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The Flickering Feminine Flame: The Power of Masculine Anxiety Against Feminine Power Within Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Coetzee's *Foe*

Rewriting a classic novel and giving voices to either neglected or new characters allows a form of modernism to be rebirthed within different literary movements. Through different modes of narration, a new story can be told entirely while bringing light to critiques of the original text. Both Jean Rhys and J.M. Coetzee do this in their novels *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Foe* respectively. In this paper I will argue that through the characters of Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Susan in *Foe*, they shed light on the male anxieties that attempt to overpower in these texts that are about women. Both novels use language and the absence of it to enact a colonizer versus colony power structure and diminish the feminine power that these women are capable of.

Jean Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, gives a secondary character a backstory that Charlotte Brontë was unable to give in her original text. Antoinette's life is prescripted in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; she's born into a multicultural world and struggles with her role as a white Creole woman, a new wife, a person with autonomy, and eventually the Madwoman in the Attic. In the novel's three sections, she narrates two of them with her age ranging from childhood until just before she kills herself at Thornfield Hall. Although the reader follows Antoinette throughout her entire life, the temporality is played around with in her narrative. Because of this fluidity of time, the narrative is unable to give a straightforward account of who she is, as she narrates from the unstable parts of her life. The physical descriptions are echoed in both texts describing her as "a

woman, tall and large, with thick dark hair hanging long down her back" with specific features being defined as "fearful and ghastly" with her face being "savage" in appearance (Brontë 120). Her narrative comprises the geopolitical issues prominent within her home of Dominica and the colonial impact that is had on her by being a white Creole and marrying a man who is the oppressor.

While prior literary movements dealt with masculinity as something that all of their main characters are filled the desire to be masculine, modernist texts begin to examine the idea of anxious masculinity along with what I define as the claustrophobic male ego. The claustrophobic male ego is a subsidiary of the male ego, a reflection of the self, combined with the societal notions of how a man should act (strong, unemotional, brave, etc.). The claustrophobic male ego is constantly questioning their actions and thoughts, thus creating a new analysis of what manliness is and the anxieties that embody it through modernism's interrogation of the ego. The word claustrophobic is used as these fears are overwhelming the character to the point where nothing else matters, he is so locked in his own perspective he is unable to understand or care about anything else. From Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night,* the character of Dick Diver is a perfect example of suffering from the claustrophobic male ego. Dick is conflicted with emotions conventionally associated with feminine than masculine. Alongside this he is filled with burgeoning questions about his own sexuality and is unable to discuss them. Dick has a desire to talk and is attributed with womanly charms, causing him to be looked down upon from his fellow men as being particularly weak.

Within Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* the unnamed male character that is meant to be Mr. Rochester suffers from the claustrophobic male ego. He desires to regain

control of what he believes should be under his domain as a man (i.e. women, slaved, his own subject.) By coming from England and into a colony, he enacts the role of the Colonizer, with this title only adding to his masculine insecurities, as he attempts to domesticate his wife and her slaves. I will argue within this paper that because of this generic claustrophobic male ego that has attempted to control Antoinette throughout her life—shown primarily with the unnamed Rochester character—Rhys is able to challenge the gendered roles within Modernism, perpetuated throughout the novel through the male domination towards females and the identity and naming of female characters within the text. Through her reading of shifting identities and the reclamation of the Madwoman in the Attic, Rhys's narrative deconstructs the claustrophobic male narrative found within Modernist texts and gives women power. By thinking of Antoinette in these terms, of being a victim of the claustrophobic male narrative, her ultimate demise is not just to escape the dominance within her own life but also is an instance of Rhys tearing down the patriarchy within modernism and setting it ablaze.

Jessica Berman's chapter on "Ethical Domains," which focuses specifically Woolf and Rhys's work, examines the role of narrative and identity through intimate ethics and the various ethical domains to which literature is subjected; through her reading of "the fold," a concept first developed by Gilles Deleuze, Berman introduces the idea that this fold "in the text that brings subjects into relationship with other subjects across this gap without conflating them, assuming their commensurability, or eliminating their distance" (Berman 40). By using a preexisting character Rhys directly engages the fold with the character of Antoinette. A set narrative has been created but by repurposing this known character, Rhys challenges past assertions and breathes life into a stale

narrative. Berman's focus on identity within these authors' narratives alludes to the forms that are challenged within Modernism and how the role of one's self is ubiquitous. "The narrative gives form to the experience of a relational selfhood, and to the self and other locked together in a process of making, doing and perceiving. It takes meaning from its role in this process" (Berman 47). The purpose of the self and other gaining meaning through the role of the narrative is used to gain an insight into the character narrating as well as the larger themes within the text. Thus, the narrative goes deeper than thought on first appearance.

Berman later brings up other ideas of narratives like self-narration, in which a character narrates from their own perspective on the events, which is used as a device within *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The narrative is important in Antoinette's story, as Brontë does not give Bertha the proper narrative she deserves; Rhys writes to give Antoinette/Bertha a life. Within *Wide Sargasso Sea* the self-narrative is employed causing some concern to its validity, as self-narration can be fickle.

> Thus, what Judith Butler points out as the ultimate impossibility of self-narration, its inscription within social relations and temporalities that define and exceed its own narrative power, becomes in Rhys's work a specific and pointed critique of the historical and political geographies that undergird her character's lives. (Berman 78)

Butler's reading on the implications of self-narration creates a dialogue that details the unlikelihood of being able to self-narrate. As there will be certain scenes within the text without the narrator present and are only within the text to progress the plot. But this impossibility of self-narration becomes recontexualized within the Caribbean colonial

text as Berman points to. The age of the narrator and the role they play within the text adds to the narrator's reliability to narrate their own lives. By using self-narration there is also the implication of lying to the self in a means for surviving a terrible situation. Antoinette is in a horrific life in both sections that she narrates in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The beginning and ending of Antoinette's narrative come at times in her life where she is unable to make decisions for herself and understand what is going on. Her first section is done from the perspective as a small girl who does not understand how the world works yet and her final comes from being imprisoned by her husband and unaware of how the world works in England.

By remaining unnamed throughout the text the husband is able to have his own identity separate from Mr. Rochester's, despite the fact that this is whom Rhys is alluding to through this character. The man struggles with feeling like an outsider not only with his new wife but also within his own family. His masculine anxieties are apparent whenever his relationship with his father is referenced. By being the younger son, he feels as though he is missing out on something that should be his by birthright and attempts to please his father despite being miles apart. In his letters to his father the religious undertones come out from the frequent mention of father and the capitalization of it. Like the conquerors that came before him, the unnamed man seeks to assert his power over those he deems to be less of him to prove his own worth to not only to himself but his father as well. He is constantly concerned with listening to what the slaves speak of him and recognizing when they are no longer speaking in Patois in regards to him. He wants to be omniscient to Antoinette and her people as a way to assert his dominance. This anxious tendency of self-doubt and the denial of his father's praise force

this character to make an effort to prove his virility through his commitment to Antoinette. This union is more than a marriage, but rather an effort to prove to his father his ability to control a relationship and make his misfit of a marriage work.

In Deborah A. Kimmey's article "Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: Metatextuality and the Politics of Reading in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*" the focus of this article is on the ability that the man believes he has over Antoinette through his renaming. "Rhys suggests that Brontë and Rochester have (mis) named Antoinette, and this misnomer is exposed as the white British man's "authority" over the white Creole woman" (Kimmey 118). The Rochester character renames Antoinette to Bertha, a name that deracinates her. He wants to assert his dominance over her and by refusing her requests thinks that he is vanquishing his claustrophobic male ego. Antoinette does not take well to his demands and instead of diminishing her worth, her husband merely adds to the already burning fire within her, built from her discontent of patriarchal values.

JM Coetzee enacts a similar goal as Rhys through his novel of *Foe*, a rewriting of Robinson Crusoe. Within this novel Coetzee reclaims the narrative of Friday, a silenced Black man who acts as Cruso's slave, and Susan Barton, a female castaway who uses writing as a form of reclaiming her own narrative with her letters to Foe. Susan is the narrator for a majority of the novel and struggles with how she wants her story to be told. Her narrative is shaped by Cruso and later Foe, two men who frequently assert that they know more than she does with their roles within the novel. Both of these male characters suffer from the claustrophobic male ego as they simultaneously enforce colonialism, a need to assert their dominance over a lesser group, much like the Rochester character.

Cruso considers himself to be the sole leader on this island that Susan washed up on. He knows how the island operates and is not keen on letting Susan control more than the bare minimum. Susan first encounters Friday who brings her to Cruso so he may assess the situation and decide how life will go on from this point. Susan is critical in her views of Cruso; she attempts to gain more power by telling Friday to do tasks and is frustrated by his lack of response. Only when Cruso gives the simple command does Friday do as he is told; Susan is angered by the male command being received and bickers with Cruso. He only replies: "This is not England, we have no need of a great stock of words" (Coetzee 21). Through this asserting Cruso acknowledges that they are in a new world now and do not need things to be as complicated as they are within the empire. He can control what words are used and how they use them since he is the white male.

Cruso fails to address the power that is had by manipulating language in this way and how that affects Friday. He uses it and forces Susan to fall in line alongside him. He continues with this power as he manipulates Susan's perception of Friday and why he had his tongue cut out (Foe 23). This manipulation is indicative of his desire to feel superior to the woman who is challenging his authority. As she hangs on his every word, she is unsure of whom Friday truly is. Cruso is able to alter her perception of Friday while suggesting there are others out in the world that are capable of evil; Cruso removes himself from this category despite his natural belonging as a white man.

Cruso's anxieties of failure arise as he acts as a colonizer to Friday, yet Susan critiques that he does not do enough. While their relationship is complex and has been consummated Susan acknowledges the power she has in those scenarios. "He has not

known a woman for fifteen years, why should he not have his desire? So I resisted no more but let him do as he wished" (Coetzee 30). Susan is not at first comfortable with Cruso's taking of her body, but she pities him for being alone for so long and lets him have her sexually. Upon reflecting on her time with Cruso, Susan realizes how he failed as acting as a true colonizer. Susan talks at Friday about this, using him as a further extension of talking to herself. "If your master had truly wished to be a colonist and leave behind a colony, would he not have been better advised (dare I say this?) to plan his seed in the only womb there was?" (Foe 83). Susan does not say this as a desire for motherhood again, as her reason for being on this adventure is to find her lost daughter, but rather to point out Cruso's failures. Her view of him illuminates his failures as a man on a variety of planes: he fails to continue the colony with his seed and his family line dies out with him. He fails in regards to his virility but leaves Susan to tell his story, something she feels inadequate to actually do. Cruso, while failing to plant his seed in Susan's womb does succeed in planting the seed of Friday's possible savagery (Foe 106). The use of the phrase or variation of it is indicative of Cruso's failures as a colonizer and is on her mind after his death.

Susan is unable to be seen as her own person devoid from the men in her life. Based on her sexual relationship with Cruso she feels a concern to ensure that she is her own woman. When telling her story to Mr. Foe, she asks him, "Do you think of me, Mr Foe, as Mrs Cruso or as a bold adventuress?" (Coetzee 45), wanting there to be a choice between the two. Susan is unable to see herself as more than just the autonomous being that she is and realizes Foe's perception of her depends on how her story is told. The pairing of Cruso and Susan is not the main part of her story and she wants that to be made

clear. She does not want to be anyone's wife, but wants to be a woman on this adventure to find her daughter. Susan is highly self-aware of how she is narrated in this story.

Her matriarchal values are the primary essence of herself, but the men she surrounds herself with do not notice this. Upon being rescued the captain of the ship who picks her up warns her of the lies that are told in order for books to sell. Her only reply is, I would rather be the author of my own story than have lies told about me" (Coetzee 40). Her dominating force is shown in this instant as she realizes the power that is had in writing. Her language of parenting her own story changes when finding Mr. Foe at his abandoned cottage. "It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold. By such means do I still endeavor to be father to my story" (Coetzee 123). In this instance she assumes the male parental role in order to feel validated within the telling of her own story. Throughout her interactions with both Mr. Foe and Cruso, she has had to assert herself through the male view to try to have the men feel as ease with her level of power in her own story. Susan is protective of her story and realizes she has the power to tell it her way and wants to ensure it is told that way she knows it should be told. With Mr. Foe she worries how he will change her words to make her story marketable.

Susan's feeling of responsibility to tell both the story of her own and Cruso's haunts her as she struggles to make her story honest and intriguing. By using Mr. Foe, she is giving him the power to manipulate her words. Susan displays how much she has written from the first page where the first quotation mark is used and then is used for every paragraph thereafter. The levels that are added of storytelling multiply by these passages, which the reader is reading through the lens of a letter written to Mr. Foe of her story. She writes to him while using his tools that they are "…your pen, your ink, I

know, but somehow the pen becomes mine while I write with it, as though growing out of my hand" (Coetzee 66-67). She shows how easy it is for her to write her own story and how the tools work for her as well as they do for him. This is threatening to Mr. Foe and his work as he cannot place her story in his own hands and control it. Language is the only true power that Mr. Foe possesses and by receiving this letter as well as the others, he flees, unable to accept the loss of his writing domain.

In Benita Parry's article "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee" Parry discusses the effect of language within his novels and what the silence of certain characters suggests. Within *Foe*, the use of language in many forms is vital; Susan's desire to have her story told, Friday's muteness, Mr. Foe's being renowned for his own writing, language is constantly discussed even when it seems unlikely. Both Mr. Foe and Susan want to tell the story of someone who is silenced in some manner; for Mr. Foe he wants to tell Susan's story and Susan wants to let Friday have the ability to use language to communicate with others. Parry in her article focuses on the power of language for the silence. "… the consequence of writing the silence attributed to the subjugated as a liberation from the constraints of subjectivity… can be read as reenacting the received disposal of narrative authority" (Parry 150). Much like in Rhys's novel the idea and emphasis of narrative authority is used in Coetzee's novel as well. These characters are so focused on telling someone else's story or allowing someone else to have a voice, the narrative authority can be seen as dismissed. Despite that this central question carries significance when it comes to situations of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy—all prevalent here. While I think that there is a dismissal of narrative on behalf of the male characters, Susan is emphatic when the terms of narrative are discussed. Much like

Antoinette, Susan is so involved within her own narrative and its perception she applies it to others whom she meets. Susan is aware of Cruso's failure but repeatedly utters sentiments like, "I would gladly now recount to you the history of this singular Cruso, as I heard it from his own lips" or "Who but Cruso, who is no more, could truly tell you Cruso's story?" (Coetzee 11; Coetzee 51) showing her desire for granting the unheard or neglected voices a chance to be heard.

The counter to this narrative is that in the article Parry also says that these fictions are based on "colonials modes, the social authority on which the rhetoric relies and which it exerts is grounded in the cognitive systems of the West" (Parry 150). No matter who is telling their own narrative, the way it is being told is reminiscent of the fact that there is no escaping the colonizer's control over them. Susan is set on having her story told her way despite the male influences upon her, the irony is she is unable to do so no matter what. These anxieties permeate her letters so she does not recognize them initially and lives to the best of her abilities instead of the fullest.

Overall the character of Susan is in the midst of this retelling of *Robinson Crusoe* and surrounded by men who desire to assert themselves and their virility to her. Through their sexual conquests of her Susan's own enjoyment is not discussed but instead she succumbs to these men out of pity and desire for her own relationships to be fulfilled in some way. The loss of her daughter is a burden on her identity as a woman and upsetting, nevertheless she persists. With the patriarchal values around her, Susan is able to maintain her own values and ensure her safety and longevity within this society she must reacclimate to after her adventures. Her relationship with Friday is able to show her mothering instinct as well as her selfish desire to survive as shown through her

monologues of talking at him. Coetzee is able to give Friday a second chance as a person and not merely Crusoe's slave, to give Defoe a characterization other than just a writer through the character of Foe, and a retelling of who the true hero of *Robinson Crusoe* truly is in a rewritten narrative.

Thinking along the same vein, by thinking of Antoinette as a force against the patriarchal tendencies within the modernist era, Rhys's outcome for her has to play out a specific way because of *Jane Eyre*. But Rhys does not submit to this narrative as the only way it has to end and through her last lines in the novel, remains hopeful for the future. "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage" (Rhys 112). The flame represents the rage that women feel at their inability to be valued compared to their male counterparts and the draught almost blowing out is the patriarchy attempting to smite this argument. But the flame prevails and refuses to be diminished within modernism and the rewriting of narrative.

Both *Foe's* and *Wide Sargasso Sea's* significance to modernism is important as it encourages the renewal of colonial texts and constantly challenges what it means to be modern. The attempt to reclaim narratives that suffer from the claustrophobic male ego enlightens its readers to see the flaws in these texts as well as challenging how they were written. Susan picks up the pen and writes, Antoinette does not let the flame die and together they are able to fight against this oppressive stance through their own narratives.

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