The Liberating Force of the Carnival (esque) in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)

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Abstract

Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a postmodern revisionary rewriting of Charlotte Brontë’s canonical novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) in which the postcolonial woman novelist liberates the female cultural Other from the confines of imposed voicelessness and savage madness. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque that sanctions a “licensed misrule,” this paper seeks to study the ceremonial subversion of Rhys’s carnivalistic text in which she turns the Brontean world on its head, redeeming the Creole Bertha Mason from her readerly representation as “the madwoman in the attic” to acutely defy the licensing systems of power. First, it will look into the Rhysian precocity to rattle the reliability and authenticity of the Brontean nation and narration, creating a polyphonic narrative that serves the politics of liberation in its endeavour to release and foster multiple voices. Investing in relativity, her narrative dismantles the monologic and monolithic ‘Truth’ of the official work, opening the floor to the free-floating articulation of different realities. Second, it will closely examine Antoinette/Bertha as a carnivalesque-grotesque character. The latter resorts to degradation manifested in her exaggerated verbalization of her deviant sexuality which is openly articulated instead of being repressed on the one hand; and to laugh that mocks the hegemonic patriarchal and colonial/imperialist discourses on the other hand.

Keywords: liberation, carnival, carnivalesque-grotesque, inversion/subversion, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. 
The Carnival (esque) as a Principle of Reversal and Misrule:

In his seminal study *Rabelais and his World*¹, Mikhail Bakhtin designates the carnival as a licensed misrule that acutely defies the licensing systems of power. Unlike official feasts which insist on the “stable, un-changing [and] perennial” nature of all “the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms and prohibitions” of the dominant culture, the carnival heralds a liberating ceremony of a topsy-turvy world where the logic of inversion/subversion is sublimated into a ritual (Yaneva 60). This logic authorizes the suppressed individuals to suspend all sorts of hierarchies and stratifications, to uncrown the imposed forms of domination and surveillance, to reverse positions of inferiority and superiority and to breach the imperatives of the social and cultural order and thus to foster alternative visions of reality that embrace the joyful relativity of the carnivalestic world. The carnival thus sanctions a license to plunge into a disorderly world of festive misconduct and transgressive inversions, redeeming the subject from the “prevailing point of view on the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (Bakhtin 34). It provides liberation from cultural by-products, ready-made truths and socially normalised orders which are ideologically and discursively underpinning the strictures of the regulatory system. In so doing, the Bakhtinian carnival offers an “experience of Utopia” that provides an anti-authoritarian and anti-taxonomic view of the world (Yaneva 59).

Enlivened with the carnival spirit, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*² represents an embodiment of what Bakhtin designates as “the transposition of carnival into the language of literature” (Bakhtin 122). Consciously performing the “logic of the “inside out”, […] of the “turnabout”, of a continual shifting from top to bottom,” Rhys endows the Creole Bertha with “a second world and a second life outside of officialdom,” a world and a life in which an alternative facet of reality and a double vision of her story acquit her from her previously readerly knowledge (11-6). In her festive-like narrative, Rhys unlocks the excentric Bertha Mason from the confines of alterity, voicelessness and madness and celebrates her subjective agency to revise, re-tell and rewrite (her) story/history. Accordingly, her novel turns out to be a liberating ceremony that sanctions a licensed reversal of “bipolar oppositions,” normalized conventions and naturalized stratifications (6). It promotes a release from the tension exerted between metropolitan self and peripherised Other who flouts defiantly the deep-seated hierarchies inscribed by the suppressive pillars sustaining the edifice of the dominant ideologies and consolidated by its discursive practices.

While offering her a plausible past life, Rhys takes her readers on a journey back to the Caribbean of the 1830s where she endows her heroine with a new identity, projecting her as Antoinette Cosway, the female counterpart of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*³. In the carnivalisic ritual of crowning and decrowning, she inverts Bertha’s situation from “the foul German spectre—the Vampire” that causes a gothic horror in Thornfield to a sane female character that shows her resistance to the patriarchal and colonialist/imperialist discourses while decentralizing the voice of Jane Eyre who is dislodged from her position as the pre-eminent narrator in the Brontë narrative (Brontë 311). Accordingly, the center stage is handed over to Antoinette/Bertha, the newly crowned heroine who becomes the speaking subject of her story. Yet, Rhys not only inverts the position of Bertha Mason but also reverses and degrades that of the Brontëan Edward Rochester who is deprived of any name. Actually, Rhys’s removal of his name as an identifying force overthrows Antoinette’s dependency on him and makes him define himself as “Antoinette’s husband.” Indeed, this victorious bottom-
side structure between these two characters troubles the fixed positions of those in power, offering an alternative space which celebrates the joyful relativity of the carnival spirit. In other words, the Caribbean woman writer defies the subordinate status of Jamaican society and its dependent position on the British Empire by obliging her male protagonist to sustain his wife’s name as his identity.

Defying Univocality, Embracing Multivocality: The Polyphonic Nature of the Rhysian Narrative:

Inasmuch as it cuddles the assortment of different voices, the carnivalesque decrees a drastic recalcitrance toward the canonical works while embracing all sorts of misalliances and consequently celebrating “the joyful relativity” of the carnival spirit (Bakhtin 123). It strives to defy the monologic world traced by those in power and acclaims its dialogic principle that fosters heterogeneity. Rhys’s novel turns out to be a carnivalistic polyphonic narrative in which “we find not an objective, authorial voice presenting the relations and dialogues between characters but a world in which all characters, and even the narrator him- or herself, are possessed of their own discursive consciousness” (Graham Allen 23). Told from a plurality of conflicting consciousnesses unchained by authorial domination, her multi-voiced textual space develops a dialogue between different, often paradoxical voices, tracing “a new mode of interrelationship, counterpoised to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life,” a mode that allows Antoinette/Bertha to “enter into a free […] contact” with Edward Rochester as well as Grace Poole, her caretaker in the Brontean work, offering the reader ‘hybridized viewpoints’ of her story (Bakhtin 123). The interaction between incompatible voices serves to overcome the infallible reality of Bertha’s madness in the Brontean narrative.

It is appositely this multiplicity of voices that makes the Rhysian text a “carnivalized writing” characterized by “an ongoing struggle between centripetal and centrifugal forces of language which can be symbolized by the opposition between monologic and dialogic utterance” (Allen 22). While the centripetal force of language designates the centralized and homogeneous nature of Western discourse; centrifugal force signals the decentralized and anti-canonical writings of the marginalized. Indeed, the second section of the novel creates “a contact zone” in which the voices of Edward Rochester (the male colonizer) and Antoinette Cosway (the female colonized) are freed from authorial hierarchies (Bakhtin 345). In his essay “Landscape and Character in Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea,” Thomas Loe contends that “[t]he contrasts between these types of narratives give us binaries (female and male, Caribbean and English, colonized and colonizer, passive and assertive, natural and man-made) for emphasizing similarities and differences in characters' psychic makeups” (50). In other words, Antoinette’s and Rochester’s competing and conflicting accounts which intersect and clash shake the reliability and authenticity of the male character who gives a centripetal version of his wife’s past life in the Brontean text, striving to decentralize the official history and ideological language of the metropolitan center that misrepresents the Indian world. Sharing with Bertha the same origin and background, she comes to occupy a new authorial site in relation to her heroine. Rhys performs what Bakhtin calls a “dialogic position” as she speaks with Bertha, not about her (Bakhtin 63).
The Carnivalesque-Grotesque in WSS:

- The carnivalestic Laughers of Antoinette Cosway:

  Unlike the Brontean narrative that depicts the Creole Bertha as a bestial and wild creature that inhabits the boundaries between the human and the animal, the Rhysian narrative adopts the Bakhtinian carnivalesque-grotesque which depends on degradation and laughter to heal Bertha from the confines of grotesqueness and celebrates what is debased and excluded in the original work. Focusing on the carnivalistic attribute of laughter, Bakhtin argues that it “enables its participants to revise old beliefs and conceptions and debunk whatever may represent a source of oppression for the individual” (Isabel Cuevas 41). The triumphant and sarcastic laughter functions as a form of resistance that “purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified […] and liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level” (Bakhtin 123). Upon his arrival to Jamaica, Rochester experiences dislocation and alienation caused by the cultural and racial borders. His failure to relate himself to this different world or to domesticate it frustrates his desire to conquer and subdue. Actually, it is Antoinette who possesses enough knowledge not only about the land but also about its people, performing the task of the supervisor while instructing and guiding her husband who reveals: “All day she’d […] try to teach me her songs, for they haunted me […] she’d laugh for a long time and never tell me why she laughed” (Rhys 76). Antoinette’s subversive laughter can better translate her mockery and derision of the vulnerable situation of her husband who becomes overwhelmed by her instructions that dominate him. Indeed, Rhys manages not only to reverse gender roles between the Creole female protagonist and the nameless male character but also to invert the colonizer/colonized relationship in a way that Rochester’s patriarchal and colonial identity is jeopardized by the female Other. Indeed, Antoinette’s exuberant laughers can be politically treated; they answer back to the ideologically dominant discourse. Her laughing act is collective at the core; it does not belong to a single subject or is limited to a spacio-temporal condition. Instead, it “is universal in scope”; it goes beyond time and space and “expresses the viewpoint of the whole [postcolonial Caribbean] world” (Bakhtin 71). Accordingly, her “festive laughter” “is not an individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic’ event […] but is the laughter of all the people” of all who shares with her the same position (11). In other words, her laughter translates the postcolonial subject’s mockery of the “single-labeled, absolute, heavy, and monolithically serious” discourses (Cuevas 21).

  Antoinette’s laughter seems more subversive in the closing pages of the novel. Unlike the Brontean text that associates Bertha’s “goblin-laughter” with madness and savageness - it “was a demonic laugh - low, suppressed, and deep - uttered”- the Rhysian narrative identifies it with her powerful precocity to deteriorate the oppressive dominant system that both incarcerates her in the third floor of Thornfield Hall and identifies her as the madwoman in the attic (Brontë 215). In a climactic scene of subjective defiance, Antoinette performs a resistant act while setting fire to Rochester’s mansion which stands for the supremacy of English patriarchy and colonial rule as she reveals:

  I saw the sunlight coming through the window, the tree outside and the shadows of the leaves on the floor, but I saw the wax candles too and I hated them. So I knocked them all down. Most of them went out but one caught the thin curtains that were behind the red ones. I laughed when I saw the lovely colour spreading so fast. (Rhys 157)

Antoinette’s laughter is “gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (Bakhtin 11-12). It communicates concretely her merry
triumph over the dominant structures of power as it enables her to undermine inequalities through her derision of hierarchical system. Rhys makes her female protagonist perform her deeds out of her deliberate intent to destroy the myth of patriarchal and colonial oppression, while rewriting her heroine’s powerlessness and passiveness. In other words, the red colour of fire stands for her burning passion and violent fury seething with her and for her belonging to the Jamaican world characterized by its warmthness. Engaged in a carnivalistic scene of deconstruction, Antoinette willingly and actively resorts to laugh that evidently mocks and debases the long-standing discursive practices of the dominant system. She endows herself with much space to redeem her sexuality in an erotic red colour scene and to release herself from the confines of otherness claiming her belonging to the West Indies. Her laughter bolsters regeneration and rebirth which is realized through the denial of imposed patterns and constraints, offering thus an alternative ground for the proliferation of new meanings and truths.

The final section of the novel is “a ‘festive’ madness” in which Antoinette challenges the dominant discourses that incarcerate her within the confines of otherness and passivity (Bakhtin 39). Unlike, the Brontean work that debases her forced insanity while describing her as “a mad cat” responsible for creating havoc in Thornfield Hall, the Rhysian text considers her madness as “a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official ‘truth’” (Brontë 44, Bakhtin 39). Bakhtin indicates that foolery offers an alternative viewpoint of the world which is not only liberated from value judgement but also far from the officialdom imposed by controlling authorities. Antoinette/Bertha’s maniacal laughter is deemed a carnivalesque parodic gesture that not only twists the readerly knowledge of her official story in the parodied text that strips her of her subjective agency but also endows her with a subversive potential to mock the solemnity of dogmatized patriarchal discourse. In an upside down world where the mad is endowed with much leeway to speak and rebel against the established system, her ambivalent laughter represents a weapon to fight against the dominant discourses, a “source of a vital regenerative power [by which …] traditional worn-out values are vanquished; what is tired and effete is defeated; even death is conquered by the reiteration of new life, affirmed in the cycle that leads from death to rebirth” (Danow 36). Thus, it is both liberating and rejuvenating forces that suspend the traditional role imposed on her. It endows her with both a liberating and rejuvenating opportunity to voice “reality” and “truth”.

• Degradation: Celebrating the Earthly

Bakhtin further explains that the grotesque thrives on degradation which he defines as “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in all their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 19-20). The carnival promotes a rehabilitation of “the traditional bodily canon” that maintains and sustains the paradigms of the normative system of power (20). Unlike the official view that adopts the Cartesian privilege of the mind over the body which is a vessel of pleasures and thus sins, the Bakhtinian theory gives voice to flesh to celebrate its materiality and corporeality. It feasts the demands and functions of the “lower bodily stratum” related to positive exaggeration of “acts of defecation and copulation, pregnancy and birth” (21). While embracing her sexually immoderate pleasures and desires, she violates the officially established cultural order which is used as a tool of gender domination and control in the Brontean text. Unlike Jane Eyre’s contained passion that stands for her normative body, Antoinette satirises the seriousness of the British norms; she represents the carnivalesque-grotesque who not only celebrates the
excitement of the erotic and the lust of the flesh but also the inversion of the patriarchal sexual politics and the veneration of anti-socio-cultural behaviours.

**Liberating the Erotic:**
In a parodic festivity, Antoinette/Bertha mocks Jane Eyre’s self-regulated identity while celebrating herself as a woman who is a sexually lustful. Her sexual propensities and erotic excesses are no longer markers of social corruption; instead, they become a transgressive form of resistance to counteract the patriarchal thought that associates the sexually passionate woman with the demonic. Antoinette’s celebration of her sexual excesses signals a subversive energy that resists patriarchal desire to control, contain and master the female body. She threatens the English morality and British cultural and social values of chastity and purity. Her transgressive and excessive sexual appetites drive her to perversion and promiscuity as Rhys writes: “She thirsts for anyone- […]... She’ll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter” (Rhys, emphasis is mine 107). Antoinette has many sexual affairs and notably with her cousin Sandi.

**Subversion of the patriarchal politics:**
The Creole heroine goes beyond that to celebrate her capacity to turn the patriarchal sexual politics upside down, contributing to the regeneration of the entire sexual system. She is no longer a sexual object of a male gaze as she redefines her subject position while disturbingly inverts and subverts the traditional sexual politics based on the binary opposite of active male/passive female. Embracing the carnivalistic spirit of turning hierarchies upside down, Antoinette’s active sexuality overpowers her husband who is captivated by her physical beauty that looks alien and strange, as Rhys writes: “[he is] bewitch[ed] with her. She is in [his] blood and [his] bones. By night and by day” (Rhys 59). The patriarchal Rochester finds himself sexually dependent on his wife who performs the active role of the dominator. In a figurative depiction of her thirst for Rochester, the Creole woman extensively uses the word “death” to excite him:

“If I could die. Now, when I am happy. Would you do that? Would you do that? You wouldn’t have to kill me. Say die and I will die. You don’t believe me? Then try, try say die and watch me die.”

“Die then! Die!” I watched her die many times. In [her] way, not in [mines] […] Very soon she was as eager for what’s called loving as I was. (Rhys, emphasis is mine 40-41)

Rochester is highly overwhelmed by Antoinette’s eroticised sexuality. Metaphorically, her way of dying obviously articulates her happiness as she comes to liberate her sexual desires from the restrictive confines of repression. Actually, her passion imperils the supremacy of Rochester’s patriarchal position. The Caribbean female novelist creates a new order as she makes Rochester depended on Antoinette through a hunger for sex. “[B]reathless and savage with desire,” he loses control over his body (Rhys 55). What Antoinette does is a reversal of sexual roles in which women are expected to be sexless and passive. She enjoys the symbiotic mixture between their bodies, promoting the eruption of the semiotic, a female realm in which boundaries between self and the other are dissolved. She subverts the ‘traditional bodily canon’ that dictates control and repression, thus verbalizing and celebrating the lower bodily stratum.
The Joyful Liberation from Restraints: The Celebration of Rebirth and Open-Endedness:

Rhys’s endorsement of the Bakhtinian concept of rebirth can be better seen in the last section of the novel which is based on Antoinette’s third dream in which she visualizes herself dying in fire that she sets in Rochester’s mansion. Her jump into the burning pool should not be read as a defeated suicide. Instead, it is a kind of triumph that liberates her from the oppressive discourses manifested in her feelings of flying like a bird as she says: “the wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings” (Rhys 123). Her fall thus, is a kind of victorious carnivalistic rebirth that celebrates life and death. Indeed, death is highly estimated in Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque as he contends:

[D]eath is not a negation of life […] but part of life as a whole-its indispensable component, the condition of its constant renewal and rejuvenation. Death is here always related to birth; the grave is related to the earth’s life-giving womb. […] Death is included in life, and together with birth determines its eternal movement. Even the struggle of life and death in the individual body is conceived by grotesque imagery as the struggle of the old life stubbornly resisting the new life about to be born, as the crisis of change. (Bakhtin 50)

Bakhtin explains that the spirit of the carnival encompasses instances of death and revival, which culminate in a festive revelry of change and renewal. Death thus, does not denote finality and destruction instead it is an affirmative moment “for recasting and a new birth” (53). WSS perceives Antoinette’s death as a healing feast that challenges the patriarchally and colonially-oriented ending of the mad Creole Bertha Mason in the Brontean text. Her death is an indispensable condition for regeneration. As she jumps into the pool where she sees the figure of Tia, the black girl who represents the other part of her personality, Antoinette will definitively succeed in rebirthing herself and asserting her hybrid identity while embracing the black and white part of her cultural identity.

Along with her endeavour to liberate her heroine from the fatal demise that she witnessed in JE, Rhys undertakes the task to redeem her novel from the finalised ending and the imposed closure of Brontë’s narrative, providing thus a new textual space that celebrates the carnivalesque joyful relativity. The final pages of the novel are based on Antoinette’s third dream which liberates her from the conventional spatiotemporal parameters through her violation of the bounds between reality and dream, creating a magical realist scene. While blurring the boundaries between her present life in Thornfield with her memories of Coulibri, Antoinette defies the realistic conception of objective truth, creating her own reality and world. She refuses to acknowledge the world of Thornfield Hall that imposes on her a fixed identity and defines her as the marginalised Other. In the final section of the novel, Antoinette “doubts the identity of her residence” insisting that the mansion is not in England (Müller 74). She believes that England which she previously depicts as “quite unreal, and like a dream” is an imaginary place, a “cardboard world” made of paper (Rhys116). She insists that she has never reached England and that she is still sailing the wide Sargasso Sea. The indeterminacy and uncertainty that Antoinette creates overthrow the conventions of clarity and finality and celebrates the concepts of uncertainty and flux. Her refusal to accept England as an objective and external reality proves her subversive capacity to create her own reality. The novel’s title seems to signify Antoinette’s unstable world of plurality and difference, one that is set against Rochester’s world that denotes fixedness and stability reflected in the word ‘land’ in England. Thinking that she and Rochester have lost their way in Sargasso Sea casts doubt on the
authority and power of Rochester as well as the reliability of Bronte’s objective reality. The novel ends with the Creole heroine wandering in the dark corridors of Rochester’s mansion reproducing the beginning of her oneiric action.

**Conclusion:**

Under the sanctioned license of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, WSS amply turns the Brontean world on its head in favour of shaking up the hierarchical system of the dominant discourses. It liberates itself from the clutches of the conventional tedium of protest while embracing the carnivalesque joyful objection to the dominant system and subjection to openness. Rhys’s narrative thus, turns out to be a Caribbean carnival that features the Bakhtinian cultural opposition between the centre and the margin in its representation of the tension between the British Rochester and the Creole Antoinette, enabling the latter to challenge her double otherness in the Brontean text. It provides a new realm of possibilities that solemnizes sexual deviance, cultural eccentricity and the plurality of alternative realities while invalidating the tenability and solidity of infallible Truth/Reality and conclusive meaning.

**Endnotes**

1. It will be referred as RW
2. It will be referred as WSS
3. It will be referred as JE
References


