or represented in the European culture and master “text” that he carries in his head and represents. Unable to understand or control the environment around him which soon becomes consonant with his wife, Rochester decides that if he cannot have this place neither can his wife, and no one will ever have her. When Christophine begs Rochester near the end of the novel to leave Antoinette and return home without her, he refuses, in “rage and jealousy”: “But she will have no lover, for I don’t want her and she’ll see no other. . . . She’s mad but mine, mine” (165-66).

The letter from Daniel gives Rochester the authority to decide his wife is mad and to take action against her: “You have been shamefully deceived by the Mason family. . . . Money is good but no money can pay for a crazy wife in your bed” (95-99). Daniel’s obviously self-serving letter could not impress Rochester if he had not been ready for it. Rochester cannot live with the “blanks in [his] mind that cannot be filled up” (76) and though the letter is filled with misconceptions and lies that both Christophine and Antoinette try to dispel, Rochester understands battle in these terms and shows he is ready.

Armed with the evidence he needs and seems to have been waiting for, Rochester has only one large battle left to fight. Antoinette is no match for him. Not understanding the nature of the battle, she also misjudges
the ammunition she needs. Christophine understands, however, and tries to dissuade Antoinette from using an obeah potion to win back his love” “That is not for béké. Bad, bad trouble come when béké meddle with that”” (112). The obeah potion does not work; instead, it prompts Rochester to think he has been tricked and poisoned. He uses this as more evidence to exact his revenge on Antoinette and get rid of Christophine. In Rochester’s last confrontation with Christophine, the British subject faces the West Indian one, who tries one last time to make sense of this narrative in terms they can both understand:

Tell the truth now. She don’t come to your house in this place England they tell me about, she don’t come to your beautiful house to beg you to marry with her. No, it’s you come all the long way to her house--it’s you beg her to marry. (158)

But Rochester cannot “tell the truth.” Instead, he relies on the privileges that his imperial status as a male British subject has handed to him: ownership and the law, a powerful ally that is often indistinguishable from God. But first he must transfer his guilt to Christophine to retain his innocence, just as he invokes his entitlement: “You are to blame for all that has happened here, so don’t come back. . . . I assure you that [this house] belongs to me now. You’ll go, or I’ll get the men to put you out” (159). The law serves to protect Rochester’s claim of ownership and to criminalize Christophine’s powers of obeah. When he threatens her with prison, Rochester chooses imperial power over truth and Christophine knows she has lost the battle--””Read and write I don’t know””--if not the war--””other things I know”” (161).

Although Rochester has “won” this important battle, the war games that he symbolized in the opening lines of his narrative continue until the end of the book as he competes with an imaginary enemy he has created, Antoinette: “We’ll see who hates best. But first, first I will destroy your hatred. Now. My hate is colder, stronger, and you’ll have no hate to warm yourself. You will have nothing” (170). Rochester tries to rob Antoinette of what he cannot have, yet he also understands that she possesses something that he cannot have: “Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it. . . . ” (172). His last words about Antoinette tie both of them back into Bronte’s novel as he admits his part in constructing this legend which he knows to be a lie.

Very soon she’ll join all the others who know the secret and will not tell it. Or cannot. Or . . . they can be recognized. White faces, dazed eyes, aimless gestures, high-pitched laughter. The way they walk and talk and scream or try to kill (themselves or you) if you laugh back at them. Yes, they’ve got to be watched. For the time comes when they try to kill, then disappear. But others are waiting to take their places, it’s a long, long line. She’s one of them. I too can wait--for the day when she is only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie. . . . (172)

In Wide Sargasso Sea, the patterns of discrimination and exclusion are seen in the operations of colonialism that continue to alienate Blacks and women from systems of power. This lack of power translates most directly into an economic disparity that continues to reinscribe them as incompetent and “improper.” Similarly, the very same operations make it possible for British men to continue benefiting from and reinscribing the colonial structure which posits them as “proper” subjects. Their access to the land, money, and the law continues to ensure that they will succeed in a system that necessitates others to fail. As Gregg states: “The West Indian novel insists that the imperial tradition . . . depends for its existence on the reconstitution of others as creatures of European will and a belief in Europe’s right of appropriation” (106). The “imperial tradition” hides itself, however, through the operations of colonialism and decolonization. In writing Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys exposes and indicts the operations of colonialism and decolonization. She looks closely at the lives of the Creole women, both black and white, to determine the politics that account for their economic and psychological alienation. She illustrates the political construction and limits of the categories of race and gender and the overlapping oppressions that occur within them. She also examines the construction of the “proper subject,” the new white English settlers who begin building a new empire on the back of the old one by positing themselves as both
innocent and entitled. Readers of Wide Sargasso Sea are able to glimpse the complex issues and insurmountable obstacles that face Rhys’s characters, if not always the solution. Although her characters are unable to change the material and social circumstances of their lives, Wide Sargasso Sea shows an awareness of the politics involved in the making of their circumstances, even an awareness of the heroine’s (Antoinette’s) complicity at times.

Wide Sargasso Sea is the most rebellious of Rhys’s counter-discourses as it is politically charged both in terms of the power politics of gender and the power politics of class, race, and colonialism. It is a story of personal and historical fragmentation and racial dispossession, a narrative infused with racial hatred, lost whiteness, and the colonial legacy of racism. In her final novel, Rhys demonstrates her growing understanding of the intermeshing or interlocking issues of gender, class, and race that affect her characters who are confronted by a mix of possibilities and limitations. She comes to terms not only with displacement and alienation but also with “an increasingly expanded verbalization of their unsettling experience” (Konzett 145). In her last novel, she, in the words of Ann B. Simpson, “makes a claim that must be heard, that cannot be ignored” (137). Rhys is able to speak at last in a rich voice whose multi-layered verbalizations and plentiful words are formed in the deeper center, the fertile realm of dreams, of the unconscious, of the womb. Her speaking, subversive voice manifests the desire to become purged once and for all of a “psychology of colonialism,” of the dark spaces of fear, alienation, economic bondage, captivity, gendering and engendering, and inequality of power and racism.

NOTES

1. In “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” Spivak suggests that through the repeated use of mirror imagery, Rhys finally forces Antoinette to “see her self as her Other, Bronte’s Bertha” (269).
2. Lucy Wilson rejects the interpretation of this ending as triumphant: “Antoinette is not a slave; her own passivity brings her to England and leaves her with no options except death.” Wilson claims that although Antoinette “identif[i]es with black West Indians, [her] destiny more closely parallel[s] the fate of the Caribs,” who were “virtually exterminated” (442).
3. The conclusion of the novel is read by some critics as an expression of Antoinette’s ultimate victimization by Rochester and the imperialist discourse he deploys (Spivak “Three Women’s Texts”), or as an expression of liberation through her union with the black community (Erwin), or as a fulfillment of “the traditional slave wish for wings with which to ‘fly’ home” (Emery 1990 57), and as a resolution of her conflicted identifications and loyalties and as her commitment to indigenous as opposed to British culture (Drake).
4. In The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon directly addresses this phenomenon when he states that “in the colonies the economic structure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” (40).
5. Both Selma James and Nancy Leigh identify Antoinette’s relationship with Tia as fundamental to Antoinette’s sense of identity. James maintains that “divided from Tia, [Antoinette] is divided from herself” (64). Reunited at the end through Antoinette’s dream she reasserts her identity through her childhood friend who “embodies her personal history and her social history as a West Indian” (72). Leigh states that “losing Tia’s friendship is part of this sense of loss and disorientation” (275). Although her identification with Tia may be “irrational,” she claims that Antoinette’s dream allows her to “re-connect with her past . . . and, most important, she reconnects with two of her mirrors: Tia and her own mother” (276). Faizal Forrester reads this scene as a “shattering of mirrors” which reveals “Antoinette’s failure to efface the ‘native,’ Tia, and step forth as the ‘real Caliban’” (33).
6. According to Elaine Fido, “Antoinette’s red dress is a powerful symbol in her imprisonment, as a memory of living fully, and a possibility of sanity and happiness” (8). Similarly, Sandra Drake connects Antoinette’s red dress to a continuous struggle for survival, which she describes as “flame”: “the color in which Antoinette thought to inscribe her name,” the “color of the dress that confirms her individual identity for Antoinette,” and “the color of the flamboyant tree” which, if buried under, lifts up the soul when it flowers (100).
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