5. Causeway to the Cosways:

Establishing Connection between Forms of Identity and Consequent Reconstruction of Destiny through Subversion of the Bildungsroman in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Isha Biswas
Jadavpur University, Kolkata,
West Bengal, India
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8328-4579
E-Mail: yoshinokurosaki@gmail.com

Abstract:

Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea has usually been regarded as a postcolonial offset to its 19th century 'Grand Narrative' – Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. Both the texts have been by and large examined by critics as texts employing the format of the Bildungsroman, also popularly known as the 'coming-of-age' novel. Rhys' work, through the account of Antoinette Cosway's life, subverts this typically linear, male-centric genre, to formulate what we may phrase as the Anti- or Reverse- Bildungsroman. In conjunction with the previous perspective, this paper shall explore how Wide Sargasso Sea overturns even the Reverse-Bildungsroman at the end of the novel to set up the groundwork for yet another sub-genre, the Kunstlerroman, or the novel that documents the formation of an artist, and the simultaneous subversion of the associated tenet of the 'double' in Victorian Sensation formula, when Antoinette paradoxically gains a form of identity, an autonomy over her own life, and appropriates active agency, much like an artist, through madness, and ultimately, death.

Keywords:

Grand narrative; Contrapuntal; Bildungsroman; Reverse-Bildungsroman; Kunstlerroman; Artist; Madness; Double; Victorian sensationalism

Special issue on Postcolonialism:
'INVESTIGATING POSTCOLONIALITY AND POSTCOLONIALISM AS THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK'
Vol. 6 No. 1 (2018) Issue- March
ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)
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DOI: 10.5958/2347-6869.2018.00005.5

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Full text:

Bildungsroman is a German term for a novel that explores the degrees of psychological and emotional maturation of the protagonist, in the course of the passage from childhood to adulthood – usually through moments of crisis and the frequent dilemmas regarding the choices one must make in life. Having been introduced textually in K.P. Moritz's *Anton Reiser* (1785-90) and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96), this particular approach towards narrative formation gained ground through the Victorian age, leaving its mark in erudite works such as Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, and quite naturally in most Dickensian novels including *Great Expectations, Oliver Twist* and the autobiographical *David Copperfield*.

Jean Rhys' agenda was to construct through her novel a contrapuntal reading of the 1847 classic *Jane Eyre*.[12] 'Contrapuntal' is a loaded word in the context of

[1] Bell, C. (1869). *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* (Vol. 3). Smith, Elder.

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Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. Generally meaning "relating to or in counterpoint" (Soanes, 2005) it is used by Said to categorize texts that write back to the 'grand narrative' of the Empire, giving "emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented" (Said, 2012). Jean Rhys' novel is an unambiguously contrapuntal reading of Bronte's 1847 classic in its success as the postcolonial counter-narrative to the colonial grand narrative, something that is exhaustively researched upon. Associated with the postcolonial context is Rhys' simultaneous re-working of the *Jane Eyre* mythos into a contrapuntal reading of the tradition of Bildungsroman. At the level of cursory reading, *Wide Sargasso Sea* seems to follow a similar path as its 'mother-text' in constructing the narrative of development of their respective heroines. Bronte had moulded her novel into the linear structure of the traditional Bildungsroman, beginning with Jane's life in her childhood and rounds off the novel with Jane having acquired some form of maturity and 'acceptable' social position. This literary genre is a process that involves "recognition of one's identity and role in the world" (Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G., 2005) and *Jane Eyre* corroborates this through the portrayal of Jane overcoming the difficulties seeking to impede her progress, and eventually allows her the feeling of social and financial security through her marriage to Edward Rochester. Rhys too formulates the journey of Antoinette Cosway through life in a similar fashion, depicting her search for identity and the exploration of her consciousness

[2] Originally published as ***Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*** published on 16 October 1847, by Smith, Elder & Co. of London, England, under the pen name "Currer Bell".

throughout. However, the process is not at all linear as it seems to readers who presuppose that the two texts are identical. Although both Antoinette and Jane grew up in a similar environment of alienation and isolated suffering, living in a world which disregards the aspirations of womankind, they end up quite differently.

The novel's subversive outlook towards the canon is its attempt to explore and expand the conformist boundaries of the Bildungsroman genre, through the atypical 'female' version. Rhys challenges the traditional Bildungsroman's internalization of gender bias where female representation as an active seeker of identity, embarking on 'adventures' – literal or psychological – was made unfeasible by the normative male-centric culture that connected women with passivity and submissiveness. In the context of constructing a female-centric Bildungsroman, Susan Fraiman argues that "the way to womanhood [is not] a single path to a clear destination but [through] endless negotiations" (Fraiman, 1993). Also, the male Bildungsroman's norm of the gallant self-imposed isolation of the hero from society to venture into self-search is ironized in the female counterpart. As aptly worded by Rebecca Farrow:

> *Numerous female authors counter the traditional Bildungsroman by envisioning a girl's progress of achieving selfhood as her building solidarity with other women [...] Where the hero's maturational norms and linear plot direct him toward separation and independence, some critics agree women's more independent self, paradoxically, is located in the creation and maintenance of intimate relationships. (Farrow, 2002)*

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In Rhys' novel too, we find Antoinette attempting to establish a bond with the women around her, most prominently with Christophine and partially successfully with Tia based on the mutuality of their existence as women forced to succumb to the dictum of a male-centric society.

Antoinette's classification as a Creole, or the mixed product of Caribbean black and European white races, presents a major problem with simplifying this novel as a Bildungsroman. Her identity is already fragmented from birth, and this that leads her to constantly oscillate between the two worlds in search for some sort of a social 'adhesive' to forge a new, complete sense of belonging. Antoinette's unease and confusion in the racially diversified culture of Creoles leads to her search for her own place in this chaos, a search that drives every relationship that she forms in her life. Her childhood friend Tia was a Black Jamaican, and hence in Antoinette's mind, she was someone who had a determinable racial position unlike Antoinette- something Antoinette longed for and believed she would obtain in her closeness to Tia. Her belief reaches a critical point in the event of the burning of her childhood home- the Coulibri estate. The Cosways' previous dependence on slave labour had become a rapidly evaporating source of wealth after the Emancipation Act, and consequently their decline in social prominence created the prime conditions for racial revenge from the freed colonial slaves. As Antoinette sought Tia amidst the calamity, we get a clear picture of her expectations from the friendship:

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

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ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. (Rhys, 1966)

This is immediately followed by the moment of crisis:

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 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. (Rhys, 1966)

Through the mirror imagery, the novelist allows Tia to serve the dual purpose of being the reflection of the truth of Antoinette's racial 'un-belonging', and as the double of Antoinette herself, in their "shared search for survival" (Farrow, 2002) under the British colonial rule which victimizes them in terms of both race and gender. Neither of them is a pure White- Antoinette is of mixed Creole lineage while Tia is a Black Jamaican native- and both are females under the historically male-dominated and masculinized phenomenon of colonization. *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents a predominantly postcolonial critique of the Victorian *Jane Eyre* and hence its appropriation of Victorian tropes is an instrument to play up and subvert them in the same breath. Thus, the trope of the double or the twin, integral to the genre of Victorian Sensation novels is first encountered and subverted in the text through the Tia-Antoinette dynamic to show how the deliberate mirroring is paradoxically revealing the sheer difference between the two. It is further explored through the

Bertha-Antoinette transition from *Jane Eyre* to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, acting as one of the catalysts that influence the reconstruction of the character in the counter-narrative to the Victorian precursor.

Rejected by the black Jamaican ethnicity Antoinette has been brought up in, she becomes addled with helpless uncertainty regarding her right to the motherland, only home she has ever known. Her desperation to find a footing on the ground that she was born in- the ground that now alienates her- reverberates throughout the novel in her words to her husband, "I loved [the island] because I had nothing else to love, but it is as indifferent as this God you call on so often" (Rhys, 1966).

Antoinette's alienation from the community she grew up in extends to her strained relationship with her own mother Annette. The first woman that all of us would form an immediate and possibly the strongest connection with is the mother-figure. Antoinette is denied the opportunity and her feeling of estrangement grows even more acute from a very young age because her mother consistently favours her younger brother Pierre over her.

"She wanted to sit with Pierre or walk where she pleased without being pestered [...] I was old enough to look after myself. 'Oh, let me alone,' she would say, 'let me alone'. So, I spent most of my time in the kitchen which was in an outbuilding some way off" (Rhys, 1966).

In the absence of the emotional support from the woman who is supposed to be the closest relative in blood and spirit, young Antoinette feels like an outcast in her own

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family. She spends her days alone, wandering about remote parts of her family's dilapidated estate and attempting to convince herself that ants and snakes are "better than people" (Rhys, 1966). Antoinette's reclusive behaviour is a premonition of her life in the future as the branded 'madwoman in the attic'. Her yearning for her mother's affection and her devastated psyche when her yearning is not recognized, let alone fulfilled, is a common trope of female Bildungsroman. Susan Fraiman contends the trope to be the inclusion of "intimate descriptions of the tremendous longing for and tragic loss of the mother, whether a biological mother, an 'other-mother', or the motherland"(Fraiman 10). Suffering rejection from her biological mother, Antoinette seeks a substitute in Christophine, a Black Martinician domestic help who is shown to truly care for the distraught child, but the racial and class differences still distance them.

When Antoinette leaves the care of Christophine, she is placed in a convent, thus exiting one maternal space to enter another. Under the care of nuns, especially that of Sister Marie Augustine, the space of the convent symbolizes recognition and compassion, emotions which Annette never bothered to communicate to her daughter, and it provides for Antoinette a world where she feels she could forge a truer mother-daughter bond. "This convent was my refuge", she says (Rhys, 1966). Her access to it, however, is made possible only through the absence of her biological mother, the absence of the substitute mother-figure Christophine, and the failure to appropriate a sense of identification with her own motherland and the native Black community (Farrow, R. L., 2002).

Unable to find a niche as a Black native, she transitions to the opposite alternative- to try gaining acceptance among the Whites, namely through her marriage to Rochester, the figure that unequivocally stands for the White British colonial. However, even here her expectations fall short, since her husband, much like the Black community, never acknowledges her identity as an individual, independent persona. Through actions such as sexual domination, refusal to adhere to conjugal principles by indulging in extramarital affairs with a maidservant named Amelie, and by re-naming Antoinette as Bertha much like a colonizer would empirically catalogue the colonized land and its inhabitants, he attempts to override his wife's distinctiveness as a free person, treating her more like a possession. Antoinette exclaims, "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name" (Rhys, 1966). The denunciation by both ends of the colonial spectrum threatens to crush Antoinette's developing sense of self – which is already a fragile exercise – and usurps her decision-making freedom regarding her own life, thus destabilizing the primary tenets of a traditional Bildungsroman.

Throughout the narrative, Antoinette's predicament with her fragmented identity and her slow descent into madness is investigated by the author, and as discussed previously, this aspect of the protagonist's character goes against the principle of the normative Bildungsroman which usually illustrates the advancement of the hero/heroine's maturity and the construction of the sense of self as well as self-confidence, and not its relegation into confusion. Antoinette is

robbed of a toehold in the worlds of both races and is further disempowered by her husband who calls her "Bertha". The imposition of nomenclature is a way to censure her subjectivity, just as calling her a "marionette" (Rhys, 1966), is a disregard of her active agency as a living individual. This tendency of objectification stems from the universal male fear of the power of female sexuality which must be controlled and subjugated through commoditization in any form. To erase the original name is to deny one's identity, one's already existing social register. This combined with the animal imagery Rochester uses to describe Antoinette is his attempt to destroy her identity as a human being and degrade her by assigning a bestial quality, "Her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen. Her feet were bare . . ." (Rhys, 1966).

In *Jane Eyre* too, we come across similar instances of Bertha's (or the married Antoinette's) degradation by Rochester. When Mr. Briggs, the solicitor appointed by Bertha's brother Mr. Mason accuses Rochester of adultery and bigamy- him taking on another wife in Jane when he is still lawfully wedded to Bertha living at his residence in Thornfield Hall- Rochester goes off into a tirade against Bertha and her entire family in a strain of self-victimization, "Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations? Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard!" (Bronte, 2008).

Exclaiming that he's "bound to a bad, mad, and embruted partner" (Bronte, 2008), he animalizes Antoinette to explain her madness and justify his own actions. A Bildungsroman recounts a tale of the lead's gradual growth as a human entity,

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while in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, we encounter the opposite- the complete dehumanization of Antoinette from her husband's perspective. The major difference between the two texts in this respect is that in *Jane Eyre*, the dehumanization is enforced by not only Rochester but Jane as well; as we see in her narration of the first time she encounters Bertha:

> *In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (Bronte, 2008)*

Jane assigns animality to Bertha's actions in a Rochester-esque way to play the innocent prey to circumstances. She uses the images of "fierceness and savagery in order to emphasize her powerlessness and Bertha's dangerousness [...] she 'needs' Bertha's lunatic attacks in order to portray herself as an innocuous victim" (OSADA, M) *Jane Eyre* thus rejects the prospect of Bertha's personal narrative completely that should have allowed her a chance to place before the readers her subjective perspective of the events. By formulating Rhys' re-reading from Antoinette's point of view rather than Jane's, *Wide Sargasso Sea* creates space for re-interpretation.

The madness and dehumanization that could serve to project the novel on the surface as a reversal of the Bildungsroman, also simultaneously problematizes the reversal itself: at the end of the novel, where the very insanity that had

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characterized the protagonist's ultimate condition, becomes the instrument of her final trial to commandeer an un-splintered identity. Through the act of setting fire to the house and leaping to her death, or even the dream of the act, Antoinette recovers the active agency that was denied to her for so long (Rhys, 1966). She is finally free to take charge of her own life. The fire is a symbol of her pure spirit and her gradually increasing strength of resistance which is also encountered in two other instances. Her fire-red dress indicates her rebellion against her husband's domineering inclinations as well as foreshadows the torching of his estate house. Bertha in *Jane Eyre* was wearing the very same red dress when she set fire to Thornfield Hall (Bronte, 2008). Similarly, the inscription of Antoinette's name in "fire red" that she stitches to the canvas of "silk roses on a pale background" is indicative of her passionate quest to establish her identity by rejecting the name that Rochester imposes on her: "Underneath, I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason, nee Cosway" (Rhys, 1966). The ending of the novel flips the Reverse-Bildungsroman upside down, in a paradoxical reversal of the reversal.

The truth behind what exactly takes place at Thornfield Hall remains even more uncertain in *Jane Eyre* than in *Wide Sargasso Sea* because Bertha/Antoinette was not the focus. It was Jane's version of the story. Despite Jane being the protagonist of Bronte's novel, it is debatable whether she is the lead of a successful Bildungsroman, because she is made to fall into the Victorian era-appropriate, audience-pleasing trope of a "happily ever after" of marriage with a rich man- the socially acceptable pinnacle of a life any woman could ever desire. Bronte ultimately

kept with the tradition, and rebellious Bertha had to be killed off as a plot device for the union of Jane and Rochester. Rhys' counter-narrative undermines that tradition by allowing another woman's perspective to be textually validated.

In *Jane Eyre*, both Jane and the readers are informed of Bertha's existence when Mr. Briggs produces the Mason-Rochester marriage certificate, which informs us of Bertha's maiden name- "Antoinetta Mason" (Bronte, 2008). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, before her marriage, Antoinette is a Cosway- entirely Rhys' idea- instead of Mason. It's a surname that has its source in her Creole father and not her English stepfather, which shows us how Rhys is attempting to narrativize a different history altogether. It is a break from "total identification with what Bronte and her work symbolize: English culture on the one hand and tacit acceptance of British colonialism on the other." (Adjarian, 1995) The surname Rhys chooses for Antoinette is interesting because of its homophonic relation to the term 'causeway', perhaps a deliberate choice on the novelist's part to alert the readers outright about how Antoinette's character across the two novels acts as a metaphorical causeway. According to Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins, "the first element of causeway is from causey [...] from Anglo-Norman French causee, based on Latin calx 'lime, limestone'- material used for paving roads. The first recorded sense of causey was 'mound, embankment, and dam'."

A causey-way (later causeway) generally referred to as a highway or a railroad constructed on top of an embankment connecting two separate land pieces across a body of water or a wetland. It can be viewed as a more modern, man-made

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mimicry of the geographical isthmus, or the land bridge. The concept of a causeway, I would argue, works in two ways across *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Firstly, there's a temporal causeway, a time bridge between the two texts. Bertha Rochester in the earlier novel is given the maiden name of Antoinette Cosway in a later novel. There's a reverse temporality because the life before marriage is taken into account in the later novel, while that after marriage, in the earlier novel. Secondly, there's an identity causeway- the identity of Bertha/Antoinette created by Bronte and that re-created by Rhys are connected by the madness that characterizes both portrayals. The foundation of the 'destructive reconstruction' of her selfhood was already there in the earlier text, one only had to know where and how to find it. M.M. Adjarian puts it succinctly: "By 'stepping into' *Jane Eyre* and 'rescuing' Bertha from silence, Rhys 'crosses boundaries'. The character thus inhabits a zone of 'in-between'" (Adjarian, 1995), in the causeway of her identification as both Cosway and Mason-Rochester. On a related note, the Sensation trope of the double or the twin that was previously encountered in the Tia-Antoinette mirror could be suggested and subverted here: Bertha in *Jane Eyre* is Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but she is reconstructed by Rhys to give an effect of an alter ego. Each text can be taken as an alternate reality, a parallel universe to each other, because of the difference in the implications of Antoinette's final destiny.

Critics like F. Forrester has argued that Antoinette is "attempting to restore the self [...] jumping back into a lost childhood" (Forrester, 1994) of her previous identity as a Cosway. However, the text seems to provide the space for a different

interpretation. Antoinette's search is not merely for a way to move back to the original environment of her childhood home in Coulibri estate like Forrester points out; she is a mission to restructure her identity almost from scratch. She moves around Coulibri, exploring places that she had never set foot in before, and her movement metaphorically represents her exploration and construction of a whole new persona. "I took another road, past the old sugar works and the water wheel that had not turned for years. I went to parts of Coulibri that I had not seen, where there was no road, no path, no track. [...] It was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer." (Rhys, 1966)

The fire motif running throughout the novel has multiple resonances much like the fissures and perplexities in Antoinette's sense of identity. In the act of burning down Thornfield Hall which unequivocally stands for Antoinette's life of incarceration, branded by her own husband as a lunatic, the fire acts in the dual mode of a destroyer as well as the preserver, not only physical but also metaphorical. In Antoinette's dream-act of setting the fire, we see how she imagines the all-consuming force protecting her, protecting the few fond memories she has left of her previous life in Coulibri, represented by the figure of her substitute mother Christophine:

I dropped the candle I was carrying, and it caught the end of a tablecloth and I saw flames shoot up. As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help

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me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped. There was a wall of fire protecting me...(Rhys, 1966)

It lets her break away from the unending oscillations between two different, colonially opposite cultures and the lack of any resolution or reconciliation, while simultaneously protecting Antoinette's fragile psyche from being irreparably fractured. As if in a novelistic facsimile of Dante's Purgatorio, the fire purifies her out of forcibly imposed names and identities.

Antoinette finds her true persona, her place, through bodily death; in the likeness of the Phoenix, the fire burns down the metaphorical skin of the racist, chauvinistic and animalizing debasements that are inflicted upon her, for her empowered, newfound persona to rise out of the ashes. What occurs is not merely a corporeal death, but a "moulting", a metamorphosis – the transformation from the cocooned subsistence of lies, neglect, despair and confusion to a liberated existence, in control of steering one's own destiny, as Antoinette becomes through death, which at the end of the day is her own, personal choice.

Through the assertion of active agency, the regaining of decision-making ability and by reprising the main narrative voice at the end of the novel, Antoinette creates space for her own design, much like an artist. In effect, one could argue that she ratifies the narrative's incursion from the scope of Bildungsroman and Reverse-Bildungsroman into what one calls the Kunstlerroman, or the "artist-novel".

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M.H. Abrams defines the genre of the Kunstlerroman as the representation of "the development of a novelist or other artist [that] signalizes the recognition of the protagonist's artistic destiny and mastery of an artistic craft." (Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G., 2005) Antoinette's 'madness' that enables her to assume the responsibility of her own life and simultaneously of the narrative voice is symbolic of the 'madness' of the artist, the artistic rapture, the pure, unadulterated ecstasy of the creator on verge of creation. What Antoinette creates, or constructs is the stage of her fate – death; what she re-creates, or re-constructs is her identity: she establishes her long-denied subjective perspective and attains the power to dictate her life in her own terms. This is the formation of an artist. In another instance of subversion of an ever-popular Victorian-Sensation motif, the trope of the 'madwoman in the attic'- exemplified in Antoinette's character- is ultimately revealed to be the bridge that connects Antoinette to the land of her active agency.

What Jean Rhys at the same time questions is how one could rationalize a man's incarceration of his wife, in the house built out of her own money, on an unfounded accusation of the wife being insane? Neither is the charge officially investigated, nor does Bertha/Antoinette's opinion matter to the red-blooded male who acts solely according to his own discretion. Paula Grace Anderson rightly notes, "Rhys' novel represents a major milestone in self-growth and awareness on the part of woman as artist, thinker and person [...] by challenging the facile 'romantic' acceptance of male power and right inherent in Bronte." (Anderson, 1982)

Antoinette's final dream described in the novel contains a peculiar emphasis on her hair: "The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones" (Rhys, 1966, p.187- 90) The motif of unruly, unrestrained, flowing hair, in addition to denoting the protagonist's desire for breaking out of the social, physical and marital confinements that encumber her quest for identity, could be associated with the figure the ecstatic artist on the brink of creation, in the moment of capturing abstract thoughts and concretizing them into an artistic expression. Such a connection is most popularly encountered and explored in the final verses of Samuel T. Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, where the artist with his "flashing eyes" and "floating hair" and the words "Beware! Beware!" on his lips strikes up a similar image of the rebellious power that unhindered creative agency holds. This is also echoed in Rochester's description of his wife as a "red-eyed wild-haired stranger" (Rhys, 122), – an image of female rebellion that terrifies the conformist society and its rubric of conventions.

The imagery could furthermore be an interesting segue into the Puranic myth of Lord Shiva's 'Tandava', believed to destroy the older, faulty world so that a new, better version could be re-created from the ruins. This brings us full circle to the original argument: Antoinette too acts to destroy her corporeality, in the possible hope that her spirit shall rise like the phoenix reborn from her ashes, having accomplished the refashioning of her identity that she so desired. Her words that close the novel- "Now, at last, I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (Rhys, 1966), give closure to what she had originally felt, "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, 1966)

Since Rhys does not explicitly describe her torching down Thornfield Hall except in her dream-scape, the ending of the novel raises doubts as to whether she went through with her plan. However, the language that closes the novel leaves very little scope to imagine she backtracked:

"I was outside holding my candle [...] 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, 1966)

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Cite this article:

Causeway to the Cosways: Establishing Connection between Forms of Identity and Consequent Reconstruction of Destiny through Subversion of the Bildungsroman in Wide Sargasso Sea

Citation Format: APA

Isha, B. (2018). Causeway to the Cosways. *S O C R A T E S*, *6*(1), 57-76. Retrieved from https://socratesjournal.com/index.php/SOCRATES/article/view/319

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