

Postcolonial Writing: Letters Assignment

Wide Sargasso Sea

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Letter One:

Aunt Cora,

I write to you now, at a time in which I feel a great desperation. Although we have not spoken for some time, I have no-one else to write to, no-one to care for my plight¹. The subject of this letter is myself, for I am trapped. Trapped and alone in this dark and dull room. There is nothing I can do, and nothing to do but to think of him, and the more I do, the more thinking turns to festering. Every day I feel time slipping away. I do not know if I have been here a month, or a year, or perhaps longer². The room is black and there is a woman here (her name escapes me) who says she is here to look after me, but I do not need looking after. I need help. I must escape, I must get away, for I do not know what I shall do should he return. What I have realised, is one thing that I am sure of: I hate him. He stole me from my home, he took me from warmth, and light, and life, and he hides me here, in this cold, dark hell. This is why I must escape, Aunt Cora. You must see, you must help, for should he return and I am still here, I will have no choice but to kill him. This man who at one time may have loved me, when I was still fresh and exotic to him³. When last he was here, I could only control myself by pulling on my hair, until pieces came out. In memory of something I once felt for him, I do not wish for this to come to pass, therefore I have to escape. I have to escape. Must escape⁴. I do not know where I will go, for I do not know

¹ Antoinette, much like her mother, feels she has been abandoned by everyone who cared for her. This heightens her paranoia, causing suspicion and, in the case of Rochester, she becomes hostile. According to Selin Yurdakul "Antoinette is trapped in the same suppressed role that destroys her mother" (2019, p. 67)..

² Antoinette's mental anguish here reflects how being held in a small room for an unknown amount of time adds to her mental health issues and feelings of isolation. This creates and fuels feelings of desperation, otherness and victimisation, thus she progressively loses her ability to function in society, even though this is the antithesis of Rochester's aim. Rhys suggests Rochester's intentions were good, in some ways: "I will not forsake her... I will do all I can for her" (Rhys, 1999 p. 102). In hiding Antoinette, however, he exacerbates her problems in the same way as Antoinette's mother, who Christophine says was driven insane because "they tell her she is mad" and she is eventually left with "no kind words, no friends, and her husband he go off" (Bronte, 1999 p. 101). This resembles Antoinette's situation and implies that Antoinette and her mother's mental health issues were accelerated and intensified by their abandonment and mistreatment.

³ Said (1978) would likely argue that this is reflective of the construction that the Orient was a place of mystery and exoticism as the East became a Western invention to reinforce and strengthen Western values, giving Europe a way of controlling the East through academic Orientalism, which "contributed to the exploitation of the orient" (Said, 1978 p. 1) and legitimised colonial control. In her re-writing of *Jane Eyre* (Bronte, 1999), Rhys (2000) is challenging Colonial and Orientalist representations of the East by challenging binaries. In this example, the use of these techniques is an attempt to showcase the effects that Orientalist ideals have, as well as how deeply embedded into academic and artistic work they became.

⁴ Scattered, repetitive writing technique showcasing Antoinette's confusion and lack of self-awareness. She is unable to recognise her odd writing technique, as well as the strange atmosphere. These aspects of

where I belong. I am lost in this world, but I know I do not belong here⁵. They fear me, I know they fear me⁶. I feared them once, or rather, I feared how long they would keep me here, and what my purpose was, for they kept both from me. They do not understand me, for they cannot. The only way they could is if they were me, and I know this is impossible⁷. Recently I feel myself moving from fear. Every day I am moving towards fury and rage and red, and it is all converging around one place in my mind. Around him.

Antoinette's character are evidenced by Rhys when she questions her own whereabouts: "They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them. We lost our way to England. When? Where?" (Rhys, 2000 p. 117). This reinforces that Antoinette's confusion is accelerated or caused by her isolation.

⁵ Rhys expresses her own otherness through Antoinette's character. Antoinette is Creole like Rhys and because of this they experience a lack of acceptance (Plasa, 2001), leading to confusion about where they belong, with Antoinette confiding in Rochester: "I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (Rhys, 2000 p. 64). Antoinette's difference in cultural background and experience others her from the white characters as "her hybrid nature thwarts her attempts to identify with the English and places her in the zone of the others" (Peimanfard, 2016, p. 17). Much like Rhys, Antoinette is othered from both of her ethnic backgrounds. This part of the letter expresses this through Antoinette's confusion about where she belongs, but also a desperation to escape her current whereabouts, as the extent to which she worries about where she will go upon escaping is minimal.

⁶ Within a foreword to Fanon's 'Black Skin, White Masks' (Fanon, 2008), Bhaba suggests that Colonialism relies on and creates an "insatiable fear and desire for the negro" which is linked heavily to the "deep cultural fear of the black" (Bhaba, 2008 p. xxiv). Fanon states that a fear of blackness, in some, or "negrophobia[,] is found to be on an instinctual, biological level" (Fanon, 2008 p. 124).

⁷ Spivak (1985, cited in Morris 2010) introduces the idea that it may not be ethical to represent subaltern groups. This is because we are speaking for them, therefore, it might be interpreted that we are taking their voice. However, in representing Antoinette this letter merely gives expanded ideas which are based on, exist within, and reflect Rhys's (who has had personal experiences relating to the effects of Colonialism) challenges to colonialism in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Letter 2:

Dear Madame,

It was my intention to involve myself no more with the matter of your services, and to entrust this to a member of my staff, however, I am told you have asked for further information. Therefore, I will describe the situation, provided I will not be pestered with further involvement⁸. First, let me assure you, your payment will be generous, but I will not discuss it in detail as I am sure you already know of the amount. This woman is someone I once knew, but who I do not recognise anymore, once my loving wife, but sadly no longer⁹. She has transformed from a beautiful soft-spoken woman into a beast with dire intent¹⁰. When I last saw her, she had taken to pulling chunks of her hair from her head. This is not the woman I knew; this is not my wife; she looks at me with lips and brows that seem to contort, forming a demon's visage. You may consider me dramatic, but I tell you this only because I am sure you will see her yourself. I have concluded that the only appropriate action, which is best for all, is to shut her away. You must understand this is for the best, for if others saw what I have seen there would be a scandal, and I would be unable to show my face. I also fear that she will become a danger to herself, and others¹¹. You might ask how she has mutated into the creature you will see, but I do not hold the answer. My belief is a fear I have held for a long time, which is that this was inevitable. Her mother was mad, you see. I am told she was dangerous, but I have done all I can to separate her from her mother's inheritance¹². Now I think my efforts were in vain as I know I could have done no more. It may be her ancestry that is to blame for her, as I have visited the place she lived, and it seems to me any person would go mad with the incessant heat and insects that harass those living there. I must admit I have felt far from myself there¹³. To finalise my

⁸ Rochester does not want to have Antoinette as his responsibility, as he believes he is a victim: "do you think that I wanted all this?" (Rhys, 2000 p. 104). He wants to pass her care off to others, moving on with his life, without seeing or hearing the problem: "for God's sake let me hear no more of it" (Rhys, 2000 p. 115) as he feels he can do no more.

⁹ Rochester feels that in Antoinette's downfall she became a different person, until she is "A ghost in the grey daylight" (Rhys, 2000 p. 110). This detachment of Antoinette is an effort to justify his actions in locking her away (Gilbert, 2000) and, in the future, his interest in Jane Eyre, as he cannot be unfaithful to his wife if she does not exist, or at least the version of her which he married does not exist.

¹⁰ Zoomorphic language such as "beast" (Bronte, 1999 p. 258) is reflective of Bronte's description of Antoinette in *Jane Eyre* showcasing how Antoinette has become the version of herself that we see in Bronte's work. It also suggests Rochester is dehumanising her, justifying his action to keep Antoinette locked away.

¹¹ Rochester mentions the danger that Antoinette may pose last in a list of why he decides to lock her away. This is reflective of his worst character trait: his ego. He cares more for how people would react if they knew his wife was 'mad' than he cares for her safety, or others.

¹² Antoinette believes Rochester refers to her as Bertha because "he has found out it was my mother's name" (Rhys, 2000 p. 71) suggesting Rochester wishes to distance Antoinette from her mother, as he feels that this may save her from mental degradation. Ciolkowski (1997 p. 349) surmises that this causes the antithesis, and acts as a catalyst in her descent, "blasphemously baptising her the madwoman of Charlotte Bronte's Victorian attic" creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. This re-naming reflects the restrictive power of colonialism because at every corner Antoinette is "confronted with the brutalising effects of othering brought about by colonialism" (Mukhuba, Theophilus T et al, 2019 p. 13861) which remove her agency.

thoughts, and feel free to use my letter as a guide for reference: I care for Bertha a great deal, but I can do no more for her; I must move on with my life. Every man has his limits and I wish to advance from this chapter of my life¹⁴, and those who brought it upon me for their own selfish ways. I took her from that wretched place and brought her to civilized society; she repays me with this. However, I will see no harm come to her and, if I am informed of this while she is under your supervision, there will be dire consequences for you. All you must do is care for her.

¹³ Rochester comes to hate the “God forsaken” (Rhys, 2000 p. 103) island, stating it is an “abominable place” (Rhys, 2000 p. 104). All his problems seem to come from Granbois, thus through association he hates the island because it has brought him nothing but turmoil (Bronte, 1999). This is evidence of a colonial trait as the West often believed that their way of life, and their home, was superior to that of the East.

¹⁴ Rochester is afraid that he will not be able to live a normal life anymore, and he fears that he will be “tied to a lunatic for life” (Rhys, 2000 p. 106). However, he still cares for Antoinette and he once looked forward to spending his life with her. He cannot let her go, and with both selfishness and care, he locks her away. Rochester states she is “my lunatic. My mad girl” (Rhys, 2000 p. 107) evidencing the fractured nature of his relationship with Antoinette (Anderson, Paula Grace, 1982).

Reflection

The first letter represents a cry for help from Antoinette to Aunt Cora whilst she is locked away in Rochester's home at an unknown time. How or where she would send the letter is unimportant as it is merely meant to showcase the desperate ramblings of Antoinette which coincide with the degenerative and devastating effects of colonialism. The letter aims to showcase Antoinette's confusion, desperation, and downfall. This is presented through the irregular and scattered nature of the writing, as well as the ostracisation that Antoinette has faced due to the oppressive nature of colonialism and the mental anguish it causes. However, there is some definite sense, evidencing her internal thought process to be misunderstood and relatively pure. The second letter is a communication from Rochester to Grace Poole, after she inquires with one of his servants for information on why Antoinette is locked away. This letter is intended to reflect the duality of Rochester and Antoinette, and therefore has the aim of presenting his confusion and desperation, but also his misunderstanding of Antoinette and her culture, as well as his superiority complex. This is evidenced through his ego and self-emphasis as Rochester relates the narrative almost completely to himself. This parallels Colonialism's lack of understanding of its damage as it believes its own culture is superior and therefore casts aside the impacts on those occupied; they are opened to civilization and God. Consequently, colonised countries were encouraged to accept Western culture over their own.

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