

E-ISSN: 2709-9369
P-ISSN: 2709-9350
www.multisubjectjournal.com
IJMT 2022; 4(1): 118-121
Received: 22-02-2022
Accepted: 26-03-2022

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Locating identity within cultural ambivalence: A study of a Creole

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Abstract

In normal circumstances culture becomes a signifier of one's identity and serves as a tag by which an individual is recognized within society. But a Creole finds himself at the crossroads of culture rather than immersed in any single culture. As a result of the cultural displacement experienced by these people, who do not belong to a particular culture or a single territory, the idea of a 'unified self' breaks down and there is an identity crisis. The paper explores how a creole defines his/her identity and locates a sense of belonging within the frame of cultural ambivalence.

Keywords: Creole, identity, culture, ambivalence, colonialism

Introduction

The sense of alienation experienced by a Creole in a Black as well as in an English community demolishes the idea, if any, of a unified self, which is, indeed, endowed by one's cultural inheritance. The British often married the natives of their colonies, thereby giving rise to a new race of mixed blood called the Creoles. Apparently, the Creoles are marginalized not only among the Whites but also within the Black community. They are regarded as alien beings in both cultural communities. Thus, they belong to neither of the two worlds created by colonialism, one of the colonizer and the other of the colonized. In fact, a Creole belongs to two contrasting cultures at the same time; s/he is both a colonizer and a colonized and thus it is very difficult for a Creole to take up specifically any one of the two cultural identities.

In normal circumstances culture becomes a signifier of one's identity and serves as a tag by which an individual is recognized within society. But a Creole finds himself at the crossroads of culture rather than immersed in any single culture. As a result of the cultural displacement experienced by these people, who do not belong to a particular culture or a single territory, the idea of a 'unified self' breaks down and there is an identity crisis. There is a sense of abandonment and isolation and as a result, one is persistently maimed by his/her ambiguous identity. This community of people is rather at ease with their amorphous identities but at the same time yearn for some kind of recognition and feel the need to belong to a cultural sphere. There cannot, indeed, exist identities that can define themselves independently:

It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated (Bhabha 2)

Homi Bhabha demolishes any notion of fixity with regard to colonizer/ed identities. Although one cannot deny that to create a dichotomy of self and other, having its basis in epistemological and ontological differences, was not an imperialist strategy, yet one cannot overlook the paradox of the colonizer-colonized relationship that questions the whole idea of absolute identity. Bhabha insists that neither the colonizer nor the colonized can lay claim on an absolute and pristine form of identity; rather these identities are in a constant flux. Therefore, no predictable, stable identity can exist; rather there is an interactive relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In other words, there is a third space that does not allow either of the two to enjoy unambiguous state of cohesiveness.

The hybrid individuals belong to one cultural category or race by birth but, as a result of historical or economical processes, lose an absolute sense of an integrated identity. Thus, for Creoles it is very difficult to acquire a well framed cultural identity, for Bhabha has always asserted that cultural identity is rather negotiated across the differences of class, race, gender and their varying cultural practices; Creoles, therefore, have to constantly step over the boundaries as they cannot feel a sense of belonging when confined within the circumferences.

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It is not possible to attribute cultural identities to some unyielding and uncompromising cultural characteristics; and thus, for the Creoles it is the “third space” that produces some sort of cultural meaning. The sense of not belonging to one particular culture takes them on this never-ending pursuit for a unified identity but succeed in acquiring only hyphenated identities. The ‘inbetweenness’ that they experience becomes rather a celebrated identification for them. It is in this sense that one needs to understand the position of Creoles, who happen to inherit not only the cultures of both the colonizer and the colonized but also the biological genes of both the races. Therefore, their condition is all the more complicated than the colonized native who begins to mimic the colonizer and thereby enters into the realm of ambivalence with regards to his/her identity or the colonizer who as result of collective unconscious and sympathy for the condition of the colonized ends up having doubts regarding his/her absolute identity as a colonizer.

The gap between the colonizer and the colonized or that between the blacks and whites is so wide that it becomes impossible for a Creole to move between the two worlds. Jean Rhys’s novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* primarily deals with the placement of a Creole within the post Emancipation society. The novel portrays the predicament of a hybrid individual who has been “othered” as a result of imperialism and colonialism. The title of Jean Rhys’s novel is itself a pointer towards this space that exists not only between the two territories but the two cultures, which probably can never be bridged. The Sargasso Sea separates the two civilizations with the Creoles, in a way, floating in-between and trying to anchor themselves on either of the two banks that can never meet. The Sargasso Sea is a part of the North Atlantic Ocean and is named after the “sargassum weeds” that are floating over the entire expanse. The symbolism of the title not only suggests the considerably wide gap between the colonizer and the colonized, but it also points out the extent to which a Creole is distanced from the two cultures. It becomes impossible for a Creole to walk that space and even if he/she manages to do so, neither of the two communities is ready to accept the mixed blood, or a hybrid in their unadulterated cultures.

The presence of this wide space that exists between the two has been expressed through landscape imagery. The recurring references to the landscapes hint at the cultural difference between the two communities and the two countries. In addition, the gulf of misunderstanding, or rather lack of understanding, between Antoinette and her husband, on a personal level, is as wide as that between the two countries. Even an intimate and sanctified relationship like marriage cannot remove the fissures between the two culturally different individuals. Also, the central currents of the Sargasso Sea form a metaphor for the journey of Antoinette towards insanity. The feeling of being completely lost and astray while searching for one’s identity and being engulfed by the whirlpool is conveyed through the characteristics associated with the Sargasso Sea. Sargasso Sea is that part of the Atlantic ocean that lies between the West Indies and the Azores, roughly between 20 degrees to 35 degrees North Latitude and 30 degree to 70 degree West Longitude. Interestingly, this portion (Sargasso Sea) of the ocean is quite in contrast to its surrounding waters that comprises some very strong currents like The Gulf stream and North Equatorial currents. All these currents intertwine making it impossible for the Sargasso Sea to drift out and join the rest of the ocean; although it

rotates and keeps shifting its position with change in temperature and other weather conditions. Another peculiar character to note is that Sargasso Sea has no coastline, thus it has no limits to mark its extent. Similarly, the Creoles are culturally like the Sargasso Sea, for there are no rigid boundaries to define them.

Wide Sargasso Sea is often regarded as a semi-autobiographical novel. There can be no doubt that Dominican background has played an important role in shaping Jean Rhys’s sensibility although her own attitude towards her birthplace has been quite ambivalent. Rhys identified with the black community and remained nostalgic about the Caribbean, yet she could not completely align herself with or belong wholly to that world. A daughter of a Creole mother (whose family had owned a plantation that was burned after the Emancipation Act) and a Welsh doctor, Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams was born in Dominica in 1890. Jean Rhys was herself a Creole and her experiences as a white Creole woman influenced her writing. The sense of ‘differentness’ and ‘belongingness’, at the same time, with regard to West Indies marks her consciousness.

Wide Sargasso Sea presents a study of gender politics and explores the identity crisis of a Creole woman. In fact, the Creole woman is doubly marginalized by the metropolitan world. On the one hand she is a Creole, which is a culturally displaced category. On the other hand, she, along with her mother, is a victim of masculine world. Gender may not be the primary concern of the writer in *Wide Sargasso Sea* but it cannot be altogether ignored. Antoinette, the Creole protagonist of the novel, is not only socially and culturally alienated but she is also not contended as a woman. She is always yearning for love and security, first from the father figure and then from the husband. Antoinette had never had a comfortable relationship with any of the men that came in her life and after her brother, Pierre, dies the temperament of her mother completely changes towards her. She has no emotional bondage with her mother and there are no other familial ties she can hold on to. The novel, thus, is a story of an individual who is forlorn as a result of cultural, social and familial alienation and all the miseries are somehow the product of creolization.

The West Indian writers are often held by the idea of dispossession due to the migrations, the nostalgia, a feeling of homelessness and a desire for a home. These feelings often arise as a result of forced or voluntary migrations. Cultural fragmentation is caused within the society and eventually results in disintegration of one’s identity. It becomes quite difficult to cope with one’s existence due to the sense of alienation in a particular country and to a specific culture and society. However, it becomes important for the writer to move away from the Caribbean in order to have a better perspective about the place. Also, there always exist a constant desire to encounter the metropolis, which in this case is England. As a kind of metaphor it is always present in the psyche of the Caribbean people and has become a part of their history. Indeed, it proves advantageous for the writer to be away from the place and the scenario that he is writing so as to form the right impression about the subject and the context.

The writer is privileged in the sense that he/she has been introduced to at least two cultures and Edward Said believes that “this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal” (Said 186). In the terminology of music, contrapuntal means acquiring two or

more independent but harmonically related symphonies. However, contrapuntal with regard to a hybrid puts forward the idea of blending of cultures that individually possess their distinct characteristics but when brought together they transform into a new form. An exile does not and cannot not fall into the standardized categories, as Edward Said maintains:

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience (Said 185)

Hence, 'exile' becomes a significant phase of the lives of these writers. Although they cannot completely isolate themselves from the islands, yet they feel dislocated. The whole situation seems paradoxical in the sense that one is locked within the metropolis and simultaneously the metropolis is locked within oneself. Thus, in order to reject it one has to first experience it. Rhys, with her last novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, fitted into this very frame:

Of particular interest is her ability to identify with two worlds, in this case Europe and the West Indies, and with the paradox they may represent, a quality often present in the literature of exile. Jean Rhys's fiction can be said to reflect the kind of truth apparent only to those who can see both sides of the reality. Readers unable to perceive the two fail to understand, for instance, the complexity of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which is expressed through the marriage of the opposites, Rhys's own divided consciousness (Frickey 9).

The consciousness is divided because it is not possible to have an integrated West Indian identity. Neither the political nor the cultural history of Caribbean islands can be seen as anything but diverse in character. With the establishment of first European settlement by Columbus in 1493, the indigenous population gradually went extinct while the foreign infiltration continued and the islands were colonized by Spanish, British, French and Dutch, who were all battling among themselves for complete control. Millions of slaves were transported from Africa to Caribbean. Thus, colonialism, slavery, migrations, all had a role to play in bestowing a cosmopolitan character to the language, culture and traditions of the region. Even Caribbean literature is entwined with issues of enslavement, migration, relocations and exodus, subjects of home and exile and at the same time questioning the notions of identity, history, community and nation. But it is important to keep in mind that boundaries cannot exist as far as the idea of Caribbean identity is concerned.

In fact, there has been heated debate about the idea of 'Caribbeanness', for the Caribbean history has undergone Balkanization in the hands of colonial powers resulting in socio-political fragmentation and cultural diversity. Also, there has never been an evolved mythology for the Caribs to fall back upon. Thus, it is very difficult to create an integrated sense of Caribbean cultural identity either through literature or through history. In the wake of collapse of any kind of stable political system, it was only the trans-national cultural identity that emerges in this region. Since there has been social as well as political upheavals in the

area, any sense of a unified "Caribbeanness" has been lost. An individual attains the sense of belongingness to a particular place by relating to the history of that place and the history carries with it the culture and the ethnicity of the civilization. In these conditions, where civilization is deprived of any sense of an indigenous and distinctive cultural identity, many writers, poets and playwrights feel that cultural identity can only be constructed through the landscape. However, identity that is formulated cannot exist in isolation of European forces and neither is it merely an imitation of the colonial culture. Therefore, it can very rightly be said that Caribbean culture is composed of different voices and patterns and the interaction among various social and cultural forms is the very essence of this society. In other words, it is the interculturalisation that is constitutive of a Caribbean identity.

The imagery in the novel not only serves as a backdrop for the dramatization of the Creole woman's journey but also metaphorically expresses the Caribbean spirit. Rhys, perhaps, feels that the idea can only be apprehended by the ones who are a part of this kind of a culture and Europeans, the white people, can never comprehend what it means to be not on any one extreme as Mr. Mason always stated: "No I don't understand. I don't understand at all" (Rhys 17). Mr. Mason, being a white man, is not able to understand Annette's empathy with the Black community and he is also very surprised at her objection to the words like "Nigger" or "Negro", especially when she does not belong to their race. It was difficult for anybody to understand how Annette felt, as she rightly say: "None of you understand about us" (Rhys 15).

Indeed, there seems to be two polemical forces in the novel—the warmth of West Indies and the coldness of England—and between the two are the Creoles. Rhys presents a combat not only between two disparate landscapes but also opposing cultures with the Creoles trying to locate themselves within the framework. Landscape has been used in the novel to reflect more than one perspective and becomes a medium through which people of West Indies can relate and not feel out of place. Also, the landscape has been plundered and raped by the colonizer just as their indigenous culture had been eroded. Furthermore, it is found that landscape emphasizes the cultural difference between the colonizer and the colonized as Rochester states: "Everything is too much, ... Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (Rhys 49). Contrastingly, the putrefying gardens and precincts left unattended points at the decay of the society. The Coulibri estate and Antoinette's family epitomizes this decrepitude and collapse that has taken place.

Many important events in the course of the novel take place with landscape as the backdrop. For instance, Antoinette's forest dream shows a dark and cool but unrecognizable landscape, which is quite in contrast to the colourful and bright scenery of Jamaica. The dream takes place among "tall dark trees" that lead to an enclosed stone garden, while Antoinette finds herself following a man towards a strange place. The dream seems to be a premonition of what awaits in future, for Rochester, more a stranger than a husband for Antoinette, leads her to England, which is an alien land that portends her confinement. On the other hand, the forests of Granbois, the honeymoon house, caste another reality. Rochester loses himself in the woods, signifying his loss of identity in the alien land and culture. It points at his inability

to adjust or accept the new surroundings with its own way of life. He come across a ruined house, suggestive of his own English mansion that is later burned down. The focus here is not only to bring about the ambivalence or cultural inbetweenness regarding the identity of a Creole but also to correct the misconstruction of Creoles as non-entities.

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