

**OF MIMICRY AND WOMAN: A FEMINIST POSTCOLONIAL READING OF
*WIDE SARGASSO SEA AND THE BIGGEST MODERN WOMAN OF THE WORLD***

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ABSTRACT: Feminist and postcolonial studies have shown a similar concern with the production of new and more empowering subjectivities for those historically cast as subaltern in androcentric western contexts. In literature, as in criticism, concepts such as revision and subversion receive unprecedented attention as discourse, and hence narrative, begins to be seen as the very site where identity and relations of power are constructed and negotiated. Among the many women writers who sought to counterbalance the white maleness of the literary canon by giving colonized women a voice and a (hi)story are writers as diverse as the Dominican-born English writer Jean Rhys and the Canadian novelist Susan Swan. In their major fictional works, respectively *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983), they challenge the tradition of both literature and history by providing secondary or marginal women characters with a story of their own. Based primarily on the concepts of subversion and rearticulation proposed by Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha, this paper investigates and compares the strategies of representation employed by Rhys and Swan in the above novels with special attention to the relationship between the protagonists' bodily experiences and the countries and cultures they stand for.

KEYWORDS: feminism; postcolonialism; revisionist reading; representation; Jean Rhys; Susan Swan.

RESUMO: Estudos feministas e pós-coloniais têm se preocupado com a produção de novas subjetividades e com o empoderamento de sujeitos historicamente considerados subalternos na cultura androcêntrica ocidental. Na literatura e na crítica, conceitos como revisionismo e subversão passam a

receber uma atenção inusitada a partir do momento em que o discurso, e conseqüentemente a narrativa, passa a ser visto como o lugar por excelência em que identidades e relações de poder são construídas e negociadas. Entre as muitas escritoras que têm buscado contrabalançar o caráter androcêntrico do cânone literário por meio de narrativas em que mulheres colonizadas ganham uma voz e uma história, encontram-se mulheres tão diferentes quanto a inglesa-dominicana Jean Rhys e a canadense Susan Swan. Em seus mais conhecidos romances, respectivamente *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) e *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983), elas desafiam as tradições tanto da literatura quanto da história ao contemplar personagens femininas secundárias ou marginais com uma história toda sua. Baseando-se principalmente nos conceitos de subversão e rearticulação propostos por Judith Butler e Homi Bhabha, este trabalho investiga e compara as estratégias utilizadas por Rhys e Swan nos romances acima, com atenção especial à relação entre as experiências corporificadas das protagonistas e os países e culturas que elas representam.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: feminismo; pós-colonialismo; leitura revisionista; representação; Jean Rhys; Susan Swan.

Feminist and postcolonial studies have shown a similar concern with the production of new and more empowering subjectivities for those historically cast as subaltern in androcentric western contexts. Accordingly, the second half of the twentieth century witnesses a growing preoccupation with the function of narrative in creating a space that would allow for revision, reconstruction and “creative intervention” (BHABHA, 1994: 3) in canonical literary and historical texts.

In this context, representation acquires a complex and manifold meaning which departs from the liberal humanist belief that reality precedes (and is represented by) discourse. Instead, representation begins to be seen as the very construction, through discourse, of identity and relations of power. The constant negotiation between real and imagined “truths”,

which takes place through discourse in literature as well as in all our everyday interactions, makes of narrative a site of political and ideological struggle, and the concern with representations and re-visions moves center stage in the production and criticism of literary texts.

Among the many women writers inspired by this revisionist impetus to counterbalance the white maleness of the literary canon by giving women a voice and a (hi)story are writers as diverse as the Dominican-born English writer Jean Rhys and the Canadian novelist Susan Swan. In their major fictional works, respectively *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983), they challenge the tradition of both literature and history by providing secondary or marginal women characters with a story of their own.

Based primarily on the concepts of subversion and rearticulation proposed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), this paper investigates and compares the strategies of representation employed by Rhys and Swan in the above novels, with special attention to the relationship between the protagonists' bodily experiences and the countries and cultures they stand for.

1. The revisionist impetus in feminism and in postcolonialism

One of the first and foremost concerns of feminist criticism in the early 1970s was a break with literary tradition, especially with the conventional representations of female protagonists and their conflicts. A number of important critical works of the decade dealt directly or indirectly with Virginia Woolf's injunction of in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), that for women writers to find a voice of their own it would be necessary to "break the sentence" and "break the sequence" of narrative (WOOLF, 1993: 74-75).

If we take Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) as the founding text of gender criticism (though a similar argument could be made about the works of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir), we can see that representation – and the attending need to revise, reread or rewrite it – has been at the center of feminist literature since its beginning. In fact, one of the premises of feminist literary criticism, launched as an academic discipline in the early 1970s, is the need for a revisionist reading of the myths and traditions of Western culture. As Adrienne Rich writes in her classic essay of 1971,

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. . . . We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (RICH, 1979: 35)

Indeed, in much of their early criticism, feminists undertook the task of examining the narrative strategies used by women writers to subvert an inherited literary tradition. Gilbert and Gubar's well-known *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), which focuses on the nineteenth century, is followed by studies such as *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985) by Rachel Blau du Plessis; *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives* (1989) by Molly Hite, and *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (1991) by Gayle Greene, whose titles clearly point to a concern with intervention and strategies of cultural change.

As the more theoretical works which begin to emerge in the late 1980's and early 1990's propose, if hierarchical and asymmetrical gender representations are embedded in narrative, then it becomes politically necessary to embark in deconstructive reading processes which expose the naturalized character of gender arrangements. Such are, for instance, the

notions of “technologies of gender” (LAURETIS, 1987), “cyborg writing” (HARAWAY, 1991), and “symptomatic reading” or “ideology critique” (HENNESSY, 1993), which inform much of the feminist criticism of the last decades.

In rather similar ways, postcolonial criticism has sought to question received values and beliefs about culture and society. When Janet Batsleer, Tony Davies, Rebecca O’Rourke and Chris Weedon publish *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class* in 1985, they openly voice the deepening concern, brought about by the work of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, with the politics of literature and literacy, as they denounce “the ruling cultures of Englishness” (BATSLEER ET AL, 1985: 9) as white, male and conservative, hoping to supersede dominant versions and effect a “rewriting of the meanings and narratives of the past” (BATSLEER ET AL, 1985: 157).

Four years later, the same New Accents Series publishes *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), written by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, inaugurating – or at least putting into wider circulation – the term postcolonial literatures, and setting the agenda for theory and criticism in the 1990’s. An interesting feature of *The Empire Writes Back* is its attempt to map out a wide and multifaceted territory which encompasses the literature of regions as diverse as New Zealand, Africa and the West Indies. Although the authors point out some common characteristics which affect the perceptual framework of post-colonial cultures in general – such as the concern with place and displacement, the need to “interrogate and subvert the imperial cultural formations” (ASHCROFT ET AL, 1989: 11), and the relationship between the imported language and the new place – they also recognize important differences among them. Whereas in a settler colony such as Canada the issue of linguistic appropriation manifests itself as silence or as a concern with “un-naming”, that is, doing away with what they call the “inauthenticity” of the colonizer’s language, in the Caribbean, which witnessed

some of the most brutal features of colonialism, the strategy takes the form of *double entendre*, for

They were forced to develop the skill of being able to say one thing in front of the ‘massa’ and have it interpreted differently by their fellow slaves. This skill involved a radical subversion of the meaning of the master’s tongue.
(ASHCROFT ET AL, 1989: 146)

The concern with discursive practices, which also permeates feminist criticism, is thus put at the center of the postcolonial debate. In fact, for the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, postcolonialism can be seen primarily as a reading strategy. For them,

The subversion of a canon is not simply a matter of replacing one set of texts with another. . . . A canon is not a body of texts *per se*, but rather a set of reading practices. . . . These reading practices, in their turn, are resident in institutional structures, such as education curricula and publishing networks. So the subversion of a canon involves the bringing-to-consciousness and articulation of these practices and institutions, and will result not only in the replacement of some texts by others, . . . but equally crucially in the reconstruction of the so-called canonical texts through alternative reading practices. (ASHCROFT ET AL, 1989: 189)

After pointing out similarities between the postcolonial and the feminist projects in the context of postmodernism, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin highlight the works of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak as the most fertile grounds for contemporary theoretical debate. Firmly anchored in post-structuralist discursive studies, both Spivak and Bhabha “have sought to

offer ways of dismantling colonialism's signifying system and exposing its operation in the silencing and oppressing of the colonial subject" (ASHCROFT ET AL, 1989: 177).

Because, more strongly than Spivak, Bhabha believes there are discursive strategies through which the subaltern can subvert the oppressor's voice, I have opted to base my "symptomatic reading" of Rhys and Swan on his examination of the forms of resistance to colonial authority. Furthermore, to deal with the subversion of gendered identity, I will be using Judith Butler's analysis of signifying practices which denaturalize and disrupt sexual categories.

2. Identity and representation

2.1 Gender Trouble

In her influential work of 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler argues that contemporary feminist practice as a whole must engage in a radical critique of the categories of identity which support patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. Stressing the need to subvert from within the terms of the existing social arrangements, she posits gender not as a preconceived category but as a "stylized repetition of acts" (BUTLER, 1990: 140)⁶⁷. Gendered identity is seen as provisional, arbitrary and performative, with the possibility of change lying precisely "in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of identity as a politically tenuous construction" (141).

Especially important is her concept of 'parody' as a process that works against seemingly stable signifiers. After problematizing the political categories of sex and gender through a genealogical examination of the category of women, Butler emphasizes the power

⁶⁷ Further references to Butler will be to this text, and the pages will be indicated in parentheses.

of language “to act upon the real through locutionary acts, which, repeated, become entrenched practices and, ultimately, institutions” (116), but which can, nevertheless, be contested by the very tools deployed in their establishment. The power of agency, therefore, resides not in a pre-discursive essence, but in the performative denaturalization and displacement of signifying practices, among which literary narrative plays a most important role.

In her concluding chapter, entitled “From Parody to Politics”, Butler takes issue with the category of the subject, seen by her as a necessary but contingent “phantasmatic construction”. Her argument is that “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’, but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (142). Thus identity can only be asserted through a process of signification in the context of cultural structures which render it either legitimate or illegitimate. Furthermore,

If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. (145; emphasis in the original)

Thus construction does not foreclose agency, as she proceeds to argue. “It is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible” (147).

The task of feminist critical theory, we may conclude, is to expose the unnaturalness of binary oppositions such as male/female, Self/Other so as to subvert what we believe to be the order of things. “The culturally constructed body,” asserts Butler, “will then be liberated,

neither to its 'natural' past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities" (93).

2.2 The Location of Culture

Published in 1994, *The Location of Culture* includes Bhabha's most important essays produced between 1985 and 1992. Integrating the texts into a well-organized sequence of chapters, the book formulates some of the major concepts for the analysis of post-colonialism. Most importantly, Bhabha deals with the issue of "strategies of representation" (BHABHA, 1994: 2)⁶⁸ and with the "revisionary impulse" (173), notions which, I hope, will illuminate the present analysis.

Bhabha starts his Introduction by describing the last decades of the twentieth century as a moment of transit, when borders are crossed and space and time can no longer be experienced as fixed points. As a result, identity becomes problematic and shifting subject positions replace the liberal humanist view of the subject as a stable entity. As a result of this change, "what is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial," he remarks, "is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (1).

Stressing the performative nature of identity, Bhabha sees the political empowerment of minorities as a "creative intervention" in received culture, a project of revision and reconstruction (3), which gives rise to "dissonant, even dissident histories and voices" (5), and "enables the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance" (6). In this conflicting encounter between the old and the new, in which the past is viewed as "a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of

⁶⁸ Further references to Bhabha will be to this text, and the pages will be indicated in parentheses.

the present” (7), criticism acquires an unprecedented political force, “for the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (12).

Among the main theoretical concepts presented throughout this work perhaps the best known is mimicry, a term retrieved from Franz Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) and used to characterize colonial discourse in Bhabha’s well-known essay “Of Mimicry and Man”, originally published in 1987.

Contrary to what we might at first suppose, the term entails more than mere imitation. It derives from the biological sciences, denoting a sort of camouflage which occurs when a group of organisms, the *mimics*, share common perceived characteristics with another group, the *models*. When applied to colonial discourse, it is distinguished from mimesis and defined by Bhabha as an ironic and elusive strategy for the relation between power and powerlessness. “The discourse of mimicry,” he writes, “is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (86; emphasis in the original). It is the sign of a double articulation which, at attempting to normalize the Other, produces a resistance to this very normalizing power and opens a space for subversion through the construction of ambiguous subject positions. In his words,

The ambivalence of mimicry – almost but not quite – suggests that the fetishized colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter-appeal. What I have called its ‘identity-effects’ are always crucially *split*. Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them. Similarly, mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its ‘otherness’, that which it disavows. (91; emphasis in original)

This ‘otherness’ of colonial identity is another important notion developed by Bhabha. For him, there are psychic and political tensions in colonialism that create an ambivalent identification, foreclosing the traditional dichotomy between Self and Other of the discourses of identity. According to him, in the attempt to fix ‘otherness’ as external, colonial discourse resorts to stereotypical modes of representation, which include naming or giving visibility to a signifier of discrimination, such as skin color or forms of behavior, in a process of subjectification. Thus, while “the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration” (70), the oppressed returns, through “stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy” (72).

This complex, ambivalent and contradictory character of the representation of ‘otherness’ can be productive in the sense that it allows for a strategy of doubling, which differs from a mere “dialectical contradiction” (49) by providing an illusionary perspective or “third dimension” (50) where new discourses may be articulated.

Focusing on the need of the colonized to elaborate “empowering strategies of emancipation” (171), Bhabha stresses the revisionary impulse of postcolonial writing and criticism, describing subaltern agency as “relocation and reinscription” (193). In this he very much echoes feminist theorists, with their emphasis on the reappropriation and reformulation of the tools of culture as acts of survival for women. In the same fashion, he argues for the need to read against the grain and acknowledges a shift in the meaning of culture from an epistemological function to an enunciative practice. “My purpose,” he writes, “in specifying the enunciative present in the articulation of culture is to provide a process by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience” (178). Liberated from the binary closures of colonialism, discourse provides a third space – the space

of enunciation – where subversions and revisions are made possible by the seizure and reinscription of the sign, a reinscription which, according to Bhabha, moves “back to the future” in a sort of cultural translation through which contingent articulations of social experience may occur.

It is here, I believe, that Butler and Bhabha reach a common ground, for both stress the openness of future conceptualizations which challenge and revise narratives of naturalized identities through counter-discursive practices and strategies.

3. *Wide Sargasso Sea*

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966, Jean Rhys tells the story of Bertha Mason (née Antoinette Cosway), Rochester’s West Indian first wife in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). The daughter of a Welsh father and a Creole Dominican mother, Rhys sought to provide a fictional life for a character that, though of the utmost importance for the development of Brontë’s narrative, exists only peripherally, confined as she is to both madness and seclusion in the attic of Rochester’s mansion.

Two of the most authoritative studies of *Jane Eyre*, Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985), see Bertha as banished to the margins. For the feminists Gilbert and Gubar, she is Jane’s dark double, “the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress”, which will not be exorcised “until the literal and symbolic death of Bertha frees her from the furies that torment her and makes possible ... wholeness within herself” (GILBERT & GUBAR, 1979: 360-361). In postcolonial terms, Spivak sees Bertha’s “otherness” as “an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the

social mission of the colonizer” (SPIVAK, 1985: 251). In either case, she is an unambiguous symbolic figure, a big, vociferous woman who must be kept offstage and subdued so as not to contaminate Thornfield Hall with the sensual femaleness and West Indian moral degeneration attributed to her, in a conflation of patriarchal and colonialist prejudice.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys uses the Brontë novel as a pre-text for relocating and reinscribing, to use Bhabha’s terms, Antoinette/Bertha in a story of her own. The narrative is divided into three parts: the first, which covers Antoinette’s childhood and youth up to her marriage to Rochester, is told by the protagonist herself; in the second Rochester describes his arrival in the West Indies, his marriage and the disastrous relationship with Antoinette; the third and final part is again narrated by the protagonist, from her confinement on the third floor of Thornfield Hall.

By giving voice to both Antoinette and Rochester, Rhys mobilizes two different and opposed subjectivities, thus enacting a dramatic conflict both on the level of male-female relations and on that between the colonizer and the colonized. But this conflict is not as clear-cut as it may at first appear. As Rochester himself remarks about his arranged marriage, “I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks” (RHYS, 1966: 59)⁶⁹.

In the luxuriant ambience of the West Indies, where the narrative begins, both characters display an unsettling ambivalence. Even though Rochester upholds the masculinist and colonialist discourse of power and domination, as he has after all succeeded in marrying a beautiful rich heiress from the colonies, he is affected by the new and strangely complex environment in more ways than one. Developing a fever immediately after his arrival, the illness makes it even more difficult for him to understand the local social behavior, especially that of the former slaves. The natural exuberance of the place renders him sick: “Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills

⁶⁹ Further references to this novel will be indicated by WSS, followed by page number.

too near. And the woman is a stranger” (WSS 59). Though the thirty thousand pounds he received for the marriage have guaranteed his financial independence and the respect of his father and brother in England, it may not have been a good deal after all.

Antoinette is still more ambivalent, both in racial and in social terms. The daughter of a white father and a Creole mother, she is part of a decaying colonial aristocracy, now threatened by a black majority of freed slaves. The power scheme in West Indian society is, thus, more complex than the opposition colonizer/colonized would allow. As Graham Huggan remarks, Antoinette’s status as a Creole “is not only a mark of personal/social instability, but also a model for the destabilization of a set of binary constructs (white/black, insider/outsider, and so forth) which provides a spurious rationalization in *Wide Sargasso Sea* for the self-privileging practices of colonial power” (HUGGAN, 1994: 657).

In fact, as the old plantations begin to decline, much of the English tradition on the islands is eroded, as we can see in the passage where Rochester describes Mr. Mason’s (Antoinette’s stepfather) room.

There was a crude bookshelf made of three shingles strung together over the desk and I looked at the books, Byron’s poems, novels by Sir Walter Scott, *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, some shabby brown volumes, and on the last shelf, *Life and Letters of...* The rest was eaten away. (WSS 63)

Antoinette herself has no stable identity. Called a “white cockroach” by the servant Amélie, with whom Rochester would later betray her, the protagonist explains to her husband:

That’s me. That’s what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I’ve heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. (WSS 85).

There are no simple dichotomies for Jean Rhys. In a mimicry of their own oppression, blacks now discriminate against the impoverished whites. The same, but not quite, as Bhabha would say. Even the slave trade is rendered as a multifaceted historical event, rather than a simplistic exploitation of black people by the whites. In fact, the issue of power is problematized in rather complex terms in the novel.

Such conflicting subject positions are acted out in the beginning of the novel, when Antoinette's only childhood friend, the back girl Tia, cheats her into losing the few coins she had and steals her nice clothes, leaving Antoinette to return home in Tia's shabby dress, their positions reversed. After a few conflicting incidents, Tia throws a rock at Antoinette, who remarks: "We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass" (WSS 38).

A further rendering of the colonizer/colonized opposition can be seen in the conversation between an infuriated Rochester and Christophine, the strong and powerful native woman who raised Antoinette as a child and to whose help she resorts as her marriage begins to flounder. In a conflict of authority over who knows what is best for an anguished and self-destroying Antoinette, Christophine confronts the Englishman with her lucid understanding of their relationship.

She is Creole girl, and she have the sun in her. Tell the truth now. She don't come to your house in this place England they tell me about, she don't come to your beautiful house to beg you to marry with her. No, it's you come all the long way to her house – it's you beg her to marry. And she love you and she give you all she have. Now you say you don't love her and you break her up. What you do with her money, eh? (WSS 130)

Having the law on his side, both because Christophine is accused of black magic and because English law guarantees his right to Antoinette's money, Rochester assures his right to take his wife back to England as a possession. "She'll have no lover, for I don't want her and she'll see no other" (WSS 136).

As pointed out by Spivak (1985) and Rody (1993), among others, Rochester asserts his right not only to Antoinette's body, by denying her her sensuality, but also to her very identity, by changing her name from Antoinette to Bertha. Thus Antoinette Cosway becomes Bertha Mason Rochester, carrying the marks of the stepfather who sold her and the husband who bought her. Furthermore, Rochester turns Antoinette into a doll, a lifeless thing, first when he begins to call her a marionette and finally when he draws a house for her.

I drank some more rum and, drinking, I drew a house surrounded by trees. A large house. I divided the third floor into rooms and in one room I drew a standing woman – a child's scribble, a dot for a head, a larger one for the body, a triangle for a skirt, slanting lines for arms and feet. But it was an English house. (WSS 134-35)

We are thus redirected to Charlotte Brontë's text, to the third floor of Thornfield Hall, where Antoinette/Bertha takes up the narrative. But we "enter the old text from a new critical direction" (RICH, 1979: 35), answering back to its reverberations in a process which writes over the original story in giving the new protagonist a voice and a purpose. In this "enunciative present", as Bhabha would have it, an objectified other does indeed become the subject of her own history. The story is the same, but not quite.

Perhaps the best example of mimicry as a repetition with a parodic twist or "a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (BHABHA, 1994: 126) can be found in the two fire scenes of Rhys's novel. The first occurs when Antoinette's house is set on fire by the

blacks. As they watch the flaming house, the family parrot Coco is seen on the railings “with his feathers alight. He made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching. He was all on fire” (WSS 36). In making the inevitable parallel with the “original” scene in *Jane Eyre*, that in which Bertha sets Rochester’s house on fire, it must be pointed out that, though Coco “didn’t talk very well”, he was capable of self identification by reciting his own name: *Qui est là? Ché Coco*. Also relevant for the parallel is the fact that his wings had been clipped by none other than his English master, Mr. Mason.

The second scene is Antoinette/Bertha’s final dream, in which she has visions of her past life in the West Indies. After a detailed description of the sights, sounds and smells she remembers, she tells us:

I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, *Qui est là? Qui est là?* and the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha! 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. 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. (WSS 155)

Unlike the closure of Brontë’s novel, Antoinette/Bertha’s final comment – “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (WSS 155-56) – is fraught with ambiguity, leaving the narrative open to several possible interpretations. Does she have to heal the conflicting demands of her Creole identity? Does she have to escape the alterity to

which Rochester has consigned her? Does she have to destroy the house which symbolizes European cultural supremacy?

However we may answer these questions, Rhys's novel interrogates *Jane Eyre*, reading it against the grain and bringing to light the cultural conventions on which it is built. As Graham Huggan remarks,

Featuring a Creole narrator/protagonist who is neither black (Afro-Caribbean) nor white (European), and whose story mimics, rather than merely represents, the story of her literary predecessor, Rhys's novel maintains a consistent tension between the obligation to reproduce its precursor text and the will to disobey it. The dialectic remains unresolved. (HUGGAN, 1994: 658)

4. The Biggest Modern Woman of the World

A similar concern with open conceptualizations informs Susan Swan's novel. Published in 1983, *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* tells the story of the Nova Scotia giantess Anna Swan, about whose life very little is known. The narrative is primarily intended, therefore, to create a space for the Canadian giantess, breaking the historical silence about the lives of women, in this specific case the life of a Canadian woman.

Differently from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Swan's novel does not have a canonical text to write back to; its interdiscursive pre-texts are the many accounts about giants (all male) in the tradition of Western culture: from Goliath, to Gulliver, to Paul Bunyan. Also, as Virginia Woolf would have it, the novel breaks "the sequence" and "the sentence", for in mimicking the conventions of the early English novel – and we may think here of Richardson's *Pamela* or Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker* – Swan produces an ironic pseudo-autobiographical text which exposes and questions the limits of such conventions in the construction of identity,

especially for an ex-centric female subject such as Anna Swan, whose excessive size and high professional ambitions preclude any facile containment.

The story is told in an autobiographical mode. Announced as a true story, an “authentic account”, Anna’s narrative is nevertheless also a performance intended to “entertain”: “A good performer has many spiels,” she tells us, “and I have three up my long sleeve to delight and astound” (SWAN, 1983: 2)⁷⁰.

Indeed, as we witness the adventures and misadventures of Anna Swan from her humble birth in Eastern Canada in 1846, through stardom in New York and Europe, we are both delighted and astounded. The story, Anna’s swan song, as it is told before her death in an Ohio farming town in 1888, registers the inscription of an extraordinary woman into history, as she publicly re-enacts (or invents) her life story. Capitalizing on the ex-centric character of her protagonist, Susan Swan endows her with a theatrical, public voice and a posture which self-consciously exaggerates the facts and figures, thus exposing the tall-tale character of the narrative. Although there are references to historical places and to characters such as P.T. Barnum and Queen Victoria, the veracity of facts is always contested.

Furthermore, as a female, and quite an extraordinary sample of femininity for being a giantess, Anna is constantly reified by other people around her, especially men. She is variously “narrated” as maternal, submissive, or romantic, as critic Teresa Heffernan remarks:

Ana is cast as a marketable commodity in Apollo and Barnum’s story, as the fecund, fertile female by her father, as domestic mate by Angus, as an interesting scientific experiment by the numerous Victorian doctors, and as a Cinderella figure who married for love in the fairy tale narrated by the curator of the Sunrise Trail Museum in Tatamagouche. (HEFFERNAN, 1992: 29)

⁷⁰ Further references to this novel will be indicated by BMWW, followed by page number.

However, unable or unwilling to follow any of these social scripts which (male) culture offers her, and physically unable to procreate, which is said to be the ‘natural’ role for women, Anna concludes that she does not fit anywhere (BMWW 332), a conclusion foreshadowed early in the narrative when her body extrapolates the walls of her father’s house in rural Canada.

Two especially interesting aspects of the novel, related respectively to the feminist and to the postcolonial character of the narrative, are Anna’s relation to femininity and to Canada as a nation. The first takes up and parodies, with Rabelaisian exaggeration⁷¹, the commonsensical notion that women are closely connected with nature, as can be seen in the protagonist’s narrative of her birth:

My birth coincided with a bumper crop of vegetables in the garden near our shanty – a rude log hutch that stood in the centre of a small New Annan glen without a tree to shade it from sun or wind. The month of my birth, Poppa’s little plot burst forth with mammoth love-apples, squash as big as wagon wheels, zucchinis as long and as fat as men’s thighs, and potatoes the size of faces. (BMWW 9)

But vegetable fertility is not the only consequence of Anna Swan’s relationship with the natural world. When Anna menstruates, all the women of Seville, the small Ohio town where she lives with her husband Martin, get their menses (BMWW 272); when her labor begins and her waters break, Londoners experience a spring shower on a perfectly cloudless day (BMWW 241).

⁷¹ It is possible to see in Susan Swan’s protagonist many of the characteristics pointed out by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais (*Rabelais and His World*, 1965). For an analysis of Anna as a grotesque character see FUNCK, S.B. “Susan Swan and the Female Grotesque”. *Ilha do Desterro* 31 (1º semestre 1994): 139-150 and “Three Big Women: The Re-narration of ‘Woman’ as a Grotesque Body”. *Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, nº 25-26, p.147-157, 2001-2002.

Furthermore, because of her size, Anna is taken to be the epitome of femininity, which causes great curiosity about her sexual life. According to some, she must feel unequalled sexual pleasure. Others think that, being a “freak”, she probably does not have any sexual desire. Both are false, for in spite of not being easily classifiable in scientific terms, her sexual history is not so very different from that of a normal woman. Or maybe it is.

After losing her virginity to her childhood friend, the Canadian dwarf Hubert, who, under the pretext of measuring her birth canal, punctures her maidenhead with an icicle, Anna has sex with three other men: the Canadian giant Angus McAskill, who cannot arouse her; the American giant Martin Bates, her husband, who is impotent; and the Australian Apollo, who, in spite of not being a giant, not only gives her pleasure but also gets her pregnant. Ironically, however, Anna’s enormous female body does not have successful pregnancies. She can neither fulfill the role of a fertile female imagined for her by her father, nor collaborate in Bates’s dream of starting a race of giants for the greatness of the American nation, which is the reason why he married her in the first place. Unable to follow the scripts designed for her by patriarchal culture, Anna inscribes herself in history as “a genuine show-biz celebrity”, “a professional giantess”, who “refused to be inconsequential” (BMW 2).

Anna’s final act of resistance, in a world which has proved too small for her, is her decision to write her own story, “to mark the world that marked [her] as other” (HARAWAY, 1991: 175). But even this perspective is problematized in the novel, for she leaves her manuscript to be edited and published by her American husband.

In spite of the ambiguities, or perhaps exactly because of such ambiguities and of the surplus economy of the novel, Swan’s text succeeds in critically exposing essentialist gender representations and in opening up a space for different representations of feminine identity. “The culturally constructed body” (BUTLER, 1990: 93) may not have been liberated, but it has certainly been overexposed and denaturalized.

A similar preoccupation may be seen in the novel in what concerns the representation of national identity. Following the traditional association of the body (generally the female body) with territoriality, the novel can also be read as a story of political alliances and identifications, with Anna's love relationships as metaphors of Canadian self-affirmation *vis-a-vis* the metropolis and two other former English colonies – the United States and Australia. It must be remembered that, unlike other countries dominated by the British, these were settler colonies. Even without the violence of an imposed rule, an uneasy cultural dependence on received values persisted until mid twentieth century. Furthermore, due to the position of power which the United States forged for itself, Canada had to face another imperialist nation right at its back door.

With her gigantic body and her tireless quest for belonging, Anna can be read as an allegory of the vast expanse of the Canadian territory in the process of establishing a cultural identity. The three men who try to “colonize” Anna for their purposes are from Canada, the United States and Australia. Her first relationship, to the national giant Angus McAskill, fails because he rejects the spotlights of the commercial freak shows in New York for a quiet rural life in Nova Scotia and Anna has higher ambitions.

After crossing the border to work in New York, Anna develops a rather ambiguous relationship with Canada. Though she never denies her Canadianness, the fact that she signs a contract with an American company may be read as a giving in to the power of money and to the more general ideals of the American Dream. For critic Smaro Kamboureli, however, Anna's leaving Canada for the United States “signifies her desire to deterritorialize her female self. . . . From this point on in the action of the novel, Anna's otherness of body and gender is accentuated by her national otherness” (KAMBOURELI, 1991/92: 11). The fact is that she ends up marrying Martin Van Buren Bates, a Kentucky giant who epitomizes imperial domination and sees in Anna “an unspoiled natural resource” (BMW 172) for his dream of

transforming the American people into a race of giants. The marriage is a failure for both of them, for Bates is impotent and Anna remains unhappy as his wife, especially after they leave “show-biz” and move to the American midwest. At one point Anna writes to her mother:

I feel I am acting out America’s relationship to the Canadas. Martin is the imperial ogre while I play the role of genteel mate who believes that if everyone is well-mannered, we can inhabit a peaceable kingdom. That is the national dream of the Canadas, isn’t it? I did not see the difference until I married Martin. We possess no fantasies of conquest and domination. Indeed, to be from the Canadas is to feel as women feel – cut off from the base of power. (BMW 273-74)

In this scenario, it is not surprising that Anna’s most passionate relationship is with Apollo, the Australian business manager she meets on a tour of England. It is with this Australian “normal” that she has her first orgasm and her two (unsuccessful) pregnancies. Without any grandiose dreams of conquest, Apollo is, like Anna, a free spirit. But, as a man, “Apollo signifies the universal condition that Anna aspires to but never attains” (KAMBOURELI, 1991/92: 14).

Both Anna and Canada are marked by difference and do not easily fit in the commonsensical categories of “woman” and “nation”. Their search for an identity in the historical context of the nineteenth-century mimics both the concept of the autonomous coherent subject and that of the modern independent nation. By resorting to parody and the grotesque, Susan Swan’s narrative (over)exposes the performative character of identity and the always provisional nature of history. In establishing a dialogue with the past, *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* articulates a dissonance that “innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (BHABHA, 1994: 7).

Final Remarks

The contingent and ambivalent identities attributed to the protagonists of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* illustrate Bhabha's contention that tradition needs to be reinscribed and opened up to scrutiny if "minorities" are to assert themselves as subjects of discourse. Both Antoinette Cosway and Anna Swan are rescued from fictional and historical narratives that erased them into silence, and are provided with stories and subjectivities of their own.

By subverting strategies in the representation of femininity, Jean Rhys and Susan Swan reveal the historicity and the naturalized character of the dominant scripts of Western culture. Antoinette and Anna transgress the limits imposed by conventional narrative and refuse to be contained in the roles assigned to them. Antoinette escapes madness by healing the split between self and other and destroying the colonial house in which she is imprisoned. Anna escapes domesticity by writing an autobiographical account of her life in show-business.

Antoinette's "madness" and Anna's "freakness" can be taken as signs of an excess of femaleness, an exuberance that spills over the limits constraining women's bodies and feminine behavior. Antoinette is too colorful, too sensuous, too free. She is a polluting threat to the social order that Rochester stands for. Anna's abnormally large body is coveted as a source of power and subjected to domestication. In a sense they function as "objective correlatives" of their respective colonial cultures, Antoinette's exuberance and lack of control being equated with the luscious landscape and social effervescence of the West Indies, and Anna's largeness and unsuccessful attempts at belonging with the vast territorial expanse and lack of cultural identity of the Canadas.

By exposing and problematizing the dichotomies between self and other, male and female, colonizer and colonized, the novels have a politically relevant discursive effect in spite of the ambiguous “survivals” of the protagonists (they die but they leave their marks on the world). The importance of the novels for feminist and postcolonial critical practice lies in their questioning of power, privilege and wholeness.

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