

The Quest for the self in Césaire's *And the Dogs Were Silent* and Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Martha Renée Navarro
mnavarro@hum.unrc.edu.ar
Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto

The socio-political and economic fragmentation that constitutes the legacy of the European colonization of the Caribbean is clearly reflected on the endless debates on Caribbean literary and cultural studies. The West Indian “supposed lack of an indigenous history,” a “distinctive cultural tradition or identity,” as well as the unresolved issue of “ethnic particularism,” lie at the heart of such debates [1]. In this essay, I explore Aimé Césaire's *And the Dogs Were Silent* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and try to establish the way in which each writer deals with the quest theme.

And the Dogs Were Silent has attained the status of “prophetic” among recent scholars and critics. As argued in the introduction to Césaire's *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry*, the poem “now functions as the sign of the sacrifice of Césaire's generation to the very process of decolonization that [the colonized black intellectuals] were the first to envisage collectively and globally” [2]. Those intellectuals, while students in France, “would become conscious” of both their “blackness” and their ties with “Africans, whom they had been encouraged to look down upon by virtue of their own very tenuous but much longer connection to French culture” [3].

And the Dogs Were Silent is a reflection of Césaire's individual experience during the 1940's. As such, it is the quintessence of the poet's own crucial moment of awareness and search for identity and self-definition. By situating the play within the autobiographical, it is possible to see the Rebel (Césaire the individual, the poet and the colonized subject) in an existential quest. My line of argument therefore positions the notion of the self (Césaire's colonized self) within the Rebel-Hybridity/Creoleness-Surrealism relationship.

For his shaman-like process, Césaire uses dramatic poetry as the ideal means to translate his personal experience to the world. On the one hand, “[p]oetry,” he claims, “is that process which through word, image, myth, love and humor establishes me at the living heart of myself and of the world” [4]. On the other hand, the theatre – in its didactic and social function – makes it possible for him to put a piece of living world on the stage. That was the world of black people who were ashamed of themselves as a result of their rejection by the white Europeans. In an atmosphere of assimilation, Césaire asserted that “[the] Negro heritage was worthy of respect, and that this heritage was not relegated to the past, that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world” [5]. His personal feelings and political ideas were clear. His strategy in *And the Dogs Were Silent* is to construct a symbolic tragic action on a syncretic master plot of sacrifice and renewal. In the voice of the Rebel, the poet thus leaves his important message for his audience and the world.

The existentialist point of departure is the human being's awareness of his/her situation. A part of this, is a sense of meaninglessness, the chaos, that he/she sees in the outer world. In turn, such meaninglessness, or chaos, produces discomfort, anxiety, loneliness in the face

of limitations. It also produces the desire to invest experience with meaning by acting upon the world – although efforts to act in a meaningless, chaotic, absurd world might lead to anguish, greater loneliness, and despair. Human beings are totally free, but also wholly responsible for what they make of themselves. For the existentialist, therefore, the possibilities of altering human nature and society are unlimited. At the same time, however, human beings can hope for aid in making such alterations only from within themselves.

The Rebel in Césaire's play is going to die – he is going to be guillotined. His death – a symbolic one – represents chaos, the dissolution of the hero's self (ultimately Césaire's) when he becomes aware of his "otherness" in a culture that he had always considered his, and that had made him believe it was his. This disruptive moment initially translates into a deep anger which, in turn, resonates in the hero's mind as he cries "Death to the whites" [6]. His awareness of both this "savage cry" and his need for self-definition makes the Rebel speculate on the implications of his utterance. "Resentment? No. I resent the injustice but under no circumstances would I trade place for that of the executioner," he says. The hero's rejection to place himself at any of the two extremes situates him in a crossroad – the natural state of the hybrid/creole identity. Neither a European and white nor a slave, the rebel nevertheless accepts his "split self" but rejects assimilation.

The hero's realization of his condition prompts him to make a choice. "I have refused once and for all, to be a slave," he claims. He admits, however, that

...none of this is simple. This cry of "Death to the whites,"
not screaming it,
it is true, means accepting the fetid sterility of worn-out soil,
but ha!
Not crying "Death" to this cry of "Death to the whites" in-
volves another poverty. [7]

The Rebel chooses to die, but not without "speaking" back. Were he to die in silence, his death would be shameful and his inner struggle for self-identity useless. What is perhaps worse, he would die accepting that he is just a half of his entire self, that he has assimilated. He would be "accepting the fetid sterility of worn-out soil." Instead, "the field was not dried up," as Césaire once pointed out. "It would still bear fruit," he added, "if we made the effort to irrigate it with our sweat and plant new seeds in it...there were things to tell the world" [8].

The Rebel therefore accepts his death, but chooses to die on his own terms:

I accept this cry only as the chemical in the fertilizer
whose sole worth is in that dying
that regenerates a land without pestilence, rich, delectable,
smelling not of fertilizer but of ceaselessly fresh grass. [9]

His death entails a ritual of purification. The hero will die but only to be reborn into a new and different being. He offers his blood ("chemical") to the earth so that it "regenerates" not enslavement ("fertilizer," "pestilence") but freedom and solidarity, represented in the image of the "ceaselessly fresh grass." In choosing to die by going down to the earth, the Rebel is embracing his African heritage; he is reclaiming his authentic character and the part of History he was robbed. His death, therefore, is "a plunge into the depths...a plunge into Africa," as Césaire puts it [10]. Through his dramatic hero in *And the Dogs Were Silent*, Césaire is revealing that such emancipation of consciousness projects his own feeling that beneath the social being would be found a profound being, over whom all sorts of ancestral layers and alluviums had been deposited.

Césaire's encounter with "Negroes of diverse origins" while in Paris was crucial for the development of his African consciousness. His realization of African singularity, his

awareness of the solidarity among blacks, as well as his resistance to the politics of assimilation are manifested in the following section of the same scene in the play:

Let's suppose the world is a forest. Fine!
There are baobabs, some live oaks, black firs, white wal-
Nut trees;
I want all of them to grow, nicely firm and dense,
different in wood, in bearing, in color,
but equally rich in sap and without one encroaching upon
another,
different at their bases
but ... oh!
Let their tops join yes very high in the even ether that will
Form a single roof [11]

The forest effectively represents Césaire's idea of Négritude. He visualizes a black world in which people are "different" by virtue of birthplace, culture and skin shade, but where they grow "equally" strong, self-confident and wise. He wants those people to be "different at their bases," but without oppressing one another – "without one encroaching upon another." Finally, he encourages all those people to let their intellect and minds grow so that they become a common consciousness: "Let their tops join very high in the even ether that will / Form a single roof."

Surrealism was a revolutionary movement. Starting in France in 1924, and claiming to be the representative of communism in the arts, it frequently formed a common front with some other revolutionary movement in the political and social sphere. M.H. Abrams defines its aim as "a revolt against all the restraints on free creativity" -being "logical reasoning, standard morality, social and artistic conventions and norms," as well as "any control over the artistic process by forethought and intention" among the restraints to be transgressed. From a psychological stance, and following Harmon and Holman, surrealism "emphasiz[ed] the expression of the imagination as realized in dreams and presented without conscious control" [12]. Clearly based on Freud's theory of the unconscious, this movement in literature claimed that through 'automatic writing' the subconscious would dictate images and symbols in combination and that these, although unexpected and discordant to the mind, would actually reveal the true nature and context of the human soul.

Surrealism, for Césaire, was a liberating factor. To him, "the rationally censored world of the written," as J. Michael Dash argues, "had to yield to something more intuitive, more verbose, and less restrained [than the world of the written]" [13]. "Radical art," he adds, "must do more than subvert. It must transcend." On his part, Césaire has clarified the notion further. "If I apply the surrealist approach," he makes clear, "I can summon up [deep and unconscious] forces. This, for me, was a call to Africa" [14]. In sum, surrealism is revolt; it breaks traditional rules (order); it aims at the unrestrained expression of subconscious thought, therefore providing an ideal medium for hallucinatory, chaotic, dream-like and hence the mythic. In this light, Césaire's revolt in life is the Rebel's revolt in *And the Dogs Were Silent*. Césaire's "split self" finds harmony – definition- in the poet's awareness and embrace of his African heritage. Likewise, the Caribbean hero in the play achieves identity through the negotiation between myth and History.

Césaire's personal quest is also his artistic quest. As he points out in an Interview, he always felt the need "to create a new language, one capable of communicating the African heritage...a black French." Likewise, he needed to find a form that was his own. "Even though I wanted to break with French literary traditions," Césaire remarks, "I did not actually

free myself from them until the moment I decided to turn my back to poetry” [15]. Surrealism provided him “with what [he] had been...searching for”: freedom and artistic self-definition.

Only by first understanding the individual self, and becoming aware that it is a historical self, is it possible for human beings to position ourselves within the wider frame of History. The existentialist assumes that existence precedes essence, that the significant fact is that we and things generally exist, but that these things have no meaning for us except as we can create meaning through acting upon them. *And the Dogs Were Silent* entails this premise. The play is a constant reminder of Césaire’s own words: “Poetry is that process which through word, image, myth, love and humor establishes me at the living heart of myself and the world.” It is also a reminder of the Rebel’s – Césaire’s – personal victory, his success in silencing the “dogs” (the colonizers) by means of his own poetry. Unlike the title of the English translation (*And the Dogs Were Silent*), in which the verb indicates that the “dogs” were already silent, the title in French (*Et les chiens se taisaient*) indicates that the “dogs” were made to be silent. Césaire, as an intellectual and poet formed in France, had access to the power of language. In the play, he uses it to write back to the French Empire and claim what is his by right: his “Frenchness” – that part of his identity that permits him to reclaim all the other parts.

If Césaire’s position as a black colonized Martinican is complex in terms of identity definition, Jean Rhys’s situation as a white creole in Jamaica is not less problematic. Belinda Edmondson claims that “the white creole occupies an ambiguous space in West Indian society” [16]. Not only does she/he descend from the colonizer but also is culturally Afro-Caribbean in many ways. She/he also has the power to decide and the privilege to choose where to belong, what she/he wants to be. In other words, and resorting to Memmian theory, the white creole is representative of both the colonizer and the colonized. In turn, this situation is further complicated by gender, placing the white creole woman in a context of double alienation – woman in a patriarchal society, and white in a plantation society.

West Indian History lies at the heart of the novel and its protagonist’s experience. The circumstances that set [it] in motion “are,” as Lee Erwin points out, “the eventual freedom of the slaves in all the British colonies and the racial conflicts and social and economic turmoil that surrounded it” [17]. Martinique was colonized by the French in 1635, after having been under Spanish rule since Columbus arrived there in 1502. The English occupied the island for brief periods, but Martinique has been under permanent French control since 1816. Jamaica, under Spanish rule for 150 years, was invaded successfully by the British in 1655, and remained a British colony until 1962. The economy of these islands - as of other colonies in the Americas – was plantation-based, and therefore sustained by plantation, or agricultural, slavery. Although the slave trade was suppressed in Britain and its colonies in 1807, it was not until the Emancipation Act was approved that the institution of slavery was abolished. In the West Indies, however, the Act took effect a year later in the British colonies, and not until ten years later in the French colonies.

As noted in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “between 1834 and 1838 former slaves in the [British] colonies were forced to work under a so-called apprenticeship system” [18]. This was a new – and perhaps more cruel – kind of slavery. Due to the *loss* brought about by the Emancipation Act, “slave-owners were to be compensated monetary for each slave”; in turn, “considered property, the slaves themselves received no compensation” (emphasis mine). Furthermore, during the apprenticeship period the former masters had to “provide laborers with food, clothing, housing, and medical care or to give land on which apprentices could cultivate their own produce during their ‘free time.’” But, as the money for compensations never arrived, the apprentices received nothing. They did not have work or food. At the same time, family

plantations, “decayed after losing [their] slave labor,” often passed on to the hands of entrepreneurs. As also noted in the novel, “English entrepreneurs...came to the West Indies to take advantage of the depressed sugar market and to buy estates and plantations [which were] sold cheaply after emancipation” [19]. Fortune-hunters through marriage were among those opportunists. Rochester indeed is, in Spivak’s words, “a younger son dispatched to the colonies to buy a heiress” [20].

Wide Sargasso Sea is set in 1840. Not only is the novel a re-writing of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* but also the representation of the struggle for survival of the Caribbean against European patriarchy and empire. As such, and with a clear autobiographical content, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a novel of quest in which the author attempts to come to terms with her identity as a creole. Antoinette, like Rhys did, experiences the effect of the rivalry between France and England over the Caribbean, the decline of plantocracy, slave revolts, as well as the presence of entrepreneurs. She does not belong to the rigid colonial society of her English father or to the economically decayed but proud and exclusive circles of her creole mother. Her only “instinctive alliance,” and one her mother disapproves of, Baldanza argues in this respect, “is with a black servant girl, an omen of her later adult alignment with ‘the insulted and injured’ outcast in Europe” [21]. So she is caught between the English imperialist and the black native, as Spivak has noted. Like the Rebel in Césaire’s play, the heroine in *Wide Sargasso Sea* needs to make sense out of the chaos within and around her.

Michael Thorpe has observed that for Rhys “a novel is an impression, not an argument” [22]. While surrealism is Césaire’s way of revolt, impressionism is Rhys’s. Also a revolutionary movement, impressionism rebelled against the romantic schools of the nineteenth century. By definition, it is a highly personal manner of writing in which the author presents materials as they appear to the individual temperament at a precise moment and from a particular vantage point rather than as they are presumed to be in actuality. Todd Bender argues that after reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* the reader can never read *Jane Eyre* again in the same way. “[The] power to reach into the past and *transform* the nature of a previous text,” he claims, “is the mark of a high critical power which *Wide Sargasso Sea* derives from the theory of literary impressionism as practiced by Ford and Conrad in their best work” [23]. In the light of such theory, impressionist writers “try to control and manipulate the constructive activity of their audience as it registers an impression of their work.” The technique is clearly reflected in the several images of mirroring in the text and the effect these images produce in the reader.

Dictated by impressionistic techniques, “Rhys’s stor[y] involve[s] deviations from normal perception, such as hallucinations induced by extreme pain or suffering, drunkenness, or madness” [24]. Such is the case in the first section, when Antoinette narrates:

Then, not so far off, I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. 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. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her hand 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. [25]

The paragraph reflects the exclusion - the cultural marginality - of the protagonist and the recognition of an unbridgeable difference based on race and class. Deprived of her mother, her

social standing and culture, Antoinette's identity and sense of belonging are transferred to Coulibri. There she feels secure, happy and protected. "Coulibri Estate...now a thing of the past. (My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed – all belonged to the past," she recalls when the story opens [26]. Later, when the former slaves revolt and burn the house, she regrets "the golden ferns and the silver ferns, the orchids, the ginger lilies and the roses, the rocking-chairs and the blue sofa, the jasmine and the honeysuckle, and the picture of the Miller's daughter" [27]. Coulibri symbolizes her creoleness and life status as a colonialist.

The sight of the house on fire and the realization that she "would never see Coulibri again" prompt Antoinette to seek acceptance in a world she does not belong – Tia's. It is true that the two girls "had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river" but their motives and realities were completely different. Tia was a slave, the servant who entertained and looked after the master's daughter. That was her role and responsibility. Antoinette was the white lady who had all the privileges of her race and class. Emancipation could not blur the differences between them.

Tia is always aware of her place; Antoinette is not. Her desperation and confusion at the idea of leaving Coulibri pushes her to ignore the unbridgeable difference that exists between her world and Tia's. In complete denial of her marginality, therefore, she entertains the illusion of a metamorphosis: "I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not." Antoinette is not like Tia, but Tia becomes the symbol of that land, a daughter of that island, so she needs to be like her. The use of the future tense is very significant here since it gives Antoinette's thought the status of a momentary determination rather than a permanent feeling. The idea of Antoinette's naivete and blindness with respect to the situation before her is further suggested by the fact that "[she] saw the jagged stone in [Tia's] hand but she did not see her throw it. [She] did not feel it either." Although Tia is visibly suffering ("I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry"), she throws the stone at Antoinette in a sign of establishing the differences between them – "in this case," as Erwin suggests, "literally by means of a cut" [28]. Tia openly excludes Antoinette and rejects the world and aspect of history she represents. The fact that it is Tia who throws the stone reinforces the idea of rejection and exclusion. Antoinette, on the other hand, becomes aware of the irreconcilability of their two worlds. "We stared at each other" (two sides of a same history confronted). "Blood on my face" (colonialism) "tears on hers" (slavery). "It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass." This concluding line emphasizes the idea of exclusion that permeates the whole passage. The image reflected in the mirror is the image of the Other.

A progressive sequence of dreams reinforces the mirror imagery of the first section. It is not until the very last scene, however, that Rhys consolidates the one from Part one. Antoinette's final dream is, as Drake puts it, "the locus of her awakening":

I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger,
Qui est l'a? Qui est l'a? and the man who hated me was
calling too, Bertha! Bertha! The wind caught my air and it
streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I
jumped to those hard stones. But when I looked over the edge
I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me
and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You
frightened? And I heard the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha! All
this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so
red. Someone screamed and I thought, *Why did I scream?* I
called 'Tia'! and jumped and woke. [29]

The dream sequence is completed with an invocation to Tia – in Spivak’s words, “the Other that could not be selfed” [30]. “It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass,” Antoinette concludes in the scene from Part one. Now, by a “mirror reversal of this sharp division and separation by race, class and wealth,” Rhys “conflates the fight at the pool” (where Antoinette had rejected Tia before Tia rejected her) “and the scene with the stone in a final scene of reconciliation” [31]. The two questions, “*Qui est l’a?*” and “You frightened?,” are also solved now. In the paragraph following the dream, Antoinette says “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” [32]. She sets the place on fire and dies. The flames “light her along the dark passage” – a beautiful image that symbolizes her self-awareness. Antoinette burns Thornfield Hall (symbol of the English) as an act of vengeance and identity reclamation. As Drake observes, the end of the novel is not the ‘end’ of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. The lightening of the passage indeed suggests that Antoinette’s quest is fulfilled; she now knows who she is. Rhys takes care that “the woman from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal,” for the purpose of “construct[ing] a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer” [33].

And the Dogs Were Silent and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are two excellent examples of the Caribbean mind working for self-identity. Although the author’s aim is the same (coming to terms with their creoleness/hybridity) and their characters have to struggle with a shared History (Caribbean History) their quests are significantly different. Césaire, a black Martinican intellectual, disillusioned and angry when he realizes the meaning of his “blackness” while studying in Paris, directs his quest towards his ancestral past – Africa – and the making and revaluing of a black consciousness. The reconstruction of that past, his identity, is only possible through the negotiation between History and myth. On the other hand, Rhys, a white Dominican creole, and a woman, needs to resolve her quest in terms of the binaries of race, class, wealth and gender. Her inner struggle is perhaps more complex. On the one hand, her conflict is a consequence of inter-racial rivalry (power among whites, as well as her condition as a female in a patriarchal society) and rejection by her own race; on the other, hers is also a conflict generated by racial, economic, and class factors resulting from her status as a colonialist minority. Césaire and Rhys, although both Caribbean, come from different H(h)istories and experiences. Inevitably, their quests have to be different.

Notes

1 Vera Kutzinski, “Caribbean Theory and Criticism” *John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 1994 ed., 139.

2 Aimé Césaire, *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry: 1946-82* (Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1990) “Introduction” xvi.

3 Césaire, “Introduction” *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry* xvi.

4 Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge” *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry* iv.

5 Césaire, “An Interview with Aimé Césaire” *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review P, 1972) 76.

6 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent* in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry*, Act III, 32. All subsequent references to the play correspond to this edition.

7 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent* 32. Subsequent references to the play can be made using a shortened title.

8 Césaire, “Interview” 76.

9 Césaire, *Dogs* 32.

10 Césaire, “Interview” 68.

11 Césaire, *Dogs* 33.

12 M.H. Abrahams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1993) 504.

- 13 Michael Dash, "Introduction" *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays by Edouard Glissant* (Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1992) xxi.
- 14 Césaire, "Interview" 68.
- 15 Césaire, "Interview" 66-67.
- 16 Sandra Drake, "Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*" *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Norton, 1999) 180.
- 17 Lee Erwin, "'Like in a Looking Glass': History and Narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea*" *Wide Sargasso Sea* 207.
- 18 Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 9 [5]; emphasis mine.
- 19 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 15 [7].
- 20 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "*Wide Sargasso Sea* and a Critique of Imperialism" *Wide Sargasso Sea* 243.
- 21 Frank Baldanza, "Jean Rhys on Insult and Injury" *British Novelists Since 1900* (New York: AMS, 1987) 106.
- 22 Michael Thorpe, "'The Other Side': *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*" *Wide Sargasso Sea* 173.
- 23 Todd Bender, "Jean Rhys and the Genius of Impressionism" *British Novelists Since 1900* 96.
- 24 Bender 102.
- 25 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 27.
- 26 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 9.
- 27 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 27.
- 28 Erwin 145.
- 29 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 112.
- 30 Spivak 243.
- 31 Drake 204.
- 32 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 112.
- 33 Spivak 243.

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