Original Paper

Study on Space and Identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Yuxuan Lu[1*]

[1] Department of English, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China

[*] Yuxuan Lu, Master of Department of English, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon Hong Kong, China

Abstract

Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea mainly tells the tragic fate of the white Creole woman Antoinette Cosway, dealing with problems of identity and inequality arising from French and British colonisation in the Caribbean. This novel serves not only as a narrative of personal tragedy but also as a spatially oriented exploration where the space is instrumental in shaping characters and reflecting colonial history. Based on the Space Theory and Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory, this paper endeavours to trace Antoinette's journey across three significant spaces, explore how these spaces impact her identity and self-reconstruction under the patriarchal and racial oppression, and reveal the complex interactions between space and Antoinette's identity in the novel, aiming to break down the binary oppositions in colonial discourse and understand the multiplicity and fluidity of identity.

Keywords

Wide Sargasso Sea, Jean Rhys, space, hybrid identity, Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory

1. Introduction

Wide Sargasso Sea, the most acclaimed work of British writer Jean Rhys, is considered as the postcolonial feminist revision of Charlotte Bronte's classic novel *Jane Eyre*. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad ex-wife, is confined in the dark attic of Thornfield Hall for a decade in secret. Unlike the other female authors in the nineteenth century who portrayed female characters as either "angels" or "monsters", Rhys revises Bertha with Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, presenting her hybrid identity and her consistent inquiry about identity and home.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys breaks up the traditional linear narrative of time; instead, she emphasises the construction of three spaces that correspond to different phases in Antoinette's life and utilises spatial transitions and internal changes to propel the narrative forward. From the colonial depths of the West Indies to the imperial centre England, each space in the novel carries unique historical and

cultural significance, interacting with the racial and gender tensions prevalent in society at the time. These interactions play a significant role in shaping Antoinette's understanding of her racial and cultural identity, reflecting core themes of displacement and belonging that are central to postcolonial literature.

Since the "spatial turn" in the twentieth century, academics have shifted focus to consider space not only as a physical entity but as a field where social relations and cultural meanings are generated. Foucault (1986) thinks that "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (p. 22). Concerning the relationship between space and identity formation, it can be argued that space not only defines where we are but also has the power to tell us who and what we are (Casey, 1993, p. 23). In other words, identity can be understood as a spatial term, spaces and places can "take on a symbolic significance around which identities are constituted and performed" (Hetherington, 1998, p. 106). Therefore, space is inherently and fundamentally related to identity and directly involved in the process of individual identity construction.

The current studies and critiques of *Wide Sargasso Sea* have taken three main perspectives, namely of feminism (Spivak, 1985; Gilchrist, 2012), post-colonial criticism (Ciolkowsk, 1997; Mardorossian, 1999) and identity criticism. In identity research, keywords such as hybridity, discourse power, the Third Space, racial conflict, and cultural hegemony are frequently mentioned. Zhang Deming (2006) analysed how Rhys presents Antoinette's broken individual and cultural identity through narrative strategies. Chen Liping (2013) and Wu Meng (2013) both explored identity crises within the colonial context, with Chen illustrating the phantasmatic nature of white identity in Western colonial discourse, and Wu interpreting Antoinette's hybrid identity and the eventual identity construction in the Third Space. Guragain (2015) highlighted the multiplicity and fluidity of identity and revealed that Antoinette's hybrid identity challenges the conventional racial categories. In addition, there has been a growing scholarly analysis in the space of the *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Zhu Feng (2014) explored Antoinette's failure in the quest for the homeland in the Caribbean and in England. Zhao Tianqi (2020) examined the impact of geological, social, and psychological spaces on Antoinette's tragic fate. Yan Lin discussed the intertwining and interaction of place and characters' identities in Rhys's three representative works. Guo RongRong (2022) employed spatial narrative theory to explore the spatial narrative characteristics and functions in the *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Although existing research on the *Wide Sargasso Sea* is relatively extensive, the study of space has primarily concentrated on its narrative function. There remains a need for further in-depth analysis of how space contributes to the recognition and construction of Antoinette's identity. In view of this, this paper intends to take Space Theory and Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory as the theoretical basis to analyse Antoinette's hybrid identity and the relationship between space and identity construction in the *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

2. Antoinette's Hybrid Identity and Identity Crisis

Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory offers a theoretical framework for a deeper interpretation of Antoinette's hybrid identity. Bhabha proposes the crucial concept of hybridity which refers to the process of mutual influence and infiltration when different cultures come into contact and collide with each other. It originates from the rebellion against binary oppositions and the uncertainty of conflicting contradictions between self and other (Sheng, 2004, p. 59). In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) argues that hybridity "reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other denied knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority" (p. 113). That is to say, amid the cultural communication and collision attendant with colonisation, both colonial and local cultures are devoiced from their original position, but rather a hybrid product emerges.

The concept of hybridity is of great significance in understanding identity discourse. Identity refers to an individual's perception of his or her unique existence as well as a sense of belonging to a specific society and culture (Tao, 2004, p. 37). Especially in a globalised world with more communication and collisions among diverse cultures, races, and genders, identity is not a singular and stable subject, but rather a fluid one, constantly shaped in the interactions between the self and the other (Guragain, 2015, p. 65). This evolving nature of identity is crucial to understanding how individuals navigate their sense of self amid cultural displacement and shocks, as Antoinette did in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

2.1 Antoinette's Hybrid Identity

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette possesses a hybrid identity as a mixed-race descendant of European settlers and indigenous black people in the West Indies. To be more specific, she embodies qualities of white/black, the coloniser/the colonised, and the European/Caribbean cultures. Antoinette presents an ambivalent and mixed attitude towards two opposing cultures and groups: she is drawn to the cultural traditions and superiority of Europeans while simultaneously feeling a deep connection to and affiliation with the West Indies, where she was born and raised, cherishing the land and its local black inhabitants. Consequently, she has been attempting to internalise two sets of conflicting values and cultural systems.

2.1.1 Antoinette's Fantasies about England and English Culture

Antoinette's longing and admiration for England and its culture represent her desire for Anglicization. Throughout the centuries of colonial history, England, as the core of the British Empire, held a sacred place in the hearts of people living in the colonies. George Lamming (1992) in *The Pleasure of Exile* describes that "England lay before us, not a place, or a people but as a promise and an expectation" (p. 212). Antoinette is filled with romanticised fantasies about England and attracted to the image of England and firmly believes that "I will be a different person when I live in England and different things will happen to me" (Rhys, 1966, p. 100). After marrying Rochester, she regards Rochester as the absolute authority from England, eagerly seeking more information about England and establishing

deeper connections with England. In other words, Antoinette projects her longing for modern civilisation and the pursuit of stability onto her idealised vision of England.

Apart from weaving an idealised dream of England, a physical geographical space, Antoinette persistently seeks to internalise and imitate English culture and traditions. Antoinette finds a sense of fulfilment in the Anglicization of her diet, with dishes like beef and mutton pies and puddings becoming a staple at her table, which brings her closeness and connection to English culture. Additionally, her favourite painting, 'The Millowner's Daughter' further exemplifies this admiration, as she envies the girl in the painting and her stepfather for their clear display of Englishness, "so sure of himself, so without a doubt English" (p. 33).

According to Zhu Feng (2014), Antoinette's imitation and adoption of White culture stems from the Western cultural hegemony which has subtly influenced the formation of Creole self-consciousness for a long time (pp. 109-110). The history, culture, religion, and language of European whites have been established as the standard, possessing universal value and considered superior to Creole customs. This imposed hierarchy instils a profound sense of inferiority among the Creoles, prompting them to emulate and imitate the European and England traditions.

2.1.2 Antoinette's Affiliation with the West Indies and Local Residents

Antoinette's hybrid identity is also manifested in her attachment to and affiliation with the West Indies and the local Black inhabitants. The land and its people have become indispensable components of her self-perception. A sense of security and belonging is of vital importance in identity formation, and it is the West Indies, where Antoinette was born and raised, that can provide her with such security and strength. As she mentions in the novel, the West Indies are "my place and everything is on our side" (p. 67). Moreover, she also establishes deep emotional ties with the local black people, especially with her nursemaid Christophine.

Fulfilling the role of a surrogate mother, Christophine gives the emotional support and stability that Antoinette's biological mother could not, compensating for Antoinette's need for maternal love. Thus, Antoinette depends greatly on Christophine and even regards Christophine's house as her true place of belonging, as is reflected in the novel "This is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay" (p. 99). This connection illustrates the powerful role that both the West Indies and interpersonal relationship play in shaping and affirming Antoinettes' identity within the broader social and cultural contexts of their lives.

2.2 Antoinette's Identity Crisis under Binary Opposition

Antoinette's white Creole identity places her in a severe identity crisis. Within the binary colonial discourse, she is marginalised and excluded by both white and black communities, leaving her in a dilemma. The white elites from Europe view Creole people with disdain as they are believed to taint the purity of white bloodlines and Englishness, while local black people in colonies harbour resentment and hatred to white Creole people due to their previous colonial oppression and economic exploitation.

Thus, Antoinette experiences a strong sense of rootlessness and alienation from both black and white groups. She agonizingly questions and inquiries about her identity, "I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (p. 93).

2.2.1 Rejection by the White Community

Despite her admiration for Europe and the white cultures, Antoinette, along with the colonial Creole white people she represents, is seen as thoroughly the other by the white Europeans. From their perspective, Antoinette and her community are inherently different and therefore unable to achieve acceptance or identity affiliation within their community. Antoinette herself acutely perceives this rejection and marginalisation. "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (p. 1). This exclusion is reinforced by her derogatory labelling as a "white nigger" and the scepticism from new white elites about her family's social standing. They question Mason's decision to marry Antoinette's mother, asking, "Why should he marry a widow without a penny to her name and Coulibri a wreck of a place" (p. 26), revealing the deep-seated dichotomies that Creoles, despite their white skin, are regarded as inherently inferior.

Additionally, within the historical context of the British abolitionist movement, the consensus was that colonial slaveholders were immoral and disgraceful for their violation of Christian fellowship and human rights. Consequently, these slaveholders were not only excluded from "the community of respectable English men and women" but were also associated with "the moral and sexual indecencies attached to the hateful system" (Ciolkowski, 1997, p. 341). Considering Antoinette's racial background, her upbringing, and her representation of the slave system, she is thus despised and scorned by the white community and she can never be fully accepted by the white community or identify with them. The true white people from England have a distinct sense of identity and belonging to their homeland, which contrasts starkly with the situation of the Creole people who yearn for their impossible homeland.

2.2.2 Resentment from the Black Community

It is noted that the possibility of identity recognition between Antoinette and the black community remains unattainable, as the long-standing hatred of black people towards white exploiters in colonial history is difficult to eliminate. The economic privileges that Creole whites gained through colonial exploitation provoked deep resentment among the local black people. However, the enactment of the Emancipation Act marks the dismantling of the plantation economy and the loss of Creole's economic and social status, thereby resulting in a reversal of power dynamics in the colonies. The reversal of power relations transforms the abuser into the victim and vice versa, facilitating the reemergence of violence within new power structures in the colonies (Schwab, 2011, p. 166). Liberated black slaves and residents express their pent-up resentment towards the colonisers by derogatorily referring to impoverished Creole whites as "white cockroaches" and "white niggers" and ridiculing them through the lyrics "White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody wants you. Go away" (p. 20). From all these,

it can be argued that the long history of colonialism has ingrained a deep-rooted hatred between white and black races that is difficult to reconcile.

The complex entanglement between Creole whites and the black people in the colony is directly mirrored in the interaction between Antoinette and her black friend Tia. Tia represents "the other that could not be selfed" for Antoinette, with their potential for identification ultimately disrupted due to the intervention of imperialism (Spivak, 1985, p. 250). As a descendant of white colonisers, Antoinette subconsciously absorbs the racialist ideologies and inadvertently holds a condescending attitude towards black people. While playing with Tia, she naturally uses racial stereotyping language like "you cheating nigger" to insult Tia (p. 22). Ultimately, this paradoxical relationship, characterised by mutual attraction yet mutual repulsion under societal influences, reaches its apex when the local emancipated black slaves burn the Coulibri estate, symbolising the irrevocable schism between the black and white communities. As Antoinette runs towards Tia for solace, Tia responds by throwing stones at her. "We looked at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as though I saw a reflection of myself" (p. 41). The symbolic mirrored relationship of identification between Antoinette and the black community is abruptly broken by Tia with a stone, and it is through this event that Antoinette finally realises the black community's antagonistic stance towards Creole whites and her failure to assimilate into them. Antoinette finds herself in an awkward position, unable to establish her identity in a native culture like the local black inhabitants, yet not fully able to assimilate into European culture. Despite her efforts, she could not be recognized by either group. Thus, she is experiencing a strong identity crisis and suffering from a sense of alienation and rootlessness.

3. The Impact of Three Spaces on Antoinette's Identity Construction

Wide Sargasso Sea is spatially oriented around three settings: Antoinette's family estate Coulibri, the honeymoon house Granbois, and Rochester's inheritance Thornfield Hall. Antoinette's transition between these spaces as well as the internal transformations within each space marks the turning point in her life and compels her to reconfirm and reconstruct her identity. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, "narrating response to a particular room or landscape becomes a character's major way of communicating cultural identity" (Savory, 1998, p. 137). Each space represents a phase in Antoinette's identity struggle—she experiences racial confusion in the Coulibri Estate, suffers from gender oppression at Granbois, and ultimately faces the erasure of her identity at Thornfield Hall. Ultimately, Antoinette extends beyond traditional binaries and reaches the Third Space. In this liminal space, Antoinette sacrifices herself but paradoxically achieves a realization of her identity construction, transcending the imposed identity of her past.

3.1 Coulibri Easte: Antoinette's Ostracised Racial Identity

In Coulibri Estate, Antoinette's Creole white identity is subject to ostracisation from both white and black groups. This estate, as her birthplace, has played a fundamental role in shaping Antoinette's

self-perception and identity formation. It serves as both the symbol of her socioeconomic status and the tangible representation of the abstract concept of "home", deeply influencing her racial and cultural understanding.

3.1.1 Symbol of Antoinette's Economic Status

"Colonial history makes its spatialized appearance in a literary text" (Radović, 2014, p. 5), which is directly shown in the changing condition of the Coulibri Estate. It mirrors the shifting power dynamics during the special historical period in the Caribbean region, producing a domino effect where White Creoles' loss of colonial power leads to their decline in economic and social status, which finally impacts Antoinette's perceptions of her racial identity. As the symbol of white Creole slave owners' economic and racial status, the Coulibri Estate's transition, from vitality and prosperity to desolation, then an illusory restoration until its final complete destruction, parallels with Antonette's identity struggle.

Initially, before the enactment of the Emancipation Act in 1833, the estate witnessed the wealth and power that Creole white masters enjoyed. As described in the novel, "Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible - the tree of life grew there" (p. 17). However, after emancipation, "All Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush" (p. 17). The barren and crumbling state of Coulibri estate reflects the impoverishment and isolation faced by the white Creoles in Jamaica. Antoinette and other white Creole people fall to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, being rejected and scorned by both white and black communities as "white niggers" and "white cockroaches".

In a later stage, Antoinette's hopes to integrate into the white community and pursue a stable identity are rekindled after her stepfather refurnishes the estate. Mr Marson, as a neocolonialist from England, attempts to transform the estate into a quintessential English manor and alter their way of life, including their English diet of "beef and mutton, pies and puddings" (p. 32) and the interior decoration like "white tablecloth and the vase of yellow roses" (p. 33). The estate's restoration creates an illusion of the resurgence of colonialism and the re-establishment of white authority in the colonies, which in turn fosters in Antoinette the delusion that she might transcend her Creole heritage to fully integrate into white society.

3.1.2 Representation of "Home" for Antoinette

Apart from its symbolic significance in terms of socio-economic status, the estate serves as Antoinette's emotional anchor, concretising her perceptions of the abstract idea of "home", where she can construct her identity amidst security and familiarity. Gaston Bachelard (1994) in *The Poetics of Space* proposes the concept of "the house". He argues that "it is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space" and "it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (pp. 3-4). "House" is a place for individuals to express their personality, establish self-identity, and maintain their values, providing familiarity and intimacy (Li &

Huang, 2015, p. 67). Antoinette emphasises that it is in the estate that she can gain a crucial sense of security and belonging. This space is her emotional sustenance and the source of her strength.

However, the estate's ultimate destruction results in the complete collapse of Antoinette's last hope of constructing a stable racial identity. Due to the fear of colonial oppression returning, the local black people burn down the Coulibri Estate, thus obliterating Antoinette's personal refuge and stripping Antoinette of her protective boundary against the external world's racial and social hostilities. Antoinette becomes directly exposed to the external world where hatred and resentment of black people cannot be erased, as well as the innate sense of superiority and contempt from white people, making her realise that she cannot be accepted by either side.

The devastating event in Coulibri Estate marks a turning point, where Antoinette's efforts to secure a consistent identity are overwhelmed by deep-seated historical and racial tensions. The ruination of her home highlights that her hybrid identity has failed to navigate the binary structures entrenched in colonial society, doubly marginalising her in a world that neither accepts nor understands her complex heritage.

3.2 Granbois Estate: Antoinette's Oppressed Female Identity

Granbois Estate, the honeymoon house for the new couple Antoinette and Rochester, becomes a crucible where Antoinette's female identity and individual dignity are marginalised and manipulated by her husband Rochester. From a hopeful bride fantasising about romantic love, Antoinette is finally reduced to a nameless and mentally distressed "wanton" woman derogated by Rochester. Within this estate, the bedroom is the arena of the power dynamics between Antoinette and Rochester and the primary place where Rochester exerts his paternal and racial oppression over Antoinette, severely affecting the construction of her feminine character and identity. This oppression deeply impacts the development of Antoinette's feminine identity in two significant ways: one is by viewing Antoinette as an object for his sexual desires, and the other is by depriving Antoinette of her subjectivity through the imposition of a new name, Bertha.

3.2.1 A Tool for Rochester's Sexual Desires

Rochester's primitive sexual release with Antoinette misleads her confusing lust with love, thereby obscuring her individual subjectivity and entirely subordinating her personal identity to the role as Rochester's wife. The bedroom, highly private and intimate, is regarded as the core of the family space, reflecting the marital relationship within the family structure (Li, 2023, p. 30). However, Rochester and Antoinette's superficial intimacy, merely physical interactions devoid of spiritual communication, temporarily masks the underlying discord within the space. The ambiguous atmosphere in the bedroom depicted in the novel emphasises the physical pleasure between the couple. Rochester confesses that "I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me" (p. 84), revealing that Antoinette's fulfilment of Rochester's desires fails to gain his respect and affection.

Immersing herself in the false intimacy with Rochester, however, Antoinette adopts an attitude of complete submission and subservience towards Rochester and abandons her own female subjectivity, instead seeking self-recognition through male authority. In a broader societal context, where identity is shaped by dominant cultural forces, Rochester's demeaning approach not only degrades Antoinette as a wife but also distorts her self-perception and female dignity. More alarmingly, Antoinette fails to recognise the serious consequence of her loss of autonomy, prefiguring her madness after being abandoned by Rochester.

3.2.2 The Other Deprived of Name

Rochester's renaming of Antoinette to Bertha is a form of dual colonisation of race and patriarchy, ultimately becoming the last straw that drives Antoinette into insanity and mental turmoil. In Lacanian psychology, personal identity is significantly reinforced by how others use one's name, making it a critical symbol of self-awareness (Zhang, 2006, p. 82). By replacing Antoinette's name with a typically English one, Rochester attempts to erase her Creole identity, reinforcing his dominance over her in a patriarchal society.

Rochester's disdain for both Antoinette and the West Indies intensifies after she resorts to Obeah to regain his affection. "The proper Englishwoman ostensibly restricts all sexual activity to the domain of the patriarchal family" (Ciolkowski, 1997, p. 343), while Antoinette is contrary to the prescribed norms, and she exhibits a strong desire for sexual engagement and even use aphrodisiacs to entice him, which are seen by Rochester as an affront to the purity of Englishness. Subsequently, he firmly associates Antoinette with ignorance, debauchery, and licentiousness. At a deeper psychological level, Rochester experiences a fear of losing control over the colonial territory, and a fascination with the virgin landscape. "It was a beautiful place—wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness" (p. 79). Therefore, he transforms these complex and conflicting emotions into the control and disdain over Antoinette, the racial and gendered other (Yan, 2020, pp. 85-86). Furthermore, compounding this complex marital relationship, Rochester engages in a sexual liaison with a black servant in a room adjacent to Antoinette's, the sounds of which are distinctly audible to Antoinette within her own bedroom. This flagrant act violates Antoinette's feminine dignity and further exemplifies the disrespect and trampling of her status as Rochester's wife. The bedroom, which had once been Antoinette's fantasy space of love and sex, now became a heartbreaking refuge for a wife abandoned by her husband.

Within the bedroom, Antoinette's resistance to Rochester and attempts to reclaim her name proves futile. Through their conversation in the bedroom, Antoinette realises that "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too" (p. 133). However, her awakening and struggles are overshadowed by Rochester's dismissive justification: "it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha" (p. 122). The patriarchal system grants Rochester the power to change his wife according to his will, and Antoinette is shaped into another

self—an othered self. As a result, Antoinette's self is split and fractured, and her own subjectivity is gradually eroded and shattered under dual oppression.

3.3 Thornfield Hall: Antoinette's Loss of Self-awareness and Final Identity Construction in The Third Space

It is in Thornfield Hall, after experiencing severe physical and mental abuse and a loss of self-consciousness, that Antoinette finally arrives at the Third Space, realising a reconstruction of identity in a self-destructive manner through burning the estate and abandoning binary thinking.

3.3.1 Antoinette's Loss of Self-awareness

Antoinette's desire to assimilate into England, her envisioned homeland, shatters completely within the confines of the attic at Thornfield Hall. The cold and harsh environment of her imprisonment in the attic forms a cruel contrast with her romantic and idealised fantasies about England. "They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them. We lost our way to England" (p. 162). Antoinette's journey from the colony West Indies to England signifies not just a physical relocation but a continuous dispersal of her identity—a relentless process of alienation and self-denial.

The attic, as the "internal colony in mainland England", is the prison where Antoinette is deprived of her freedom, identity and human rights as the enslaved people have once suffered in the West Indies. Antoinette is in complete isolation from the outside world. "There is one window high up—you cannot see out of it. My bed had doors but they have been taken away…The door of the tapestry room is kept locked" (p. 161). According to Houston Baker (1991), "If one, however, is constituted and maintained by and within boundaries set by a dominating authority, then one is not a setter of place but a prisoner of another's desire" (p. 104). The tightly closed door is the boundary that Rochester sets for Antoinette, showing that colonial power dynamics are once again replicated within mainland England.

In this space, the most direct way in which Antoinette constructs her identity—through mirror relationships—is also denied, plunging Antoinette into a state of complete identity loss. According to Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory, one's unified self-consciousness is first established by seeing the reflection of the mirror, which is the initial and most basic stage of a subject forming identity (Zhang, 2006, p. 80). However, in the attic, Antoinette is stripped of the right to look at herself in the mirror. "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…What am I doing in this place and who am I" (p. 162). Antoinette's self-awareness fragments without the reflection of self-image and under the oppressive gaze of others who perceive her as a madwoman, thrusting her into complete identity confusion and loss.

3.3.2 Antoinette's Final Identity Construction in the Third Space

After experiencing a prolonged and painful journey of self-discovery amidst dual rejection by both the black and white communities, Antoinette finally reaches the Third Space and achieves her identity construction. She accepts her hybrid identity, breaks free from the traditional binary constraints and resists colonial and patriarchal oppression. In an act of self-destruction, she achieves a rebirth.

The Third Space generally refers to a space of knowledge and resistance beyond binary oppositions. It is used to explore scenes that have been suppressed, fragmented, or ignored in the past, enhancing the possibilities of struggle or resistance in discourse (Sheng, 2004, p. 28). Hybrid strategy opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal. The journey to the Third Space is achieved through transcending boundaries (Wu, 2014, p. 39). For Antoinette, she requires crossing two distinct boundaries. The first is the physical boundary, which means escaping away from the dark attic that imprisoned her. This attic is a metaphor for the oppressive dominance exercised by white society over minorities and it also signifies the emotional and physical subjugation experienced by a wife at the hands of her husband. Antoinette sets fire to Thornfield Hall, just like the liberated slaves once burning her Coulibri estate with resentment. "Antoinette's act of arson is an active refusal to continue submitting to the powers that be: in her case, her husband's white, male, English, domestic domination of her" (Gilchrist, 2012, p. 485). Antoinette not only liberates herself from her physical prison but also symbolically shatters the chains of racial and gender discrimination.

The second boundary is the invisible boundary, which is the long-standing constraint of racial ideologies and Eurocentrism on people. Antoinette's act of rebellion and her subsequent psychological awakening mark her rejection of rigid dichotomies such as white/black and the coloniser/the colonised. She realises that she needs to break free from the oppression of colonisation and patriarchy, which are the root causes of all her suffering. Antoinette decides to empower herself with agency and autonomy to establish her own identity. This shift is crucial for her to reach the Third Space, where the complexities and hybridity of identity are acknowledged rather than suppressed.

4. Conclusion

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, space is not merely the container or the backdrop of the story, but carries significant ideological and cultural connotations, playing a crucial role in shaping Antoinette's identity. Space in the text acts as a catalyst in deconstructing and reconstructing Antoinette's self-identity, emphasising the complex but unignorable interactions between space and identity in the postcolonial discourse. Through these spaces, Antoinette transitions from a longing for a singular and stable identity to complete identity confusion and loss, and ultimately to a rebirth that transcends binary oppositions and achieves her identity construction in the Third Space. This paper is aimed at calling for more attention and analysis on the topic of space, with a specific focus on the rich cultural implications of spaces in literary texts, particularly on its impact on character identity perception and reflection of colonial history.

In addition, this paper pays particular attention to the identity crisis of the ethnic minority. Antoinette's identity is a product of colonial history but is neither accepted nor recognised under Western cultural hegemony, leading to her sense of alienation and despair. This paper emphasises the significance of acknowledging and respecting the multiplicity and diversity of identity and a more inclusive approach

to addressing identity issues.

References

Bachelard, G. (1994). *The Poetics of Space* (Maria Jolas, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1958).

Baker, H. A. (1991). *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Casey, E. (1993). *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Chen, L. P. (2013). Identity Crisis in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, *34*(2), 119-126.

Ciolkowski, L. E. (1997). Navigating the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire. *Twentieth Century Literature*, *43*(3), 339-359.

Foucault, M. (1986). Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics*, *16*(1), 22-27.

Gilchrist, J. (2012). Women, Slavery, and the Problem of Freedom in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *58*(3), 462-494.

Guo, R. R. (2022). On Spatial Narratives in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Prose Hundred Schools*, *19*(03), 19-21.

Guragain, K. (2015). The "Third Space" and the Questions of Identity in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Localities*, *5*(11), 65-88.

Hetherington, K. (1998). *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics*. London: Sage.

Lamming, G. (1992). *The Pleasure of Exile*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1960).

Li, M. (2023). *Family Narration and Cultural Metaphor in Amos OZ's Novels*. Master's thesis, Guxangxi Minzu University, Nanning.

Li, G., & Huang, R. (2015). On Spatial Writing and the Question of Identity in "The Third and Final Continent". *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, *36*(3), 63-69.

Mardorossian, C. M. (1999). Shutting Up the Subaltern: Silences, Stereotypes, and Double-Entendre in Jean Rhys's "Wide Sargasso Sea". *Callaloo*, *22*(4), 1071-1090.

Radović, S. (2014). *Locating the Destitute: Space and Identity in Caribbean Fiction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Rhys, J. (1982). *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: Norton. (Original work published 1966).

Savory, E. (1998). *Jean Rhys*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schwab, G. (2011). *Literature, Power and Subjectivity* (Tao Jiajun Trans.). Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.

Sheng, A. F. (2004). *A Study of Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theories*. Doctoral Thesis, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing.

Spivak, G. C. (1985). Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism. *Critical Inquiry*, *12*(1), 243-261.

Tao, J. J. (2004). Introduction to Identity. *Foreign Literature*, (02), 37-44.

Wu, M. (2014). *On the Construction of Antoinette's Identity in Third Space in Wide Sargasso Sea*. Master's thesis, Liaoning Normal University, Shenyang.

Yan, L. (2020). *Place and Identity in Jean Rhys's Fiction*. Doctoral thesis, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai.

Zhang, D. M. (2006). Canon Rewriting and Identity Narrating: On *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Foreign Literature Studies*, (03), 77-83.

Zhu, F. (2014). Broken Dream of Home: Antoinette's Wanderings in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Foreign Languages Research*, *143*(1), 107-111.