

The Counter-Discourse of Colonialism in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*

Sumit Saha

M.A (Eng)

Research Scholar

St. Paul's Cathedral Mission College, Kolkata

Affiliated to University of Calcutta

Abstract

In the course of history, we see the colonizers tyrannizing the colonized in almost every mild and intense mode of action. But what if the colonizers get entrapped by their own system? The prevalent discourse of colonization is obvious in numerous writings of both the white and the black world. But very few could truly exhibit the other truth i.e., the counter-discourse of it, which if not equally, but went quite abreast with the discourse. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and George Orwell's semi-autobiographical essay *Shooting an Elephant* served as the critique of the discourse and showed that not only the colonized but the colonizers too, became a prey to its own schema. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Annette and Antoinette, being the wife and the daughter of an ex-plantation owner respectively, went through a number of trauma and died at the end. In *Shooting an Elephant*, Orwell, being a white police inspector, becomes a victim of the power-politics game. My paper aims at analyzing those characters who fall in the pitfalls of colonization and get stuck in it badly and wants to get out of it. Within the context of this paper the story of the 'Subalterns' will be examined from a post-colonialist perspective through the representation of several characters and it would be apparent how their hybridized state leads them to the state of nihilism.

Keywords: Colonizer – Colonized Relationship; Counter-Discourse; Power-Politics; Marginalized; Subalterns; Xenophobia; Racial Discrimination.

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.

-Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

The French philosopher and social historian Michel Foucault maintains the term 'discourse' as a phenomenological term which affects our views on all things. Every discourse exists within a given body of social discourses and every social discourse incorporates one of more politically generated truth. Foucault has also observed that every discourse demands

and legitimizes a counter discourse. Hence, postcolonial literature or postcolonial discourses emerge as inescapable challenge to the colonial discourse as the "re-reading and re-writing of the European historical and fictional record" is indispensable (Tiffin). This paper aims at focusing two texts, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*, which in turn will be used to portray the conflict between the colonial master and the colonized and how the white masters become a victim of their own supremacy.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* comes to us as a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* where the mystery behind the mad woman in the attic is unraveled. Rhys explores the counter-discourse after the abolition of slavery around the lives of the plantation owners in the English colonies across the Atlantic. Likewise, Orwell goes through an epiphany that imperialism is an evil thing and he is entrapped by his white supremacy in Moulmein in lower Burma:

I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing... I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. (Orwell 36)

Officially in August, 1833, the Abolition of Slavery Act was passed and the slaves acquired their freedom from their hellish bondage. As a consequence, a large number of the plantation owners had to face heavy loss but the English Parliament had been reassuring them that emancipation would not be affecting their labor supply. The planters were further appeased by the offer of £20 million worth of compensation, but it did not arrive in the British colonies on time. As its obvious result, 40-50% of the Jamaican plantation went out of business after the emancipation (USI).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* we witness the perils faced by Annette, the widow of one such plantation owner after the abolition of slavery. Her life became very difficult as well as different after the emancipation. According to the British law she does not hold the right to own her property. For this very reason she marries Mr. Mason, however her Martinique heritage makes her an outcast in the British society. Furthermore, she and her family came in the firing line of the slaves, who became power hungry and anarchist. They were hailed as 'white cockroaches' by the natives: 'They hated us. They called us white cockroaches' (Rhys 20). When Mr. Mason openly calls them good-for-nothing and threatens to bring Indian coolies, the slaves try to burn their house down along with them in it. Their latent vehemence towards them had reached its climax when they set the whole house on fire. The burning down of the parrot Coco is symbolically presented in the novel. It is an ominous sign and it foretells Annette and her daughter Antoinette's impending misfortune. Likewise, Antoinette says:

I heard someone say something about bad luck and remembered that it was very unlucky to kill a parrot, or even to see a parrot die. (Rhys 39)

Likewise, Orwell in *Shooting an Elephant* writes about his experience as an agent of British imperialism in Burma and how he did not receive any good conduct from the native (colonized) Burmese. His imperialistic eye could not find anything positive in the Burmese people. They have 'sneering' and 'cowed' faces and their actions were even more degrading

(Orwell 36). They spit betel juice on the dress of white women while they were at the bazaar, jeered at the police officers, and played foul at football tournaments between the natives and the British police officers. Even though the Burmese suffered from poverty and bondage, we get develop a negative impression about them. On a playground when a white man was tripped by a nimble Burmese player, the referee seemed to remain ignorant and the Burmese yelled with hideous laughter (Orwell 36). What's more important here is that the author faces such occurrence more than twice. Such demeanors are not so strange when it's coming from the lower and the middle orders of the oppressed. But in this case, on the streets, the Buddhist priests, who are supposed to spread discipline and humanity, are doing nothing but jeering at the Europeans. As a consequence, the author thought 'that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts' (Orwell 36).

Duplicity is found amongst some Western writers whose central focus was the orient. The essay *Shooting an Elephant* demonstrates the conflicting emotions that exist, such as the desire to sympathize with the natives and lament their plight, and, on the other hand, a strong sense of hatred for the colonial (imperial) force. Orwell served five years in Indian Imperial Police, and went through the feeling of being a 'Sahib': "A Sahib has got to act like a Sahib" (Orwell 40), even if the demands would be disdainful. He came face to face to the realities of the master-slave relationship. He eye-witnessed kicking, flogging, torturing from close quarters: "In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters (Orwell 36)". Orwell, like other exiles, lived with an odd conundrum: on the one hand, he was forced to pick his imperial roots while on the other, he was suffering for his part as a cog in British dictatorship. When he is pushed to kill the elephant against his will, he grasped "the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East" (Orwell 40). He sees imperialism as a double curse, landing on both the oppressors and the oppressed (Quinn 354). Here, as Stansky and Abrahams maintain, 'victim is elephant, and Blair victimizer, who himself feels victimized by Burmans, all of them together the victims of imperialism (Peter Stansky 201).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, we get to see the next generation English Jamaicans were incessantly dejected by their own colonial British government:

Still waiting for the compensation, the English promised when the Emancipation Act was passed. Some will wait for a long time...Mr. Luttrell would be the first who grew tired of waiting? One calm evening he shot his dog, swam out to sea and was gone for always. No agent came from England to look after his property. (Rhys 15)

The unnamed Mr. Rochester and Annette's daughter Antoinette both being the products of colonialism suffered from a number of obstructions. The notion of how an Englishmen from the mainland looks at a Jamaican White becomes very significant. Rochester views everyone as being primitive, foreign and perverted as soon as he arrives on the island of Jamaica:

It was a beautiful place - wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. (Rhys 79)

Mr. Rochester even sees his wife, Antoinette as someone who incarnates the wild and the exotic which is different from the civilized British mainland demeanor and etiquette and it is something which he is not accustomed with. *Wide Sargasso Sea* implies that in spite of Rochester's affection for Antoinette at the beginning, there is a note of separation and difference between them. Both are cut off by the Sargasso Sea, a desolate body of water that is encircled by the free-floating seaweed that Rhys believed to be the coast where the failed marriage drifted. Thomas Staley thinks that through focusing readers' attention on particular key thematic scenes, the book exposes the relationship between Antoinette and Mr. Rochester. Furthermore, as per Sue Thomas, the entire ambience of the novel becomes conceptualized by Antoinette and Rochester's troubled relationship where English xenophobia, class, racial and sexual anxieties are part of it (Thomas 22).

According to the English common law, only the first son inherits the family's fortune. Being the second son, Rochester was denied the right to his family's wealth and thus makes a big journey to Jamaica to marry Antoinette who was in possession of a huge property that she cannot own:

I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks. ...The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. (Rhys 63)

His love towards Antoinette on one hand is profound and on the other is conditional, and this same trait is tantamount to Kurtz's conditional affection towards the exotic Amazon in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Rochester delimits Antoinette as a colonial other. Benita Parry states that in colonialism there was a process of constructing English cultural identity. In the process the natives and the colonized were seen as "other" and the English as masters (Ashcroft 45). In this case Antoinette becomes a colonized subject of Rochester. He becomes annoyed and angry when Antoinette speaks of England as a land of gloom and coldness. Her limited knowledge of the world made her a mere Creole and her Creolized identity made her unfit for the English court and restricted her to enter into the realm of Englishness.

Her heritage and Creole identity had a big impact on Jean Rhys. She was aware of the clashing cultures because she had lived as a Creole in both the Caribbean and England. She therefore represents Antoinette as having these characteristics. The struggle to understand who she is, where she came from, and to whom she belongs drives Antoinette, like every other individual with a distinct identity, to the state of nihilism. Likewise, Angela Smith observes that omission of the inessentials creates an impression of vitality to speakers of the language that was the source of the Creole (Smith):

She is Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either. (Rhys 61)

Rochester is obsessed with anxiety that Antoinette is not entirely white and he regrets his choice.

In order to substantiate these arguments and to show how it moves beyond binary distinctions between colonizer and colonized, Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* argues that:

The place of difference and otherness, or the space of the adversarial...is never entirely on the outside or implacably oppositional. (Bhabha 109)

Along similar context, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* Gayatri Spivak writes:

I repeatedly attempt to undo the often-unexamined opposition between colonizer and colonized implicit in much colonial and postcolonial discourse study. (Spivak 46)

Antoinette's 'otherness' can well be traced in the scene where her own half-brother Daniel Cosway succeeds in manipulating Rochester about her false promiscuity, which becomes a reason to label her morally mad. Rochester now believes that Antoinette is not faithful to him: "Do you think that I don't know? She thirsts for anyone - not for me..." (Rhys 149). Later on, Amelie's sexual encounter with Rochester was her way of taking revenge on Antoinette. But it was Christophine, who was Antoinette's caretaker, appeared different from other women in Antoinette's eyes - "she was not like the other women" (Rhys 18), who always held her authority and claimed obedience even from her colonial masters: "This is free country and I am free woman". (Rhys 145) Likewise, Rhys's subaltern characters spoke back to the centre in such defiant and confident way, leaving the slave owners as victims of their own supremacy. It is these characters that dictate the proceedings of the main plot and seem more in control of their lives than their masters.

Similarly in *Shooting an Elephant*, we find that the natives also dictated the main plot. In the attempt to preserve the image of a strict 'Sahib', the sahib gives up his freedom to be the master of his own will. The rampaging elephant is easy to read as a symbol of Burmese society: unwieldy, untethered and ultimately impossible to subdue. In the way that the elephant runs amok, and is impossible to contain without violence, the Burmese defiance of British rule is a constant, making itself known by jeers and humiliation. Similar to how an out-of-control elephant is impossible to control without resorting to violence, so too is Burmese resistance to British rule, which manifests itself through humiliation and jeers. Orwell must resort to an unnatural use of force to show his dominance over the elephant, just as "the white man" or British officials in Burma had to rely on force, notably torture, to gain the upper hand over the Burmese people. We are witnessing the same use of force by the British imperialists against the Burmese people when we see him shoot the elephant (Enotes). Even though he killed the elephant he had to face questions and criticism from his own side. Through his decision to shoot the elephant, young Orwell is ensuring the ideological permanence of the state both in the perception of the Burmese and the Englishmen. Althusser establishes that "not only does the State apparatus contribute generously to its own reproduction, but also and above all, the State apparatus secures by repression the political conditions for the action of the Ideological State Apparatuses" (Althusser 16). His integrity towards the government was oppugned when the opinions amongst the Europeans were divided:

Among the Europeans opinion was divided. The older men said I was right, the younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. (Orwell 43)

Orwell could aptly bypass the truth: "I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool" (Orwell 43), and took a shelter under falsity, and this reminds us of a scene where Marlow could not tell the truth about Kurtz's final words upon arriving on the mainland in *Heart of Darkness*.

Likewise, both the texts succeeded in revealing the drawbacks of colonialism and showed how the colonial masters were being victimized in their own power-politics game.

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