

Short Research Article

Searching for Identity—Analysis of Antoinette’s Identity Crisis from the Perspective of Lacan’s Theory of the Mirror Stage

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Abstract

Wide Sargasso Sea, as a prequel to Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, has been very influential in English literary field. Its author, Jean Rhys, expressed what Charlotte Bronte hasn’t expressed in *Jane Eyre*: The author has given a thorough analysis about Antoinette’s life before she becomes insane from different aspects, which make the insane woman newly understood for the readers. This paper intends to analyze Antoinette’s journey of searching for her identity through interactions with different people and the functions of mirror as the object in real life by applying Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage.

Keywords

Wide Sargasso Sea, mirror stage, identity crisis

1. Introduction

Everybody knows that *Jane Eyre* is always considered to be one of the most classic literary works in English literary history, and the heroine Jane impresses readers of all ages and countries. However, several decades later, another literary work, i.e., *Wide Sargasso Sea*, attracts the attention of the whole literary field. With the publication of this novel, the author Jean Rhys becomes one of the major writers of the 20th century. As a prequel to Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* displays Antoinette’s life before she becomes insane from different aspects. Antoinette, who was the mad woman locked in attic in *Jane Eyre*, has a very awkward situation and miserable experiences in her life. As a Creole girl, she lives in between white and black culture, and is characterized as the marginal woman. This paper will analyze Antoinette’s journey of searching for her identity through interactions with different people and the functions of mirror as the object in real life by applying Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage.

2. Lacan's Theory of the Mirror Stage

Many western humanists place the human subject in a privileged position and insist that our individuality is natural and spontaneous. Lacan believes that it is impossible to gain any sense of selfhood and identity without the relationship with other people. According to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, the only way for the infant to identify himself as a distinct being is through a whole, unfragmented other. A mirror, in our view, is merely a piece of glass. In Lacan's view, In the early several months after his birth, the infant has no sense of himself as a separate entity and no distinction between self and other. This period is what Lacan calls the pre-mirror stage during which there is no self for the child. But all this begins to change in the mirror stage, which usually occurs between the age of six and eighteen months and which is, according to Lacan, the critical stage for the development of the child's selfhood. In this stage, the infant will see his own image by glimpsing at a mirror, or some equivalent to a mirror which promises a stability, unity and wholeness. As a result of such identification with this unfragmented image, the child starts to see himself as a whole and totalized entity. For the first time, according to Lacan, the child understands himself as whole, thus separating himself from the world around it. However, the image in the mirror is called by Lacan as the "Ideal I", meaning "unreal" or "imaginary". The child takes the mirror reflection as "me" and identifies with it, but it is not the real "me" but something belonging to the other. The infant's new understanding of himself as a whole being, after his birth, does not come from himself but from an image outside, from the other people. Only with the intervention of the other can child form a self, which is designated by the word "I".

3. Analysis of Antoinette's Search for Identity

Based on the understanding of Lacan's theory of mirror stage, we can better understand Antoinette's identity crisis in the novel by close-reading. Through interactions with all kinds of people around her, readers may see clearly Antoinette's attempt to seek for her identity. Firstly, the relationship between Antoinette and the negroes in Coulibri Estate is the indication of Antoinette's identity crisis, which shows the complicated and tense relations between white Creoles and emancipated slaves. Antoinette, the daughter of white Creole slave-owner, is rejected by blacks and isolated from the black world. Although all the slaves are set free in the 19th century, emancipation could not change attitudes the negroes held towards whites for so many years, and it released a hatred of blacks for whites that had long been suppressed. Antoinette said, "I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. Antoinette has heard English women call them white niggers. Through the analysis of the relationship between Antoinette and the blacks around her and the black's attitudes toward her, Antoinette has realized that she is neither a white nor a black. She is just a "white cockroach", and she even doesn't know where she belongs.

Secondly, the relationship between Antoinette and her friend Tia is also the indication of Antoinette's identity crisis. Tia, the daughter of Christophine's Martinique friend, is Antoinette's only childhood

friend. The two girls always play and eat together. In the novel, Antoinette forms her friendship with Tia after being taunted as a “white cockroach” by another black girl. Following that incident, it is not to her white mother she turns, but to her black servant Christophine and her friend Tia. However, Antoinette is looked down upon by Tia. In Tia’s eyes, Antoinette is not a real white. *“Real white people, they got gold money. They didn’t look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger”* (Rhys 7). Tia’s betrayal of their friendship is impressed on Antoinette’s mind. The breakdown of their friendship becomes the final focus for Antoinette while Coulibri Estate burns, as she runs out of her burning house, she said:

Then not so far off, I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her 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 26)

In this scene, the white Creole child and the black Creole child become reflections of each other, just like someone looks at the other self in a mirror. They are the same, but to some extent, they are complete oppositions of each other. The blood on Antoinette’s face and the tears on Tia’s face represent the breakdown of their friendship. Antoinette tries to seek for her own identity through the friendship with Tia, but in vain.

Thirdly, the relationship between Antoinette and her husband Rochester is the indication of Antoinette’s identity crisis. In their marriage, Antoinette has to be economically dependent on her husband, who has totally controlled her mind, and at last, Antoinette got her physical confinement in the attic in Thornfield. Antoinette’s husband Rochester is a pure Englishman. His way of thinking and lifestyle are the typical English. However, in Rochester’s eyes, Antoinette is not a pure Englishwoman. He describes her as *“Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either”* (Rhys 42). In their marriage, Rochester views himself as the Self and his wife Antoinette as the Other. Antoinette and Rochester could not understand each other, which deepens Antoinette’s sense of alienation and drives her to the final madness.

Besides different relationships and interactions Antoinette had with different kinds of people, the mirror as the object in real life also plays an important role in Antoinette’s journey of searching for identity. In the first part of the novel, the Coulibri Estate was burnt by black slaves, and Antoinette’s little brother was dead because of the big fire, which made her mother insane. After experiencing all those misfortunes in her life, Antoinette was sent to convent. At convent, she found that there was no looking-glass in their dormitory. The description implies that Antoinette is deprived of the opportunity to seek for her selfhood and identity in her life. In the third part of the novel, the importance of mirror is emphasized once again. After Antoinette married Rochester, she was taken to England and was locked in the attic in Thornfield. Antoinette narrates:

There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us—hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I? (Rhys 138)

From Antoinette's narration readers can see that her image in the mirror represents her selfhood and identity. By taking out the looking-glass in her room, Antoinette is actually deprived of any opportunity to seek for and establish her own identity, which contribute to her final tragedy. Only through burning the Thornfield could she get her right and opportunity which are deprived by Rochester.

4. Conclusion

Lacan argues that subjectivity arises when an infant catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror and takes the image to be himself. The heroine Antoinette tries to seek for her selfhood and identity through interactions with people around her. However, she is doomed to be a double outsider because of her special Creole identity. She lives in between white and black culture, and is characterized as the marginal woman. At the end of the novel, instead of experiencing an epiphany of Lacanian self-discovery, Antoinette seems unable to recognize herself in the mirror: "*The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself*". She becomes the alienated subject, unable to trust the validity of her own reflection. Therefore, Antoinette fails to find out her own identity through interactions with people around her, therefore leading to her final madness.

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