Integration and Segregation in Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys

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The sins of the fathers, Hester said, are visited upon the children unto the third or fourth generation . . . a myth don't get tangled up in myths.
(Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*)

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Choosing a literary setting for her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966),[2] Jean Rhys has avoided dealing with a political approach of the problem of segregation in the English speaking world of the West-Indies. The author consistently claimed to be a conservative although her novels depict the life of the underdog, the exploited women, the misfit islanders who cannot adapt to the mainstream. In fact she refused the political debate because it could not have accounted for the depth of the crisis the individual must face when he cannot fit in the expected pattern. Thus segregation and integration are experienced on a deep ontological level. The very identity of the heroes, heroines, narrators and perhaps readers is at stake.

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2. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).

However, *Wide Sargasso Sea* reconciles history and fiction. The political background is all the more precisely drawn as it seems to belong to the past. The characters appear first as puppets in a political show, manipulated by forces that they are too weak to influence. But the attention focuses on the characters whose place in the general pattern is challenged by the complexity of the social organization. Thus, they are endowed with an original depth which corresponds to the specificity of their culture. The characters and the country are described in similar terms that underline the fatality of their destiny, and just as nature submits the island to destruction, society sacrifices the individual to the system, and the author condemns her characters to literary tradition.

As a matter of fact, Jean Rhys takes up the novel *Jane Eyre* not to transform the outlines but, using traditional fiction, to give a voice to the culture that was totally muted by Victorian domination. This novel represents the integration in the literary field of the traditional secondary character usually the victim of segregation.

The book starts with an allusion to trouble coming for the white people of Jamaica: the planters have to face the aftermath of the Emancipation Act passed in 1833 which deprives them of their free workforce. At a time of fierce competition, they are often driven to utter poverty. Although the British government has promised them compensation, they cannot afford to wait as long as they are meant to. A whole generation of slave-owners is thus disappearing. Their way of life, first described by the narrator who is presented as their heiress, seems easy, careless, decadent, but on the whole rather benevolent. The old Mr Cosway led the life of a carefree planter who accepted to provide for his half-caste children while indulging in his love for a younger wife and his passion for drink. No allusion to bad treatment is ever made; Antoinette even feels shocked when her husband suggests that slaves may have been massacred; some of the servants remain faithful, while others just move away.

But this self-complacent point of view is challenged by a few comments from Daniel, a former slave, who still resents the past and the white domination. Mr Cosway, who may be pictured as generous by some or as shamefully immoral by the white ladies, may also be perceived as a hateful slave-owner who takes advantage of young women belonging to him and who buys a clear conscience by giving them some money to bring up their children. The children born from these unlawful unions bear into the present and the future remembrance of things past. To the moral decadence of Cosway corresponds an economic decline: he already faced financial difficulties before the Emancipation Act made worse his careless

management, and before his giving away presents to his bastards. "Some old customs are better dead and buried" (25) and so is Mr Cosway, according to the modern white society of Jamaica.

If Cosway is morally objectionable to Victorian ladies who blame him for his lust, so is he to the new English planters who reject slavery and mismanagement. It is difficult to know which is worse. Officially, the moral accusation comes first but it often seems to hide the economic judgement. Jamaica at the time was he scene of an opposition between the old timers and the new immigrants who came to make money, not to share the easy life. They imported with them the British way of life and customs too rigid to adapt. The laxity of the old-time doctors, for instance, is opposed to the rigidity of the new men who instantly appeal to the police when anything goes wrong.

> 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. (22-3)

The description of the new power conveys more tangible threats than the mere word "slavery." A whole system seems to have been devised to compel the black population to submission, whatever the importance of the crime. Double-standards clearly rule social relationships: the husband of the heroine, a modern Englishman, is allowed to sin with his servant as long as he sends her away immediately, while he condemns his wife for her longing for love, and her father as a bad model.

The new generation does not act more morally than the former slave-owners. The Victorian society is denounced as a simple code of appearances and words, hiding what seems to be the inevitable relations between the powerful and the powerless; the rich and the poor; men and women; Whites and Blacks. All those who do not belong to the ruling group are debased as mere puppets, deprived of their rights and reason. Poor girls are made to sell themselves to rich masters, wives are legally forced to give up their wealth to their husbands, Blacks are considered as either children or drunken Negroes. A total lack of understanding, therefore of prudence, leads to open conflicts, which might have been avoided in a more careful system. Power becomes necessary to punish those who claim their rights, be they Blacks who refuse the threat of a new workforce imported from the East-Indies, or wives who cannot stand being considered so badly.

The Creoles try to conciliate domination with understanding: Mr Mason is blamed for talking openly about East-Indian coolies in front of his black servant. The Creole family feels the threat of a riot, whereas Mr Mason will only realize it too late. The alliance between impoverished Creoles and rich English planters, or poor Englishmen and rich heiresses, can only bring destruction since the English refuse to listen to those who know the country. Their feeling of superiority leads them to a complete rejection of other customs made clear in the open contrast between French easiness and British rigidity. Besides, the patois is described as debased French rather than as a natural adaptation to a different reality. British superiority does not adapt, it rules. "Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (56). The social relationships may be summed up in terms of cultural segregation. Those who, like the heroine Antoinette, make an effort towards integration soon feel they lose the real meaning of life as when, eating English food to be a good English girl, she misses the taste of her nurse's food.

But the new English masters do not realize that, refusing to share the power with the French or the Creoles, they point out the weakness of the white society which can no longer rely on a racial justification of its dominance, since cultural, social, and financial distinctions overcome racial coherence. The favorite phrase used by the Blacks to express their contempt is clearly a way to deny all justifications of racism: you can be a "black Englishman" if you betray your black brothers, but, worse of all, you become a "white nigger" if you no longer belong to the white upper-class.

So facing the decadent white colonists, the black population vindicates its own system of standards and values. Colour no longer corresponds to one's skin but to one's wealth and way of life; the old opposition between black evil and white goodness no longer threatens their identity.

> 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. (21)

What they resent is not so much domination as a certain lack of privacy. Segregation seems more tolerable than mock integration because it does not reach any sensitive level of the personality; it only implies social behaviours to which they must submit without compromising their integrity. However hard the white domination may have been, it has been considered as a malevolent necessity to be borne till an opportunity for revolt should arise.

That is what the last generation of Creoles like Antoinette have failed to understand. Antoinette has believed in the friendship of Tia who has been forced to play with her: "We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her" (38). But when the natives set fire to the estate, Tia throws a stone at Antoinette, thus breaking the mirror; for the first time, the image is perceived as distorted and the heroine loses her innocence; it will be definitely spoilt on her wedding day: "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" (38). Suffering now belongs to the white girl, the little black girl has fought for her independence, however painful this may have been.

Violence no longer pent-up in the colonial relationships crops up as soon as the dominating class weakens, though this does not involve the whole population. Some of the servants remain faithful because they do not resent a fairly easy relationship. Antoinette, like her parents, can be generous and understanding; besides, she is willing to share her money with those who work for her. Like her mother, she does not count. So the first division within the black community is between the local population and the servants of the family, remains of the old slave-planter relationships. But the natives of the island may claim their rights to the land, they are afraid of losing their jobs to East-Indian coolies. Jean Rhys does allude rapidly but very precisely to the social unrest that ruined the peace of the islands for quite a time; this is a modern form of social disruption, when employers deny their workers the right to control their jobs and to demand a decent salary.

Again, economic reasons overtake racial distinctions. Daniel, the black character who has studied both the Bible and people, draws a clear line between the hateful failures and the loving successful half-castes. Various shades of skin correspond to various degrees of integration among the half-castes. The lighter you look, the better. "Because he prosper he is two-faced, he won't speak against white people" (103). It is difficult to know which comes first as the text presents the resentful man as both ugly and disgusting, while his light counterpart is both handsome and pleasant. Moral connotations must be determined by social conditions.

Even among the Blacks, shades reveal mental and social distinctions. For instance, Christophine, the central black character, is blacker than other women and she is the only one endowed with a strong personality and a real independence. "Her songs were not like Jamaican songs, and she was not like the other women. She was much blacker-blue-black with a thin face and straight features

. . . No other negro woman wore black, or tied her handkerchief Martinique fashion" (18).

The Black society suffers from the same divisions as the white group. Christophine physically looks different but she also acts and thinks differently. Her dress hints at another fashion coming from the French island. And at the time, as the English husband admits, Saint-Pierre rivals Spanish Town as unpleasantly as Paris rivals London. Above all Christophine's language is different; she even masters several languages and can thus be in contact with all the groups present on the island because she can understand everything and can communicate.

She stands as an imposing figure, dressed up as for a ceremony, to be respected by everybody. Her knowledge of obeah makes her a real authority to be dreaded. But just like the planters, she exacts obedience; she does not gain it through love and so she is perpetually exposed to desertion. However, she is able to perceive the complexity of all relationships and to accept that Blacks and Whites may be equal and very much alike. The French West-Indies where she comes from seem to have escaped the "apartheid" that plagues Jamaica.

Christophine is not just a character, she takes part in the structuring of the novel. She stresses the links between scenes that would otherwise appear isolated and she underlines the process of destruction engendered by society and history. As an outsider with a different culture and more freedom, she can be trusted by the various characters, the narrators and the reader, to point out the real meaning of creation and all that would otherwise remain untold. "It was like that, I thought. It was like that. But better to say nothing" (126). Christophine is aware of the cultural conflicts and of the influence of place upon character. She warns the husband of the danger to curb a Creole girl to a cold empty life against her nature; she denounces the economic exploitation of an innocent girl; she refuses the notion of fatality and thus gives a moral and political scope to the novel: "Yes, that didn't just happen. I meant it" (127).

But Christophine's power is restricted to that of a clever observer. As she does not belong to the island, nor to the English culture, she cannot influence the heroine's fate. Antoinette refuses to flee to Martinique, she wants to know England. So finally the country and the culture that rules it are more powerful than lucidity. Even though Blacks and Whites, French and English, English and Creoles fight for the ownership of the land, they all fall victims to the enchantment of this land: "she belongs to this island," as syntax points out.

People belong to a specific island and those who live in Jamaica are not the same as those who live on the smaller islands. There is even a real antagonism

and scorn between them, as the husband discovers as soon as he arrives. Place can turn against man and play an active part in the development of the plot. Jamaica is fairly urban and modern; it is a trade center open to British culture, whereas the island has remained untouched in spite of the efforts of the planters to establish estates. First the colonial pattern appears through a network of roads and estates. The British colonies are famous for being rationally and efficiently criss-crossed. The estates often bear the names of British figures or owners — Nelson's Rest — but a few of them celebrate the local beauty and wild-life — Coulibri Estate — if the owner is less rigid — a Creole. They all correspond to the economic partition of the country made to turn out profits for the planters. Allusions are made to the sugar-cane plantations that bring wealth, to the natural boundaries of rivers that underline the natural unity and fertility of each property. Each estate can boast an English-like construction where the family reigns, and that is passed on from generation to generation. Coulibri was given to the mother as a wedding present along with Christophine and Granbois becomes part of Antoinette's dowry.

But these houses that are supposed to fly the colours of British refinement are soon perceived as mere imitations, in shabby repair. "At the top a badly cut, coarse grained lawn and at the end of the lawn a shabby white house" (60). The Creoles are proud of their properties but the Englishman only sees the flaws in them; he feels more impressed by the mountains and the forests. So there is no real understanding as to what is to represent power and beauty. The house that was built to impress now hints at decadence and weakness. It cannot last; just like the old generation of planters, it is condemned to ruin and destruction but the natural threat makes it clear that it will not be replaced by another building. Nature will outgrow any trace of civilization. If necessary, the local population will help by setting fire to the house, thus purifying the land from the encroachment of white civilization, to deny history. When the husband gets lost in the forest, he discovers an old paved road but the natives refuse to admit its existence, and whenever he tries to understand, he faces total silence.

In fact, parts of the estate have always remained out of the reach of agriculture. Thus, the young heroine finds out places that she had never seen before, beyond the most remote signs of civilization, as if even in more prosperous times, the land was too big for complete colonisation: "I went to parts of Coulibri that I had not seen, where there was no road, no path, no track" (24). So, even those who best know the place always have something new to explore, some virgin territory out of human reach, where they may lose themselves.

Besides, human husbandry has been seriously challenged with the end of slavery, as if one sin disappeared along with the other: "All Coulibri had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush. No more slavery — why should anybody work? This never saddened me. I did not remember the place when it was prosperous" (17). This is worse than just neglect. Wilderness is the very opposite of civilization: it suggests that rules no longer apply, that nature overcomes nurture. Where the girl can admire wild beauty, older people, whose tastes have been trained in better times, would be shocked. The symbol of the garden alludes to the British cultural desire to give a pattern to nature, and to the garden in the Bible "the tree of life grew there but it had gone wild" (16). So this is the garden after the fall. The decaying process has started and nothing can stop it. Destiny belongs to a natural cycle of growth leading to recurrent destruction — by the hurricanes, for instance. Man is segregated from the divine garden, condemned to find his way in the wilderness and in torments.

The wilderness is described as luxuriant and colourful and as a real invitation to sin, to forget one's soul in exuberance, just as the hero can forget himself in lust for his wife. The woman is identified with a flower, snaky but fragile, sweet but dangerous. The native Creole reconciles the lively power of the sun with the lust for an exuberant life and the deadly forces of the night; the wish for a silent secret. "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" (141).

The tantalizing secret sums up the very meaning of existence. The passionless Englishman perceives that reason cannot provide him with a satisfactory answer to his questions. He chooses social integration, to abide by the wishes of his family who arranged his marriage for money's sake, because he has guessed that the alternative implies total segregation. As Christophine clearly puts it, béké (i.e. white people) cannot stand the power of magic. The Blacks are immune to it, whereas Creoles may suffer from unexpected reactions. Antoinette cannot be cured by Christophine's drug because she is too much under the influence of her husband's lies. She embodies the conflicts between two cultures, otherwise present in the island, but also between two interpretations of life, two religions, so to speak.

Logically, her embarrassing position leads to segregation since the others perceive her as a threat either to the black ownership of the land and its secret or to the English claim to colonize and tame it. The Blacks consider her as a parasite, a "white cockroach," or a "white centipede" to be crushed, while the

husband, more sensitive to her beauty, threatens to smash her as he smashes flowers. To him, who is the real outsider, she belongs to the island, and, by imposing his will on her, he can state his domination over the land. He compares himself to the hurricane that threatens the island. His pride makes him forget his own limitations and he considers himself as a sort of god who must be respected by all. He is afraid of gossips, of scandal, of being laughed at. He cannot compromise with any suggestion of weakness and will run away from the danger that threatened him as soon as he arrived. His fever left him only at the end of three weeks, and, whenever he tramples the orchids, he feels the weakness again, as if he was punished for his sacrilege. According to the heroine, the place is sacred to the sun, so any attack has a religious significance and his emotions are clearly associated with madness.

So because he cannot become part of this false paradise, the hero has to depart and hide his failure: he condemns his *alter ego* to silence and segregation. Because he cannot share the passion, because he cannot understand the secret, he closes her up in an English attic where she will be reduced to despair and oblivion, to the traditional fate of women who challenge social conventions. Comparing himself to the hurricane, the hero meditates what he calls his revenge; segregation is a passionate decision, a confession of relative helplessness, the only attempt at self-protection that he can conjure up.

The luxuriant and mysterious background of the West-Indies turns into a cardboard setting that sums up the aridity of Victorian England. Colours have disappeared except for the fire which is the last remains of West-Indian experience; nature is only spotted once on the sly. The abrupt contrast between the last part of the book and the previous chapters underlines the atmosphere of nightmare and questions the notion of reality. The author strikingly emphasizes her attempt at completing the vision offered by Bronte in *Jane Eyre*. What was described in detail becomes unreal and reduced to a mere outline, whereas all that was left untold is now given full attention.

Wide Sargasso Sea represents the integration in the literary field of the history of madness as well as of the history of the West-Indian secondary character. Although no main character really bears the same name as in *Jane Eyre*, the relationship is obvious. The use, by the nameless husband, of nicknames to call his wife suggests that there is a strong similarity between mad Bertha and Antoinette. But this is a subtle allusion; the heroine revolts at being imposed a false and reductive identity; the author does not express herself directly but the importance and influence of names can be repeatedly underlined. Thus, the reader is left to elaborate his own interpretation: he may choose to think

that this is the same heroine born again, or he may decide that this is a different person, if only because the name given by the first narrator and by all the other characters should be considered as her real identity. But he may also understand that identity can be subjected to so powerful manipulations, or can be presented in so very different lights, that it becomes impossible to state any truth about any personality, or, for that matter, about any literary character.

The husband/narrator himself, before making use of this ambiguity, perceives that different lights can change his perception of the landscape and of the people. He also knows that his own feelings as much as his own training determine his judgement. The adjective "alien" is used to suggest that, in the end, all differences are perceived negatively. The Victorian hero rejects all forms of originality however seductive; he protects the integrity of his soul and the strength of the system to which he belongs.

The husband only exists in the novel through his part as a husband and as a second self of the heroine. He is married "for better and for worse," a phrase that he mocks at the beginning of his narration. The better is the financial and social position which he secures by gaining his wife's fortune. The worse is to be tied to a lunatic wife. Possession is a recurrent theme: "She is mad, but *mine*, *mine*" (136). Nothing can now separate them: he is too sensitive to gossip and conventions. Just like Oedipus or Lear who must lose their sight before they can find the wisdom that lies deep in themselves, he will have to go far from the mad crowd and become blind to understand and be purified. He would give his eyes never to have seen Sodom: the puritan judgement passed on the passionate experience is crucial for it contains the whole meaning of social behaviour, the meaning of being human. The hero is the victim of outside circumstances: he appears as the crucible in which influences mix and operate. But the text itself yields to the same forces as the hero: *Wide Sargasso Sea* must be read as a new interpretation of destinies first described within the Victorian experience.

The choice of this literary framework limits the freedom of the author who cannot determine the final destiny of the characters. The end is known beforehand and what matters is the process that has to be endured. This links this modern novel with the long tradition of tragedy in literature: the question no longer concerns fate itself but how it works.

In that respect, Jean Rhys gives precise if complex answers. She chooses to have the story told by three different voices, not to mention the judgements uttered by various characters along the plot. First Antoinette relates a few unlinked memories of the most striking scenes of her childhood; then her husband gives a more elaborate version of the following years, perceiving the links and the

process of destruction that had only been hinted at in the first part. In the third part of the book, the I-form is shared by Grace Poole, the character of *Jane Eyre*, and the heroine again so as to reinforce the suggestive narration with what may appear as an objective testimony.

The I-form is split to suggest the complexity of the mind and to underline its conflicts. Who is the speaking *I* ? The husband in his rage to destroy comes too close to his mad wife so that they blur into each other. Grace Poole, as an advocate for women, only says what Antoinette feels. In her fear to fail, Antoinette resembles her doubtful husband: because of his lack of self-confidence, he is condemned to a mere mimicry of social integration. The characters escape from the simple manipulation by their creator. Powerful forces belonging to history (facts) and tradition (interpretation of facts) make them extremely complex and the reader is led to choose — or ignore — an interpretation that could be challenged by any new element in the text itself or any new event that may happen in the contemporary history of the reader.

The I-form suggests a relative identity of the characters and the narrators, but when the narration takes place, the emotion has already fallen away, as when the hero thinks back of his nights of lust after the fever has left him; he feels he had been poisoned. The narration itself is already an interpretation of past events, an echo distorting the original voice, emphasizing any slight accent of distress but repeating endlessly the name of passionate love.

Only in the third part is the temporal gap bridged. As a matter of fact, dream and reality become blurred, and the narration of a past dream is read as the prophetic description of an action. The confusion is made possible by the reader's knowledge of Bronte's novel. Antoinette breaks the mirror in which she sees herself and her mother, her present and her past; she breaks the mirror in which the reader finds Jane Eyre' image. She repeats the act of her friend Tia who threw the stone at her and who always succeeded in lightening fire when the inexperienced Antoinette always failed. Once the mirror is broken and confusion reigns, writing becomes useless.

Wide Sargasso Sea has indeed helped integrate a segregated voice in mainstream literature, but it also leads to silence, as if the author had been broken up by her own attempt. Silence and madness signify that the author, like her heroine, has given up her effort at integration. After *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys only writes short stories, as if the continuous process of time vital to the novel had lost its meaning for her. The heroine and the author accept what the reader can

consider either as the complete defeat or as the achievement of an inner stage of existence in which integration and segregation are no longer heard.