
The Voice of The Other in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

“How will you like being made exactly like other people?” is a question that echoes through Antoinette’s mind early within Jean Rhys’s responsive and revisionist text, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Rhys 22). Constructing her protagonist from Charlotte Brontë’s insane Bertha Mason, Rhys aims to write the history, the preface, of one of the most discussed feminist figures in the literary canon. Giving voice to the voiceless, Rhys reconsiders the circumstance that culminated in Bertha’s (here Antoinette’s) descent into madness. However, one character in particular—Antoinette’s former slave and surrogate guardian, Christophine—maintains a refusal to subscribe to this question of erased identity that shapes the novel. A character “embedded in multiple hierarchies” (Hai 494), Christophine defies the subordination and assimilation of other, more powerful characters within the text whose actions aim to reduce her to the demeaning role of “other.” While her race, color, and gender all leave her open to discrimination and marginalization typical for members of these social groups, she subtly undermines these stereotypes not through overt, activist proclamations but through her silence and exit from a novel dominated by two white narrators.

Throughout the novel, Rhys exemplifies Christophine’s narrative as one of dual subjugation and subversion in order to depict her defiance of patriarchal colonial powers and illustrate the resistive power of subtle, marginal actions. The opening of the novel presents a tone of quintessential colonial hegemony, immediately characterizing Christophine as an “other” within the text. However, what is perhaps most notable—and uncharacteristic of colonial discourse—is that Christophine opens the novel as the first woman named to the reader. Rhys opens her text, “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did... The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, ‘because she pretty like pretty self’ Christophine said” (Rhys 9). By allowing Christophine to open the novel, great power is instilled in both her voice and her narrative; however, this power of with being the first speaker is muddled by Christophine’s inability to speak for herself. While her words open the story, Antoinette’s ultimately narrates it. This action of being spoken for exemplifies the authority that colonial and slave-owning traditions hold over Christophine, as she is unable to speak for herself despite possessing a quotable, insightful opinion. The language of Christophine’s opinion particularly separates her as an ignorant other. By proclaiming Annette to be “pretty like pretty self,” in her Caribbean colloquial dialect, Christophine’s voice is inherently seen as less educated and less insightful. The juxtaposition of this native tongue to Rhys’s eloquent opening prose of “closing ranks,” crafted in a lengthy, complex syntax, further marginalizes Christophine and her voice as subsidiary. Repeatedly analyzed as the othered native trope, Christophine’s role is often reduced through postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak’s observation that “she is simply driven out of the story, with neither narrative nor characterological explanation or justice” (Spivak 246).

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However, it is this strange and muddled opening that both gives Christophine power and strips it from her, presenting the character as one of complex motives, stories, and means.

Additionally, Rhys's narrative structure implicates the ownership—both legal and informal—that Antoinette holds over Christophine. Her role as slave, and later servant, in the novel immediately notes her as a dominated woman, but coupled with the statement of “closing ranks” illuminates a characterization as a member of an outed, lesser group—a characterization assigned to her from the opening of the text. Christophine, despite her initial assignment to this place of marginalization, repeatedly threatens the powers, and people, that aim to subjugate her. Throughout the novel, Christophine maintains an undoubtedly complex relationship with both Antoinette and Rochester—challenging one of the primary forms of her marginalization, servitude. To take on black feminist bell hooks' exploration of what it means to be oppressed, Christophine undermines those who aim to dominate her all while within her place of servitude. While hooks acknowledges that the concept of marginalization typically notes a rather negative, oppressive connotation, she reverses this construct, uniquely defining the margin as the primary “space for counter hegemonic discourse... not just... in words but in habits of being and the way one lives” (hooks 206). Utilizing this perspective, it becomes clear that Christophine's actions—while still at times in a place of subservience—alter the forms of oppression placed upon her. For instance, in a moment where Christophine is cleaning and serving the couple coffee, Rochester harshly critiques, “I can't say I like her language... And she looks so lazy, she dawdles about” (Rhys 50-51). Despite taking place in a moment where Christophine is working and repeatedly referring to the two as “master” (Rhys 50), Rochester elects to distinguish her as, above all, “lazy.” This depiction overtly refers, not to her work ethic, but her blackness, equating her performance to her race. The notion that “she dawdles about” inherently diminishes her to an entity responsible only for serving and subject to the judgments of her “masters.” This moment, conversely, gives way to the power Christophine yields over language, again complicating her subservience.

While clearly not the rhetoric preferred by Rochester, Christophine's rhetoric creates a dialogue that disrupts the expectations of submission and silence. It is through her language—even within a role of servitude—that Christophine asserts her power, aligning her margin to hooks' “site of radical possibility, [and] space of resistance.” (hooks 206). Christophine further dismantles her role of subservience when she refuses Antoinette's money for an obeah love potion. Repeatedly begging Christophine to mend her marriage and her love with Rochester, Antoinette, by partaking in the obeah trade, legitimizes both Christophine's practice and her knowledge over the culture. Aiming to dominate the trade and by extension Christophine, she attempts to throw her “purse from [her] pocketbook” (Rhys 70), claiming capital control over her former slave. However, Christophine subverts this capitalist hegemony by simply refusing the money, retaliating, “You don't have to give me money. I do this foolishness because you beg me—not for money” (Rhys 70). By directly dismissing Antoinette's money, Christophine

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removes herself from a capitalist interaction aimed at dominating her. She further extends her reclamation of power over the situation, denoting Antoinette's desires for the obeah potion as "foolishness." Despite it being Christophine's own cultural practice, she aligns with the dominating rhetoric that deems obeah foolish, not to belittle herself, but to embarrass Antoinette. In this moment, Christophine aims to redefine the power dynamics present between the two women, simply by removing herself from the traditional interaction of trading money. By removing herself from this capitalist practice, Christophine willingly exits from the accepted mainstream and, arguably, into the margin. The occupation of this space, while traditionally undesirable, breaks the oppressive expectations Christophine must maintain in the periphery. It is here that it becomes clear that Christophine's marginalization maintains hooks' ideal resistance "where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor" (hooks 207), allowing her to deny and rebel against Antoinette's standards, dismantling the capitalist ideals often associated with colonial hegemony.

Perhaps the most powerful moment Christophine commands within the novel is when she confronts Rochester's treatment of Antoinette, in a sense, verbally castrating him. While Christophine's rebellion against Antoinette's expectations is powerful for its corrosion of the master/servant and black/white dichotomies, her assertion of Rochester is arguably extensively more powerful as it additionally addresses the patriarchal authority he holds over her as a man. Abhorred by his treatment of Antoinette, she accuses "all you want is to break her up... you made her worse" (Rhys 92-93), culminating in the vivid insult, "But you wicked like Satan self!" (Rhys 96). This proclamation that Rochester lives to see Antoinette deteriorate verbally assaults the treatment of his wife. The harsh accusation that he made his wife "worse" is particularly baring and rather out of place from a servant, making Christophine's words that much sharper. To depict Rochester in the simile "wicked like Satan" not only places Christophine's immense distaste upon him but also parallels him to an evil so grotesque the only image she can conjure is that of the devil. This degradation stands not only to diminish Rochester, but also to assign power to Christophine and her language that he has already expressed contempt for. Her assertive discourse, directly meant to question his patriarchal authority as Antoinette's husband, challenges his decisions and his command over a servant he should presumably carry great colonial dominance over. Thus, Christophine's verbal attack subverts Rochester's position of authority, allowing her to combat the colonial standards that aim for her submission.

Despite her rather dramatic proclamations of power against both Antoinette and Rochester, Christophine disappears from the novel in a rather abrupt exit. The same way Christophine subverts the subordination from the coupled narrators, she refuses to exit the physical periphery to enter the center: England. In the culmination of her fight with Rochester, Christophine proclaims, "Read and write I don't know. Other things I know," to which her arch in the novel concludes, "She walked away without looking back" (Rhys 97). Christophine's adamant profession of her lack of literacy—something often attributed to intelligence and knowledge—does

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not capture her ignorance, but rather reveals a knowledge of her own limits. By confessing to her deficit, Christophine reclaims her lack of understanding and instead propels her assertion “other things I know.” This brief yet poignant moment establishes Christophine’s certainty in her role throughout the novel, while the short syntax resonates “know” at the closing of the sentence, solidifying Christophine’s rebellious confidence. Furthermore, it asserts a sense of wisdom and understanding to her action of “walk[ing] away.” It is this definitive past tense: “she walked away” that ultimately becomes Christophine’s most powerful act of defiance. Without so much as “looking back,” she is able to refuse a physical presence once the white narrators leave for England, instead adhering to her margin as “a site one stays in, clings to even... to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (hooks 207). Therefore, she is not driven out but rather consciously elects to leave once the novel’s setting migrates to the center in her ultimate act of defiance.

Throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the character of Christophine subverts the hegemonic powers that aim to subjugate her in order to demonstrate the capacity of passive resistance. While her outright verbal defiance of Antoinette and Rochester directly undermines capitalist and patriarchal standards, her subtle behavioral resistances illustrate the power she culminates through her own marginalization. Despite the subservient act of cleaning, she resists through language Rochester deems abhorrent, and despite the silencing moment of her exit, she voices her dissent by refusing presence once the narration reaches England. This defiance ultimately portrays the complexities that define Christophine’s suppression, highlighting her disruption of colonial powers and her use of the margin as a site of rebellious discourse.

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