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*The Supernatural in Caribbean Literature, a Feminist Perspective: Jean Rhys and  
Rosario Ferré.*

***MASTER EN ESTUDIOS FILOLÓGICOS SUPERIORES: INVESTIGACIÓN Y  
APLICACIONES PROFESIONALES.***

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# Chapter I

## Introduction

Jean Rhys and Rosario Ferré have a characteristic in common: their Caribbean origin. Therefore they could be classified as post-colonial women writers. While their life, their ages and their countries are different, we can trace a common thread linking the two writers: as they were born in a part of the world touched by colonialism and later by post-colonialism, their hybridity, their particular point of view and the presence in their works of common themes and structure.

It is interesting to explore some characteristics of the post-colonial literature, in order to later read the novels of Jean Rhys and Rosario Ferré as a part of it.

In this work I am going to examine Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Rosario Ferré's short stories *The Youngest Doll* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, analyzing their Fantastical and Supernatural element and their strong connection to the feminist approach to literature. In this first part, I will introduce the issues posed by post-colonial literature through a narratology standpoint evaluating how the way post-colonial literature reconsiders certain categories, such as the narrative point of view and identity, then I will explain the Supernatural beliefs typical of the West Indians Island, such as the *Obeah* and the *Santería*, and finally the feminist perspective in works containing fantastical elements and how it is important to Caribbean women writers.

In the second part, I will analyze the theme of identity in Jean Rhys' works, then the Supernatural element in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and its use of the popular tropes of Caribbean magic, such as the zombies. In the third part I will analyze Rosario Ferré's works and her double identity as Puerto Rican and a US citizen, then her use of the theme of the transformation and her subversion of Western classic Fairy tales. Finally, in the conclusions, I will give my personal opinion on the importance of examining post-colonial feminist literature and how the perspective changes according to the different point of view.

## 1.1. The Caribbean literature in the Post-Colonial world: critical issues.

The crisis of identity is a very common theme in most post-colonial literature. The term “post-colonial”, according to Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* “points out that the term is resonant with all the ambiguity and complexity of the many different cultural experiences it implicates from the moment of colonization to the present day”.<sup>1</sup> This explains the continuity of binaries which leads to a sense of displacement in identities. These binaries are set in order to distinct qualities in the process of “othering” which eventually leads to hierarchical position which disintegrates people.

It is interesting to study this struggle from a narratology point of view. Narratology refers to both the theory and the study of narrative and narrative structure and the ways that these affect our perception.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, as it traces explicitly the definitional boundaries of narrative, narratology tries to account for narrative diversity and for identifying particular point of view.

Post-colonial narratology is sensitive to matters commonly, if not uncontroversially, associated with the post-colonial (i.e., hybridity, migrancy, otherness, fragmentation, diversity, power relations), but, as Gerald Prince states in his essays, it “does not aim to identify post-colonial narratives or capture their distinctiveness”<sup>3</sup>. It does not propose to show “how concepts of identity and alterity or categories such as ethnicity, race, class and gender are constructed, perpetuated or subverted in narrative texts”<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, though indebted to Susan Lanser’s work on feminist narratology, it does not quite “study narrative in relation to a referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social, and political”.<sup>5</sup> It is not even bound to a specific corpus or primarily constituted through the study of particular texts and it does not chiefly depend on inductive procedures.

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1 Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. Routledge, 2002. pp. 3

2 Felluga, Dino. "General Introduction to Narratology." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Purdue U. from the website [www.purdue.edu <http://www.purdue.edu/~guidetotheory/narratology/modules/introduction.html>](http://www.purdue.edu/~guidetotheory/narratology/modules/introduction.html). Accessed (10/8/2013)

3 Phelan, James; Rabinowitz, Peter J. (ed.). *A companion to narrative theory*. Wiley. Com, 2008. pp. 373

4 Ibidem.

5 Lanser, Susan S. “Toward a feminist narratology.” *Style*, 1986, 20.1986. pp. 345. <[http://www.english.uga.edu/~eberle/homepageth20materials/lanser\\_femnnarratology.pdf](http://www.english.uga.edu/~eberle/homepageth20materials/lanser_femnnarratology.pdf)> (accessed 30/7/2013).

As Monika Fludernik remarks in her discussion of potentially productive links between post colonial narratives and narratology, or as Marion Gymnich emphasizes in her study of the relevance of linguistics to a post-colonial narratology, the languages used by the narrator and by the characters constitute a fruitful area of narratological inquiry.<sup>6</sup> In her discussion, Fludernik mentions as well the use of innovative or unconventional techniques as another fertile area of investigation. “Odd” pronouns in “one,” “you,” or “we” narratives would offer pertinent illustrations;<sup>7</sup> and a narratorial “we,” say, might represent a homogeneous or a heterogeneous group, designate a discordant rather than harmonious collectIbid.ty, or include certain communities but not others.<sup>8</sup>

They have, likewise, done extensive work on the category “person” (second-person narration, first-person-plural narration, multipersoned narration, etc.). It is also true that formal innovation and technical daring are neither distinctive of nor integral to post-colonial texts. They may, in fact, be more common in (post)modern or feminist texts. But many post-colonial texts are (post)modern or feminist too and (post-colonial) narratology studies possibilities rather than only actualities.

In any case, without altering any definitional boundaries, the accentuation of characteristics like the linguistic power or the communal representativeness of the narratorial voice would foster the study of texts in terms of the ways they utilize such characteristics.

On the level of the narrated, for instance, narratologists consider whether space is explicitly mentioned and described, prominent or not, stable or changing, perceiver dependent or, on the contrary, autonomous, characterized by its position or by its constituents.

Given the boundaries, crossings, transfers, dispersions, marginalization, decks and holds, fields and jungles created by or related to colonialism, they might pay particular attention to the extent of multitopicality as opposed to there as well as to the degree of heterotopicality, to the kinds of mixtures and inconsistencies, of gaps, breaches, and to spatial alignments along such semantic axes as natural or artificial, familiar or strange, independent or colonized.

A post-colonial narratology would aim to account for the kind of characters inhabiting these spatial and temporal settings and to supply instruments for the exploration and description of their significance, their designation and identity. In addition, it would allow for the study of their thoughts, and feelings, their motivations, their interactions, with respect to such commonly exploited semantic. A post-colonial storytelling theory perceives phenomena in organizations as a

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6 Allrath, Gaby, Marion Gymnich, and Carola Surkamp. "Introduction: towards a Narratology of tV Series." *A: ALLRATH, G*, 2005 1-43.

7 Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a 'natural' narratology*. London: Routledge, 1996. pp. 2

8 Ibidem,.

web of complex relationships and entangled genealogies, which comprise both colonizers and colonized/neocolonized. Post-colonial storytelling thus produces an awareness of antenarrative resistance and contestation to imperial and colonizing narratives. Story-in-the-making and antenarrative-in-the-making are both active participants in the process of materialization, not just a discursive representation, and is oppositional to rectified, static, petrified narrative representations in management studies.<sup>9</sup> This makes it possible to study the intra-play of dominant colonizing and post-colonizing retrospective-narratives with the liberatory counter-moves of *Ibid.*ng stories and ante-narrating.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the category “point of view” can serve as an example. A post-colonial narratology would obviously detail the standard types of point of view (i.e., unrestricted or “omniscient,” internal, external). In addition, it would characterize more eccentric cases like compound point of view (when a set of elements is perceived simultaneously – and identically or differently – by more than one focalizer), unspecified point of view (when no particular focalizer is identified), undecidable point of view (when it is impossible to determine which one of two or more specific entities functions as the focalizer), or maybe even split point of view (when one focalizer yields two or more different but equally adequate presentations of the same existents and events).<sup>11</sup>

As a novel that adopts the perspective of a marginalized and exoticized literary figure, *Wide Sargasso Sea* promotes an awareness of multiple and simultaneous viewpoints as it struggles against dominant traditions and espouses the cause of the under-represented through its exploration of racial, colonial and sexual oppression.<sup>12</sup> Jane Rhys redresses Antoinette's silencing, *ibid.*ng her an own narrative voice with which to tell her own experiences. Antoinette's recount of the scene of Richard Manson's visit reveals her confusion and dislocation. It seeks to humanize the one-dimensional "madwoman" Bertha in *Jane Eyre* by creating her prehistory as a woman left with the burdens of a *ibid.*ded cultural identity, tracing her development from a young solitary girl in Jamaica to a dispossessed lunatic woman in an English garret. In line with postmodern thought, post-colonial theory fully subscribes to the new identity discourse by acknowledging the destabilization and the fragmentation affecting the concept of identity.

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9 Jorgensen, Kenneth; Strand, Anete; Boje, David. “Towards a post-colonial-storytelling Theory of Management and Organisation.” *Philosophy of Management*, 2013, pp. 4.

<[http://peaceaware.com/vita/paper\\_pdfs/post-colonial\\_storytelling\\_j\\_of\\_philosophy.pdf](http://peaceaware.com/vita/paper_pdfs/post-colonial_storytelling_j_of_philosophy.pdf)> (accessed 1/8/2013)

10 *Ibidem*.

11 Phelan, James, and Peter J. Rabinowitz, *op.cit.* pp.378

12 "*Wide Sargasso Sea*" by Jean Rhys." WriteWork.com. WriteWork.com, 01 October, 2005. <<http://www.writework.com/essay/wide-sargasso-sea-jean-rhys>> (Accessed 3/9/2013).

The destabilization of the concept of identity stems from the growing awareness that identity is a question involving the relationship of the self and the other. Without the other, there would be no self, no identity. The contemporary concern with otherness highlights the proposition that alterity (difference or the existence of the other) determines the process of identification. It is the existence of the other that gives the self meaning.<sup>13</sup>

Besides, the self is not a finished product; it is not a stable construct; it is, rather, a process in constant flux; something that is incessantly shifting. The ceaseless change that affects the self in its relation with the other endows identity with mutable fluidity. As Stuart Hall defines it: "Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses".<sup>14</sup>

Seen under the light of this new discourse, identity in post-colonial theory becomes a process of questioning. Post-colonial theory perceives identity as a process in constant flux wherein the self, in its perpetual negotiation with the other, enacts a self-interrogating mechanism, a self-centered process of interrogation, establishing a deconstructive apprehension of identity.<sup>15</sup>

According to Jacques Derrida, the self, "in departing from itself, lets itself be put into question by the other".<sup>16</sup> In its encounter with the other, the self indulges in a process of becoming other than itself.<sup>17</sup> In its "adventuring outside oneself towards the unforeseeably-other",<sup>18</sup> the self has to face "the impossibility of return to the same". The acknowledgment of this inescapable impossibility of return to the same after encountering the other plays an active role in approaching post-colonial identities. Violence could be perceived as a manifestation of madness, and madness, namely the insanity associated with a number of characters, is revolt, a process of questioning which raises disturbing questions. Madness, which is a form of violence, enacts a process of self-interrogation, putting into question the fixity of meaning that the self may seek to reach in its struggle to apprehend identity.<sup>19</sup>

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13 Karkaba, Cherki. "Deconstructing identity in post-colonial fiction." in Komar, Smiljana and Mozetič, Uroš (eds), *English Language Overseas Perspectives Enquires*, Volume VII, University of Ljubljana, 2010. pp. 93. <<http://www.sdas.edus.si/Elope/PDF/ElopeVol7-2Karkaba.pdf>> (accessed 23/8/2013).

14 Hall, Stuart, and Paul Du Gay, eds. *Questions of cultural identity*. Sage 1996. pp. 10.

15 Karkaba, Cherki, *op.cit.*, pp. 93.

16 Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and difference*. University of Chicago Press, Google Books, 1978. pp. 96.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 119

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 95.

19 Karkaba, Cherki, *op.cit.*, pp. 93.

Madness may manifest itself in the form of schizophrenia which could function as a deconstructive mode of interrogation, an incessant process of questioning identity. Gilles Deleuze perceives schizophrenia as “a line of flight”<sup>20</sup>, a sort of escape from “the enclosed and stratified systems of authoritarian thought”.<sup>21</sup> Schizophrenia in the Deleuzian sense is a sort of revolutionary attitude in its rejection of authoritarianism, and it could also be approached, not as mental illness, but rather as a creative process and a productive movement.

As a productive and creative process, schizophrenia, which becomes a critical mode, opens onto an incommensurable space of numerous possibilities, variations and potentials of signification.<sup>22</sup> It is in this light that the post-colonial approach to the concept of identity may be considered under Deleuze’s perception of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia, as a creative and dynamic process, should be compared to the interrogative movement inherent in identity as a process of self-questioning.

If identity can be thought of as a “third space”, an interstitial universe of border-crossings and numerous possibilities, one may be tempted to suggest that identity as a process of self-questioning is a schizophrenic movement perpetually raising an unlimited number of interrogations. The restlessness, as characterizing a number of post-colonial characters, could be viewed thus as a sign of schizophrenia in its interpretation as a dynamic process related to the deconstructive investigation into identity.<sup>23</sup> In Ferré's *The Sleeping Beauty* the double identity of María, a well-off and well-raised girl that transforms herself in a prostitute, recall again the schizophrenia of colonial identity.

And finally, fire as a destructive element is closely associated with the identity crisis that the heroine suffers in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This narrative reeks with violence as Antoinette struggles against insanity and alienation, allowing Jean Rhys to involve into a profound investigation into post-colonial identity. The final descent of the “madwoman in the attic” with a candle in her hand, ready to set the whole house on fire, dramatizes the violent inner struggle to apprehend identity.<sup>24</sup>

## 1.2. The supernatural

Another clue to follow is the presence of elements close to supernatural and to fantastic.

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20 Edgar, Andrew, and Peter Sedgwick, eds. *Cultural theory: The key concepts*. Routledge, 2007. pp. 40.

21 Ibidem.

22 Karkaba, Cherki, *op.cit.*, pp. 96.

23 Ibid., pp. 93.

24 Ibid., pp. 95.



In his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, first published in 1975, Tzvetan Todorov offers the following definitions of fantastic fiction:

"In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know....there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination-- and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality--but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us<sup>25</sup>...The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty....The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event ."<sup>26</sup>

The fantastic in literature requires the fulfillment of three conditions, according to Teodorov. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work--in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. The third criteria is the most controversial, as it states that the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations<sup>27</sup>. The modern theories, however, poses that the reader can and should interpret the text in their own way, and the author should not require anything from them.<sup>28</sup>

The fantastic lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion. At the story's end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous.

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25 Todorov, Tzvetan. *The fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre*. Cornell University Press, 1975. pp. 25

26 Ibidem.

27 Ibid., pp. 33.

28 Tompkins, Jane P. *Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism*. Johns Hopkins University Press., 1980.

The fantastic therefore leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment. It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre. One of the great periods of supernatural literature, that of the Gothic novel, seems to confirm this. Indeed, we generally distinguish, within the literary Gothic, two tendencies: that of the supernatural explained (the "uncanny"), as it appears in the novels of Ann Radcliffe; and that of the supernatural accepted (the "marvelous"), which is characteristic of the works of Horace Walpole. In the latter we find not the fantastic in the strict sense, only genres adjacent to it.<sup>29</sup> More precisely, the effect of the fantastic is certainly produced, but during only a portion of our reading: in Ann Radcliffe, up to the moment when we are sure that the supernatural events will receive *no* explanation. Once we have finished reading, we understand, in both cases, that what we call the fantastic has not existed.<sup>30</sup> In post-colonial novels, the presence of zombies can be seen as a hint of the supernatural.

As Trenton Hickman asserts, "Throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the man zombifies Antoinette Cosway by undermining her family ties, her connections with the island, and finally by forcing her to live imprisoned and exiled in England, where she is divorced from the land where her identity was formed. 'Bertha Mason' is by Rhys' account a zombie, created from the woman who had been Antoinette Cosway to suit the man's own financial, social, and sexual needs"<sup>31</sup>

Others and more complex hints of the supernatural are to be found in the novels of the two writers, as the presence of the traditional religions in connection with their different origins (*Obeah* in Jamaica, Santería in Puerto Rico).

In Jean Rhys' novel, the supernatural influence is, as we will see, the *Obeah*. *Obeah* (sometimes spelled *Obi*, *Obea* or *Obia*) is a term used in the West Indies to refer to folk magic, sorcery, and religious practices derived from West African, and specifically Igbo (in south-eastern Nigeria) origin.<sup>32</sup> *Obeah* is similar to other African derived religions including, Voodoo, Santería, and it is practiced in Jamaica, (where the novel is set) and Dominica, where Rhys was brought up.<sup>33</sup>

*Obeah* is associated with both benign and malignant magic, charms, luck, and with mysticism in

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29 Todorov, Tzvetan, op.cit, pp. 42

30 Ibid., pp. 43.

31 Hickman, Trenton. "The Colonized Woman as Monster in Jane Eyre, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Annie John." *Journal of Caribbean Studies* 14:3 2000. pp. 191.

32 Eltis, David, and Richardson David, eds. *Routes to Slavery: Direction, Ethnicity and Mortality in the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Vol. 18. No. 1. Psychology Press, 1997, pp.88

33 Incayawar, Mario, et al. *Psychiatrists and traditional healers: Unwitting partners in global mental health*. Vol. 9. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. pp.22

general. In some cases, aspects of these folk religions have survived through syncretism with Christian symbolism and practice introduced by European colonials and slave owners. During slavery, *Obeah* was directed against the European slave masters. However, with the rise of Christianity, *Obeah* is considered a taboo, and the term has pejorative associations.<sup>34</sup>

Jamaicans have differing opinions as to what *Obeah* actually is. The broadest interpretation will include any type of healing ritual using local bushes and natural remedies, falling outside of established conventional medicine.<sup>35</sup> Narrower views will say that the invoking of spirits is an essential part of *Obeah*, or that *Obeah* is primarily used to do evil, or to ward off the evil set by others.

*Obeah* is one of the many Jamaican traditions rooted in West African ancestry. Many of the slaves brought to Jamaica were healers, medicine men and priests, and some of them pursued their traditional practices when they lived on the island. The Africans distinguished between practices which used sorcery, usually for evil purposes (*Obeah*), and those used for healing and to counteract evil (Myal). Even the masters saw that the two classes were not identical. The early Myal-men and *Obeah*-men (women too, in both cases) were patronised by both whites and blacks. In time the distinction between the two groups became blurred, and all such practices were labelled "*Obeah*".

Many *Obeah* practitioners seem to be well versed in poisons and other harmful substances. Hundreds of deaths of both blacks and whites during the days of slavery were attributed to poisons devised by *Obeah*-men. *Obeah* was made illegal in Jamaica in 1760, when it was linked to the Tacky rebellion which started on an estate in St. Mary and spread to other estates.

Despite embracing Christian principles, for many people the Jamaican traditions and beliefs that originated in Africa are too strong to resist. There is a lot of guilt, shame and therefore secrecy and denial when an *Obeah*-man is consulted. If someone who believes in it thinks they have been *Obeahed*, they worry so much that if the *Obeah* itself doesn't make them sick, the worry surely will. People have wasted away and died when they believe they have been "*Obeahed*."

The *Obeah*-man (or woman) is a well established persona in the Jamaican society, with a patronage which is largely lower class, but also includes society's movers and shakers. He may be feared, hated, respected or even mocked. He is a last resort for many who have exhausted avenues offered by conventional medicine. He is the first choice of many who want to 'tie' their lovers to them forever, to ensure their success in a court case or in getting a visa, or to get revenge on their

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34 "*Obeah*" from wikipedia.org <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obeah>> (accessed 22/08/2013)

35 "Jamaican Traditions: *Obeah* in the 21st Century" from the website real-jamaica.com <<http://www.real-jamaica-vacations.com/jamaican-traditions-Obeah.html>>

enemies.<sup>36</sup> To set *Obeah* on an enemy, the *Obeah*-man may require an article of the person's clothing, or a strand of hair. Powders and other charmed substances may be given to be sprinkled or put in the person's way.

The established way of counteracting *Obeah* which has been set on a person is to turn it back by engaging a more powerful *Obeah*-man than the one used by the person's enemy.<sup>37</sup>

A continuing source of white anxiety related to *Obeah* was the belief that practitioners were skilled in using poisons, as mentioned in Matthew Lewis's *Journal of a West India Proprietor*; a record of his permanence in Jamaica from 1815 to 1817.<sup>38</sup>

An anti-*Obeah* law passed in Barbados in 1818 specifically forbade the possession of "any poison, or any noxious or destructive substance". A doctor who examined the medicine chest of an *Obeah* man arrested in Jamaica in 1866 identified white arsenic as one of the powders in it, but could not identify the others. The unnamed correspondent reporting this affirmed "The Jamaica herbal is an extensive one, and comprises some highly poisonous juices, of which the *Obeah* men have a perfect knowledge."<sup>39</sup>

This fear is shown in Rochester, when he recollects the night when his Creole wife Antoinette drugs him with an *Obeah* potion she has procured from Christophine, her now emancipated slave says :

"I had never seen her look so gay or so beautiful. She poured wine into two glasses but I swear it was long before I drank that I longed to bury my face in her hair as I used to do. I said, 'We are letting ghosts trouble us. Why shouldn't we be happy?' She said, 'Christophine knows about ghosts too, but that is not what she calls them'. She need not have done what she did to me. I will always swear that, she need not have done it."<sup>40</sup>

The Santería seems to influence the stories of Rosario Ferré instead. It is a syncretic religion of West African and Caribbean origin influenced by and syncretized with Roman Catholicism. It is a system of beliefs that originally comes from the African *Yorùbá* religion (which was brought to the New World by West Africans).<sup>41</sup> These Africans carried with them various religious customs, including a

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36 Ibidem.

37 Ibidem.

38 Lewis, Matthew Gregory. *Journal of a West India Proprietor*. 1834. in Google Books, pp. 149. (accessed 22/08/2013)

39 "*Obeah*" from wikipedia.org

40 Rhys, Jean, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986, pp. 87

41 "Santería" from the website wikipedia.org. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SanterthC3thADa>> (accessed 21/8/2013).

trance for communicating with their ancestors and deities, animal sacrifice and sacred drumming and dance. Some rituals of this religion .

Many of the rituals of the Santería are inserted in the stories too. To become a full-fledged *Santero* or *Santera* (Priest or Priestess of Santería), the initiator must go through an intensive initiation process. To begin with, the initiator goes through what is called a cleansing ritual. The initiator's *Padrino* (godfather) rubs the herbs and water in a specific pattern of movements into the scalp of his/her head.<sup>42</sup> This recalls what is done to the dolls made by a character in Rosario Ferré's *The Youngest Doll*, filled with herbs and with stones previously put into a river water.

These dolls, given as a gift by the aunts to her nieces, seems to protect them and to show them the way to empower their life, just as in the second important ritual of Santería, known as *medio asiento*, that is the creation of an image of the orichá (saint) Eleguá. The individual will go through a consultation with a *Santero*, where all the recipients' life, past present and future, will be reviewed (as María in Ferré's *The Sleeping Beauty* and Antoinette in Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* do at the end of their life). The *Santero* materials that will be used to construct the image of the *Eleguá*, a sculpture that is used to keep evil spirits away from the initiator's home, this recalling the presence of the dolls in Ferré's story.

*Espiritismo* is a part of the Latin American traditional healing practice. Du Toit reveals that Santería has a "strong element of spiritism".<sup>43</sup> McNeill also concurs that some *Santeros* have the power to communicate with spirits asking for guidance to improve the situation of a person.<sup>44</sup> However, in general, the *Santeros* primarily turn to religion as their practice to address personal challenges and identify means to improve a situation.<sup>45</sup> The reputation of *espiritistas* was tinged with negativity, being accused of witchcraft because they deal with health through the unfamiliar paradigm of the spirit world, which was not understood by either the medical doctors or the Catholic priests. Consequently, *espiritistas* or traditional healers of Santería working with healing through the spirit world are attacked as "works of the devil",<sup>46</sup> as also Rochester to Antoinette does

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42 Ibidem.

43 du Toit, Brian "Ethnomedical (Folk) Healing in the Caribbean". In Olmos, Margarite Fernández, and Paravisini-Gebert Lizabeth, *Creole religions of the Caribbean: An introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*. NYU Press, 2011. pp. 21

44 McNeill Brian, Esquivel Eileen et al. "Santeria and the Healing Process in Cuba and the United States". in McNeill, Brian W., and Joseph Michael Cervantes, eds. *Latina/o healing practices: Mestizo and indigenous perspectives*. Taylor & Francis, 2008. pp.69

45 Ibid., pp. 23

46 "Santeria" wikipedia.org

in Rhys' novel, joining so together the two traditional religions.

It is said that "healing can occur when the spirit medium assists the sufferer to come into harmony with the spirit world so as to change his or her physical condition, emotions, way of life, or destiny"<sup>47</sup>, and this is one of the interpretations given to Antoinette's end in fire at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

### 1.3 The feminist perspective.

In her essay *Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende* (1989) Patricia Hart defines Magical feminism "as magical realism employed in a femino-centric work, or one that is specially insightful into the status or condition of women in the context described in the work". In fact, concerns about cultural identity are at the heart of Caribbean feminist critics and their hostility to poststructuralist and postmodernist theories associated broadly with Euro-American feminist work. These amalgamated theories tend to be dismissed, rightly or wrongly, as neocolonial or imperialist misreadings of subalterns' realities.<sup>48</sup>

While it is not unusual now to think of gender as a social performance, biological sex still appears immutable. There are many persons, in real life and in literature, who perform socio-sexual identities that are inconsistent not just with their body's biology but with the expectations that their biological makeup, in the form of physical appearance, raises in their fellow humans. This is an important distinction because it leads us away from essentialist ideas about human bodies (and, by implication, about bodies politic) and toward a concept of identity as something that gets transacted between performers and audiences.

Certain performances are not just deemed more "realistic" than others but are, in fact, perceived as "real." And they are perceived as real when, and only when, they conform to the beholder's expectations and biases.<sup>49</sup> A case in point here is Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's anti-theory polemic, which goes well beyond Elaine Savory's contention that Caribbean writers have "no need" of postmodernist and other theoretical systems.<sup>50</sup> Citing the case of Rosario Ferré, who changed her cultural and linguistic identity from Puertorriqueña to Latina so as to be eligible for the American

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47 Brian du Toit, *op.cit.*, pp. 25.

48 Kutzinksi, Vera. "Improprieties: Feminism, Queerness, and Caribbean Literature." *Macalester International* 10.1, 2001, pp 166. <<http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1253&context=macintl>> (accessed 20/8/2013)

49 Ibidem.

50 Davies, Carole Boyce and Savory Fido, Elaine eds. Out of the Kumbla. *Caribbean Women and Literature*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1990

Book Award, which considers only work written and published in English, Paravisini laments that the post-colonial book market “has opened a niche for a certain kind of female Caribbean writer whose work can be easily consumed, appropriated into a configuration where it serves the narrow purposes of theory, reassuring the reader that he or she understands the Caribbean without having to penetrate its multifarious realities.”<sup>51</sup> That few feminists would figure more complex cultural understanding as a form of penetration draws attention to Paravisini’s oddly unselfconscious use of language in her concern about “Caribbean women’s writing being coopted, seduced away from its glorious insularity.”<sup>52</sup> What makes this insularity so “glorious” remains vague, leaving one to suspect an implicit alliance between authentic female identity and some sort of mythic cultural purity preserved somehow by isolation or insulation.<sup>53</sup>

In Rosario Ferré’s *Maldito Amor*, we find the salient elements of an emerging female and feminist historiography that seeks to examine the parameters of Caribbean feminism from a vantage point that is truly Caribbean and appears to owe little to foreign concepts of women’s power. The text is part of an extraordinarily large body of novels written by Caribbean women centering on women’s roles in the destruction of the patriarchal/colonial power.<sup>54</sup> They depict women’s struggle to become leading actors in the destruction of the multileveled power of the patriarchal plantation as the metaphor for the struggles of Caribbean peoples to unshackle themselves from the colonial power represented by the plantation and its remnants.<sup>55</sup> Their depiction of women as the destroyers of the plantation takes two primary forms : the planter-heroines are portrayed as self-immolating/self-destructive heroines that bring the plantation order crashing down (avenging angels like Antoinette Cosway in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and, as said before, Gloria in Ferré’s *Maldito Amor*).<sup>56</sup> Feminist critics outside the Caribbean, after all, lionized Jean Rhys’s heroines as representative of the Caribbean woman as victim of patriarchal oppression-in sharp contrast to most Caribbean readings of Rhys’s texts, which find heroism in her characters’ self-destruction- creating a series of tropes that resonate through the critical literature on Caribbean women’s writings. Rhys’ heroines, however, are *sui generis* heroines, typical of a vision of Caribbean womanhood shared by few other

51 Olmos, Margarite Fernández, and Paravisini-Gebert Lizabeth, *op.cit.* pp. 162

52 Ibidem.

53 Ibidem.

54 Paravasini-Gebert, Lizabeth, “Decolonizing feminism, The Home-Grown Roots of Caribbean Women’s Movements”, in Springfield, Consuelo López, ed. *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean women in the twentieth century*. Indiana University Press, 1997. pp. 14.

55 Ibidem.

56 Ibidem.

Caribbean writers.<sup>57</sup>

By writing the romance, Caribbean women reconsider the sexual politics that have linked women with metaphorical constructions of the nation while at the same time detailing the extent to which transnational forces, including colonization, impact the representation of love and desire in literary texts. Although ultimately these novels refuse the generic requirements of the traditional resolution for romance (the so-called happy ending), they nonetheless gesture towards a reordering of community and a revised notion of kinship that recognizes the weight of both gendered and sexual identities in the Caribbean.<sup>58</sup> In spite of all the negative pressure they receive, Caribbean women writers can be seen to mobilize gender, as well as ethnicity and cultural identity, as a site of resistance and affirmation.<sup>59</sup>

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57 Ibid., pp. 16.

58 Meyers, Emily Taylor. "Transnational romance: The politics of desire in Caribbean novels by women." 2009. <<http://udini.proquest.com/view/transnational-romance-the-politics-pqid:1883677641/>> (accessed 22/08/2013)

59 Donnell, Alison. *Twentieth-century Caribbean literature: Critical moments in Anglophone literary history*. Routledge, 2005. pp. 138



## Chapter II

### *Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea.*

*Do you know what an Obeah woman is?  
I'm the Obeah woman from beneath the sea  
To get to Satan you gotta pass through me  
I know the angels name by name  
I can eat thunder and drink the rain*  
**Nina Simone, "Obeah Woman"**

#### 2.1 Jean Rhys' Hybrid Soul.

Jean Rhys, pseudonym of Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams, was born on August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1890, in Roseau, the capital town of the island of Dominica,<sup>60</sup> at that time a British colony. Her father, William Rees Williams, was a Welsh doctor and her mother, Minna Williams, was a third-generation Dominican Creole of Scots ancestry. At that time, the term "Creole" meant a person of exclusively white descent Ibid.ng in a Colony <sup>61</sup>, while the modern meaning, as defined by the The Oxford Dictionary, is "a person of mixed European and black descent, especially in the Caribbean",<sup>62</sup> a subtle yet very important difference that influenced Jean Rhys' entire life.

At the age of seventeen, she moved to England with her aunt and she attended the Perse School for Girls in Cambridge, where she was mocked because of her accent, as an outsider. She also spent two terms at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in London in 1909. The instructors at

<sup>60</sup> "Jean Rhys", from wikipedia.org. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean\\_Rhys](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Rhys)> (accessed 12/6/2013)

<sup>61</sup> "Creole", Encyclopedia Britannica.com, <<http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/142548/Creole>> (accessed 12/6/2013)

<sup>62</sup> "Creole" from Oxford Dictionary.com <<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/Creole>> (accessed 12/6/2013)

RADA despaired of Rhys being able to speak what they considered "proper English" and advised her father to take her away.

Unable to train as an actress and refusing to return to the Caribbean as her parents wished, she worked with varied success as a chorus girl under various pseudonyms. During this time, she began an affair with a wealthy man, who, despite being a bachelor, did not offer to marry her, and ended the affair after two years, though he continued to sustain her financially. After a series of traumatic experiences, culminating in an abortion, she began to write a personal memoir where she related all that had happened to her until that moment, which later became the inspiration of *Voyage In the Dark*, a semi-autobiographical novel, first published in 1934.<sup>63</sup>

She remained in England throughout the First World War, working as a volunteer nurse,<sup>64</sup> then she married a Dutch poet, Willem Johan Marie (Jean) Lengle,<sup>65</sup> the first of her three husbands, and for ten years they lived a rootless, wandering life on the Continent, mainly in Paris and Vienna.<sup>66</sup> It was the 1920s, Europe was considered the center of cultural and literary life, and the New World writers came to Europe, especially to Paris, in order to be part of the artists' community there.<sup>67</sup> She was discovered there by an American writer, Ford Madox Ford, in 1924, who was enthusiast about her "instinct for form"<sup>68</sup> and defined her writing style very unlike any other writer he knew<sup>69</sup>. The particular feature that Rhys possessed was, according to Ford, her perspective of a woman coming from the Antilles, who had "a terrific -an almost lurid!- passion for stating the case of the underdog"<sup>70</sup>, an attitude that she maintained throughout her literary works, culminating in her most famous work, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Her first book, *The Left Bank*, was published in 1927, shortly followed by *Quartet*, (1928), *After leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), the aforementioned *Voyage in the Dark*, written in England after divorcing in 1933 and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), where she used the stream of consciousness technique to portray the experiences of an aging woman.<sup>71</sup> After *Good Morning*,

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63 Rhys Jean, *Smile please :an unfinished autobiography*, Harmondsworth etc., Penguin Books, 1984, pp. 173.

64 Ibidem.

65 "Jean Rhys", wikipedia.org.

66 Wyndham Francis, «Introduction» a *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Harmonds worth: Penguin Books 1983, pp. 3.

67 James, Selma, *The ladies and the mummies :Jane Austen and Jean Rhys*, Bristol, Falling Wall, 1983, pp. 57

68 Ibidem.

69 Ibidem.

70 Ibidem

71 "Jean Rhys", wikipedia.org.

*Midnight*, Jean Rhys disappeared for many years, and although her books had gained some success, they went out of print quickly.<sup>72</sup> For many years, people were unable to find her or even to read new printed versions of her books. Then, as a result of a BBC dramatized version of *Good Morning, Midnight*, in the late 50's she was finally traced in Cornwall,<sup>73</sup> where she was working on a new novel.

Her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, was published in 1966, and she won the prestigious WH Smith Literary Award the following year<sup>74</sup>, but she was unimpressed with her newfound popularity, stating that the honor had come too late.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, as her fame grew, many people, be it scholars, journalists or casual readers, tried to interview her repeatedly,<sup>76</sup> with varying success.

She died in 1979, before completing her autobiography, which was published posthumously the same year as *Smile Please: an Unfinished Autobiography*,<sup>77</sup> written with the explicit purpose of narrating her life from her own perspective, fearing that somebody else would do it for her after she died.<sup>78</sup>

## 2.2 The theme of Identity.

It is clear that, for most of her life, Rhys always felt like an outsider, and she began to write in a time when the Caribbean needed to explain themselves in front of the very rigid and organized society of the 1920s England.<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, she is also somewhat different from the tradition of the imperial-expatriate in which the metropolitan outsider is thrown into relief against an alien background<sup>80</sup>, because she had no specific audience to play to.

In an interview, when asked whether she considered herself as a West Indian writer, she responded that it was a long time since she had left, but when asked if she considered herself an English writer,

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72 Wyndham, F., *op.cit*, pp.9.

73 Idem, pp. 10.

74 “Jean Rhys”, wikipedia.org.

75 Frickey, Pierrette M., *Critical Perspectives on Jean Rhys*. Vol. 14. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990 pp. 1

76 Idem, pp. 20.

77 “Jean Rhys”, wikipedia.org.

78 Frickey, Pierrette M, *op. cit*, pp. 20

79 Naipaul, V. S. “Without a dog’s chance: After Leaving Mr Mackenzie” pp. 54-62., in Frickey, Pierrette m., *op.cit*, pp. 53.

80 Ibidem.

she responded vehemently that she was not, for she was not even English.<sup>81</sup>

This uncertainty of a place to belong to is reflected in her novels. Her heroines, much like her, are thrown off by organized society,<sup>82</sup> where they have no roots, but at the same time they come from no society, having no memories of places, and having lost their “way to England”.<sup>83</sup>

Jean Rhys' novels have one particular element in common: they are about how women are aliens, often despairing and isolated.<sup>84</sup> The society where the protagonists live is closed. The isolation of the woman, the outsider, is complete, she exists in a void.<sup>85</sup> Being outside the surrounding culture, she lacks the set of standards and the resources which are needed to survive in such a hostile environment,<sup>86</sup> and she is often unable to fight back, leaving her defenseless and vulnerable against domination by men and exploitation by everyone.<sup>87</sup>

It is interesting to note that, while the protagonist of the previous novels is an Englishwoman, in *Voyage in the Dark* she is in fact a young West Indian Woman, nostalgic of her childhood in a West Indian Island and who experiences a great culture shock between the world she grew up in and England.<sup>88</sup> The protagonist, Anna Morgan, the young West Indian girl living in England, opens the book with these lines, describing her experience in England:

*“It was almost like being born again: the colours were different, the smells were different (...), but a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy”<sup>89</sup>.*

Anna is torn between defending her Creole mother from the charge that she was “coloured” and desperately wishing to end her own ambiguity,<sup>90</sup> but the people around cannot and will not understand her.<sup>91</sup>

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81 Plante, D. “Jean Rhys: A Remembrance.” pp. 275.

82 Naipaul, V. S. , *op.cit*, pp. 53

83 Ibidem.

84 James, Selma, *op.cit* pp. 58.

85 Ibidem.

86 James, S, *op.cit* pp. 58

87 Ibidem.

88 Idem, pp 60.

89 Rhys, Jean. *Voyage in the Dark*. Reprinted New York: Norton, 1982.

90 James, S, *op.cit* pp. 59.

91 Ibidem.

### 2.3 Wide Sargasso Sea and The Obeah Theme.

*Wide Sargasso Sea*, which is by far Rhys' best known novel, also develops these themes, but it adds a different perspective. It is, in fact, an historical novel, set in XIX century Jamaica, precisely after 1833, the year in which slavery ended in the British colonies. The original subtitle, “*the extraordinary story of the first Mrs. Rochester*”, immediately points to a connection with the elusive and mysterious character of Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre.

Indeed, the character of Bertha Mason (called Antoinette Cosway in this version) had many attractions for Jean Rhys, being a white West Indian who ended up in Europe.<sup>92</sup> She is not only a “foreigner”, but the victim, the identified underdog, entirely defined by and in power of another man, her white husband Edward Rochester<sup>93</sup>, although he remained unnamed for the entire novel.

While Charlotte Bronte's first Mrs. Rochester is the epitome of all of Jean Rhys' heroines, seen from the point of view of their oppressors, Rhys's own West Indian novel sets out to tell the character's part of the story, in order to refute the distorted account given of her by canonical English Literature.<sup>94</sup> To accomplish this, Rhys left the Europe of Parisian cafes and London bedsits, and the West Indies is no longer a flashback or an idealization<sup>95</sup>, but the setting in which most of the story takes place.

From the very beginning, it draws a picture of Antoinette Cosway's childhood, engulfed by the green forests and lost in a society where her Creole heritage distances her from both the island's white and black cultures.<sup>96</sup> More poignantly, Antoinette's own mother also seems lost to her, first in caring for her sick brother, later to a new husband, and finally to grief-laden madness.<sup>97</sup>

In this tumult, the magic - the “*Obeah*” - of the island is perfectly at home; another mystery in a childhood of confusion.<sup>98</sup> The power of the mysterious magic in the novel is symbolized by

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92 Ibid., pp. 61.

93 Ibidem.

94 Ibidem.

95 Ibidem.

96 “Wide Sargasso Sea” from the website <http://readers.penguin.co.uk>  
<<http://readers.penguin.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780141185422,00.html>> (accessed 1/7/2013)

97 Ibidem.

98 Ibidem.

Christophine, the *Obeah* woman who takes care of Antoinette and her mother, and who tries to help them the best she can. Jamaica is described as a flourishing and mystical place, particularly the garden of the main character's house, Coulibri, based on the author family's own estate, as noted in her autobiography *Smile Please*.<sup>99</sup> Coulibri's garden is stated to be "large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible"<sup>100</sup>, even though "it had gone wild"<sup>101</sup> due to the lack of money to purchase workers after the end of slavery.

As the novel progresses, and we encounter her English husband, we see that the two lives collide, just as the two cultures do. It is this duality that helps weave many of the novel's haunting spells. Not just binary oppositions - white meets black, man meets woman - but a host of parallels and possibilities.<sup>102</sup> The novel suddenly has another narrative voice introduced, Antoinette is given another name by her husband, and we see that the marriage is not simply the domination of one figure by another, but the result of two people both driven by differing experiences.<sup>103</sup>

At the end, it seems that Antoinette, or Bertha as her husband calls her, has lost her name, her voice, and, as doubts are cast over her wits, it seems she must lose her country too<sup>104</sup>, dying later while burning her husband's estate, Thornfield Hall.

The post-modern nature of the novel, however, transforms Bronte's ending, presenting the final arson as a dream, and refusing to confirm its ending, hinting that other options fan out like a series of question marks beyond the text.<sup>105</sup>

The title itself is a metaphor for the impenetrable and murky problems of the dark voyage between the West Indies and Europe,<sup>106</sup> having been the sea that Columbus reported in his initial "West Indies" voyage.<sup>107</sup> Antoinette herself, on the ship that brings her to England, notices that after a certain point she is in "a different sea. Colder."<sup>108</sup> and that she is no longer home, although she does

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99 Rhys, Jean, *Smile Please*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984, pp.33.

100 Rhys, Jean, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 16.

101 Ibidem.

102 Ibidem.

103 Ibidem.

104 Ibidem.

105 Ibidem.

106 James, Selma, *op.cit*, pp. 62

107 Ibidem.

108 Rhys, Jean, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 148.

not believe she is going to England but that they lost their way instead.<sup>109</sup>

## 2.4 Magic and the Caribbean

The strange, mystical feeling of Antoinette's homeland does not end here. While writing this novel, Jean Rhys drew on African sources, mediated in her case through the culture of her Dominican homeland. Just as visual artists learned from West African masks and sacred artifacts to streamline and stylize forms, so Rhys borrowed cultural and oral tropes from the Yoruba and other West African peoples.<sup>110</sup> These cultural markers had crossed the Atlantic with the slave ships and evolved into the trickster tales, ghost stories, *Obeah* spells, talismans, satirical calypso songs and carnival street performances of Dominica and the other Caribbean islands.<sup>111</sup>

It is not surprising that Jean Rhys was drawn to subversive Afrocentric orality, given her aforementioned particular background and status as white woman in the West Indies.<sup>112</sup> She was knowledgeable about Afrocentric folklore: witches, ghosts, shape-shifters, tricksters, souciantes, and zombies. She researched Voodoo and left copious notes on Baron Samedi and other Haitian deities<sup>113</sup>, and she often mentioned *Obeah*, that is, the practice of harnessing supernatural forces and spirits for one's own personal use, known in some parts of Africa as 'Obeye' (an entity that lives within witches)<sup>114</sup> claiming that she could cast spells.<sup>115</sup>

Consequently, it is not surprising that this aspect comes to play an important part in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As a matter of fact, one of the novel's most important character is Christophine, Antoinette's black nanny and "Obeah woman", who faithfully serves her mother and her.

Christophine was also partly based on Rhys' personal experience. In fact, the writer modeled her after her own nanny Anne Truitt, the Rhys family's cook who was arrested and accused of

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109 Ibidem.

110 Davis, Cynthia "Jamette Carnival and Afro-Caribbean Influences on the Work of Jean Rhys," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 9. 2005 pp. 1

111 Ibidem.

112 Ibid., pp. 2.

113 Ibidem.

114 Giraldo, Alexander, "Religion and resistance: *Obeah*, the ultimate resistance" from the website <http://scholar.library.miami.edu> <<http://scholar.library.miami.edu/slaves/Religion/religion.html>> (accessed 13/7/2013)

115 Ibidem.

practicing *Obeah* by Governor Hesketh Bell<sup>116</sup>, a fate reflected by the fictional character, when Rochester threatens to bring her to the law. Much like Antoinette, Christophine is seen with suspicion from both the white and the black people, because of her foreign origin (she is from Martinique, in the French part of the Caribbean, as is Antoinette's mother) and her strange, ambiguous powers.

It is clear from the beginning that Christophine is a strange and mysterious figure: Antoinette declares that she is “not like other women”<sup>117</sup>: she sings different songs, she dresses in a different manner, and no one wants to have anything to do with her. Yet other girls and women do as she says, because, as Antoinette discovers, they are terrified of her, and they offer her various presents of fruit and vegetables<sup>118</sup>, as if to appease her.

In the second part of the novel, the reader witnesses a direct example of the power that the *Obeah* woman has over people, when she threatens Amélie, a little servant girl who flirts with Rochester and mocks Antoinette, to “[s]mash [her face] like [she] [s]mash[es] plantain”<sup>119</sup> and to give her a stomachache so strong that she might die for it.<sup>120</sup>

Christophine is clearly a figure of power, even though her abilities are not the ones that are traditionally prized in the cultures of her white Western masters: as she states in the novel to Mr. Rochester himself, she does not know how to “read and write”<sup>121</sup>, but she knows “other things”<sup>122</sup>.

It should be noted, however, that the extensions of these powers are never fully explained, though Antoinette thinks that they are strong enough to appeals to her for help during the second part of the novel. She begs to have her husband's love again through some sort of a love potion, after he has been driven away by the rumors about her mother and brother's lingering madness. The *Obeah* woman herself gives some contradictory statements about what she has done to Antoinette and her husband, claiming that the rumors about her are “foolishness”<sup>123</sup> but also that, even if they are not, her powers and potions do not work very well on white Creoles like Antoinette (or, as she calls her,

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116 Davis, Cynthia, *op.cit* pp. 3

117 *Wide Sargasso Sea* pp. 18.

118 *Ibidem*.

119 *Ibid.*, pp. 84.

120 *Ibidem*.

121 *Ibid.*, pp. 133

122 *Ibidem*.

123 *Ibid.*, pp. 132



a “*beké*”<sup>124</sup>). Interestingly, however, she also cryptically mutters in a language Rochester does not recognize, claiming that “he meddle[s] in something he do[es] not what it is”<sup>125</sup>, right after he declares that he would give up his eyes in order to no longer see Jamaica again, an obvious foreshadowing of his eventual blindness, as narrated in *Jane Eyre*.

But Christophine is also more than the local “strange” *Obeah*-woman, she is a maternal protector and ancestor-figure in the profound African sense<sup>126</sup>, and it is no accident that, after Antoinette falls ill, Rochester and Christophine have a final confrontation about Rochester's real feeling towards Antoinette and his plans for their future. Being both a healer and a witch, Christophine is also a figure who combines this aspect of slave resistance with an alert evaluation of the activities of the white authorities.<sup>127</sup> She does not believe that the slavery has really ended, the mere thought makes her laugh<sup>128</sup> because the new rich people coming to the island still have the power of the law, with lawyers, magistrates and jailhouses.<sup>129</sup>

She judges Antoinette's stepbrother, Richard Mason (also a character from Bronte's *Jane Eyre*), who pushed his stepsister into the arranged marriage, as a “boy worse than Satan himself”<sup>130</sup> and she rightfully guesses that Mason and all the doctors Rochester intends to consult will declare Antoinette a madwoman, so that she can follow the path of her mother<sup>131</sup>. As mentioned before, Rochester responds by using the law against her, threatening to expose her as a fraud and a criminal, and sending her to jail if she tries to see Antoinette again, thus effectively separating his wife to her last emotional connection she has to the Black Caribbean.<sup>132</sup>

Christophine's struggle for Antoinette's survival — for the survival of the Caribbean — against European patriarchy and empire, is the struggle for a voice to re inscribe a past history and construct a future out of genuine indigenous cultural materials— to become something other than a copy —

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124Ibidem.

125Ibidem.

126 Drake, Sandra, *Race and caribbean culture* in Raiskin in Judith L., *Wide Sargasso Sea : Backgrounds Criticism*, Norton & Company • New York, 1999. pp. 193

<<http://www4.ncsu.edu/~leila/documents/DrakeonRhys.pdf>> (accessed 8/7/2013)

127 “The context of Wide Sargasso Sea Religious and philosophical context” from crossref-it.info.com

<<http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/Wide-Sargasso-Sea/29/1917>> (accessed 5/7/2013)

128 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 22.

129 Ibid., pp. 23

130 Ibid., pp. 91.

131 Ibid., pp. 138.

132 Drake, Sandra, *op.cit* pp. 201.

and she apparently loses, only to be vindicated by Antoinette herself at the end of the novel.<sup>133</sup>

However, the reticence to explain something about the “Caribbean magic” in the novel is hardly a characteristic belonging just to Christophine: in the second part of the novel, written from the perspective of Mr. Rochester, he tries to discover more about the mysterious practices of the black servants around him, even asking if there is a ghost or a zombi (a *libid. ng* dead) in the woods, but he is told by his butler, Baptiste, that nobody knows anything about such nonsense, and he resorts to do some researches by reading a book, and later writing a letter to the local magistrate to know about Christophine.

Indeed, the magic in the novel, and all Caribbean magic, is never transparent and straightforward, but rather opaque and ambiguous.<sup>134</sup> The insistence of separating the “black magic” and the *Obeah* from the white people could be seen as an action of exoticizing such practices and reducing them into a European stereotype in an attempt to represent “otherness”<sup>135</sup> On the other hand, the *Obeah* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is clearly the expression of a repressed culture, an hidden and unrecognizable subtext, and it is because of its ambiguity and mysteriousness that it resists being appropriated, stolen and tamed from people who would not and could not understand it.<sup>136</sup>

Rhys' representation of the contrasting feelings of Antoinette towards the *Obeah* practices, that is, terrified and attracted to them at the same time, as well as a partly vulnerable to them but not entirely, reflects the hybrid condition (neither black, nor English) of Antoinette herself,<sup>137</sup> but at the same time it gives the character a way to claim a cultural affiliation, so that she can fight back and resist the English Law, however controversially.<sup>138</sup>

## 2.5 Magic tropes: naming and zombies.

A great part of the *Obeah* Theme that pervades Rhys' novel is dedicated to the importance of the character's names, nicknames and even insults.

A glaring example of the latter is found in the central part of the novel, Antoinette speaks of the

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133 *Ibid.*, pp. 194

134 Coppola, Manuela, *L'isola madre: maternità e memoria nella narrativa di Jean Rhys e Jamaica Kincaid* Tangram Edizioni Scientifiche Trento, 2010 pp. 105.

135 Mardorossian, Carine M. *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* Vol. 3, No. 3, Jean Rhys (Summer 2003), pp. 133

136 Coppola, Manuela, *op.cit.*, pp. 105.

137 *Ibid.*, pp. 102.

138 *Ibidem.*

names she has been called (“white cockroach,” “white nigger”) in her life as a Creole, saying to Rochester “I often wonder where I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all”<sup>139</sup>, lamenting, once again, her issues of identity as a white Creole.<sup>140</sup> However, the importance of the names comes to play in the novel in several different disturbing ways.

As mentioned before, Charlotte Bronte's original Mrs. Rochester was named Bertha Antoinette Mason, while Rhys' character is called Antoinette Cosway, while Mr. Mason is her stepfather who arranges the marriage along with her stepbrother.

This seemingly meaningless change reveals itself to be very important: as we have seen, one of the first signs of the (always unnamed) Mr. Rochester will to dominate his new wife is his newfound habit to call her by a different name, the proper English name Bertha. Interestingly, this happens only after Rochester has heard the rumors about Antoinette's troubled past life and family, particularly that Antoinette's mother, who bore the same name as her daughter, did not die a long time before like he was lead to believe, but only recently, in an asylum. Consequently, suspicion has grown in his mind and he does not know who he can trust. When she asks, worried, why he calls her so, he responds, elusive: “Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha”<sup>141</sup>.

Antoinette's first reaction is to submit to him, stating that it does not matter<sup>142</sup>, effectively agreeing to his wishes, even after she confessed her whole past to him, including a disturbing visit she paid to her insane mother, who was kept drunk and abused by her servants. However, she later recognizes the practice for what it is, that is, Rochester stealing her name and identity, and she agrees that it is “*Obeah* too”<sup>143</sup>: “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”<sup>144</sup>, demonstrating that, while Rochester is not be a part of *Obeah* practicing nor is he able to understand them fully, he successfully can use the subtleness of the Jamaican surrounding to his own purposes.

Indeed, here, the situation of women under the patriarchy, and of black people, is compared. The slaves lost their African names, and often took surnames of their owners. Women, in the British

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139 Ibid., pp. 83.

140 “Religion and Literature in the Caribbean” from [http://www.people.vcu.edu/~wchan/poco/624/harris\\_south/Literaryworks.htm](http://www.people.vcu.edu/~wchan/poco/624/harris_south/Literaryworks.htm) (accessed 10/7/2013)

141 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 111

142 Ibidem.

143 Ibid., pp.121.

144 Ibidem.

patriarchy, take the surnames of their husbands. Rochester goes a step farther and seeks to remove Antoinette's given name too.<sup>145</sup>

Rochester himself mildly resents when his servant Baptiste does not call him “sir” or “master”, probably out of spite for having had an affair with another servant while his wife was sleeping in the house.<sup>146</sup>

Shortly after he begins calling her Bertha, Antoinette tells Christophine, who notices right away that she is beginning to undergo the transformation that will make her into the madwoman ‘Bertha’ of *Jane Eyre*, and Christophine associates her with the supernatural:<sup>147</sup> stating that “Your face like dead woman and your eyes red like *soucriant*”<sup>148</sup>, a kind of Caribbean vampire<sup>149</sup>. This foreshadows Bertha’s eventual imprisonment and madness in England, made that way both by the Rochester's colonialism and also, accidentally, by Christophine, who gave her something to help her “sleep” (“She isn’t going to sleep natural, that’s for sure, but I can make her sleep”<sup>150</sup> she says to Rochester) through the ordeal of her imprisonment.<sup>151</sup>

Another important part of the Caribbean Folklore that becomes important in the second part of the novel is the quintessentially Afro-Caribbean figure of the zombie, or as Rhys spells it, “zombi” about whom Rochester himself tries to ask about them, only to be denied any answer.

The myth of the zombi is, of course, of African origins: a number of African societies thought that *bokors* —"sorcerers" who turned great powers to evil ends — could reduce persons to automatons and force them to do the *bokor's* will, including work for him.<sup>152</sup> . A number of Caribbean scholars have been intrigued with the question of why this belief should have attained much greater importance in the Caribbean than in Africa, suggesting that it was because it was so well suited to represent the condition of plantation slavery in the Americas.<sup>153</sup>

Far from being an exotic backdrop, the figure of the zombi in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the central

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145 Drake, Sandra, *op.cit.*, pp. 194.

146 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 110

147“Religion and Literature in the Caribbean” from <http://www.people.vcu.edu>

148 *Wide Sargasso Sea* pp 109

149 “Trinidad and Tobago Folklore: The Mayaro Soucouyant”, from the website [www.trinIbid.ew.com](http://www.trinIbid.ew.com)  
<<http://www.trinIbid.ew.com/TnT/Soucouyant.htm>> (accessed 23/7/2013)

150 *Ibid.*, pp. 124.

151 “Religion and Literature in the Caribbean” website cited.

152 Drake, Sandra, *op.cit* pp 201

153 *Ibidem*.

character of the novel, that is, Antoinette herself,<sup>154</sup> who embodies the book's own definition of the fantastical figure, that is “the spirit of the place”<sup>155</sup>, in both the Jamaican and English setting.

Throughout the novel, Antoinette slowly becomes the zombie because, she has no country, no race, no place, and no identity, and her will is easily controlled by Rochester, because she has no roots to combat his English view of her. Antoinette is marked by the colonial encounter as a zombie, her madness is genetic and a product of her environment, where she can never articulate an authentic self, and thus is neither African nor English.<sup>156</sup> Her eventual madness and destruction of Thornfield Hall might be read then, as a response to the colonial power that has stunted her. It is her only way since *Obeah*, zombification, and hybridity have not rescued her from colonialism, she must still speak her story.<sup>157</sup> Indeed, it is not until the end, when she is ready to triumph, even only in a dream, that she declares that “Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette and I saw Antoinette drifting out the window”<sup>158</sup>. This time, not only does she recognize what it has been done to her, but also that it is time to retaliate, somehow.

It should be noted that Rochester too is, at some points, compared to a zombi, and he certainly feels disconnected and disoriented by the the place, which he feels is “his enemy and on [her] side”<sup>159</sup>, even though Antoinette tries to tell him that it is “indifferent”<sup>160</sup> and it is a stranger to either of them. Nevertheless, as an Englishman and a colonizer, he has the resources to escape this dreadful transformation, which Christophine implies is due to his resentfulness towards his wife and the fact that he has been the one to go and “beg her to marry”<sup>161</sup>, rather than the other way round, in a curious reversal of traditional gender roles. Interestingly, it is at the mention of the word “money” that breaks the spell that the seemingly enchanted surroundings, or perhaps the influence of Christophine, have cast upon him: he no longer feels “dazed, tired, half hypnotized”<sup>162</sup>, but instead

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154 Ibid., pp. 195.

155 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 130.

156 “Religion and Literature in the Caribbean” website cited

157 Ibidem.

158 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 147.

159 Ibid., pp. 107.

160 Ibidem.

161 Ibid., pp. 130.

162 Ibidem.

he is “alert and wary, ready to defend [him]self”<sup>163</sup>. He no longer listens to what Christophine and later Antoinette have to say to him, but he makes the decision not to divorce his wife, in order to administer Antoinette's dowry money and to control her life like her stepbrother and stepbrother had previously done. By returning to the traditional gender roles he is accustomed to, he escapes zombification, but only at the expense of Antoinette's life, who only at the end is able to take her revenge through the fire, finally reversing her condition of “Ibid.ng dead” and “sleeper” (which is a reversible state in Afro-Caribbean culture)<sup>164</sup> and rebelling against her master.<sup>165</sup>

## 2.6 Jean Rhys between post-modern feminism and post-colonialism.

Another question remains: why the choice of using Charlotte Bronte's characters? It is clear that it could have been written without the relationship of intertextual referentiality of *Jane Eyre*. But this level of literary intertextual referentiality invokes and is paralleled by the extratextual referentiality to Europe's historical narrative.<sup>166</sup>

In that narrative, the Caribbean since the Voyages of European Conquest is construed, and thus constructed, in the terms of a dominant literary and historical discourse that takes Europe as origin and reference point. So too does *Wide Sargasso Sea* has a European origin-reference point: *Jane Eyre*.<sup>167</sup> It is in this regard deliberately derivative, an imitation, a palimpsest. Its very existence derives from the English classical literary canon.<sup>168</sup>

It is clear that *Wide Sargasso Sea* purposefully problematizes its conceptions of gender.<sup>169</sup> As noticed by Maggie Humm, “All women characters in Rhys's fictions are mercilessly exposed to the financial and gendered constraints of an imperial world”<sup>170</sup>, in striking difference with Charlotte Bronte's type of feminism: whereas Jane has concrete beliefs in what women deserve, as well as obtainable goals for how she imagines her place in society as a woman; Antoinette does not even

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163 Ibidem.

164 Drake, Sara, pp. 199

165 Ibid., pp. 200.

166 Drake, Sandra, *op.cit.*, pp. 196.

167 Ibidem.

168 Ibidem.

169 Lewkowicz, Sherry, *The Experience of Womanhood in Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea* Brown University, 2004 <<http://www.post-colonialweb.org/caribbean/dominica/rhys/lewkowicz14.html>> (accessed 13/7/2013)

170 Humm, Maggie. *Third World Feminisms: Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea. Practicing Feminist Criticism: an introduction*. Great Britain: Prentice Hall, 1995. pp. 187

know where to begin to desire change or to assert herself <sup>171</sup>. Rhys's novel reflects the changing status of woman in the twentieth century as it was written after colonization and after two world wars. The characteristically modern anxieties present in *Wide Sargasso Sea* results in a female protagonist who, although existing in roughly the same time period as Jane and experiencing much of the same challenges, represents a much more modern conception of a woman. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* can each be seen as feminist texts when considering their social and historical context, but *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents a more post-modern form of feminism which takes into account the complexity of male-female interaction to find that efforts to transcend deep-set gender norms are nearly hopeless.<sup>172</sup>

Whereas in Jane's world, women are literally restricted from participating in society as men do, in Antoinette's world this repression has gone underground. It is ideology and norms about femininity which are oppressive, and therefore so much more difficult for Antoinette to rise against or even to confront. Rhys's work expresses the challenge of dealing with this new, and perhaps more dangerous, repression, signaled in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by new uses of style, voice, and narrative structure.<sup>173</sup>

As Schapiro states, "in its reworking of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Rhys's novel makes the shift in literary sensibility from the nineteenth to the twentieth century particularly discernible . . . the collapse of rational order, of stable and conventional structures on all levels, distinguishes Rhys's vision and places it squarely within the modernist tradition".<sup>174</sup>

Even the ending is open to the reader: it can either suggests that perhaps, the gulf between men and women (and this extends to any power binary, such as former master/former slave) cannot be breached<sup>175</sup>, and the Perhaps the differences are so great, or more importantly, so established and internalized that Antoinette cannot ever have the sense of security, happiness, and pride that Jane finds by the end of *Jane Eyre*,<sup>176</sup> or, on the contrary, that her resolution is, indeed, a satisfactory one.<sup>177</sup> If we take into account the second option, the satisfactory resolution of Antoinette Cosway's

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171 Lewkowicz, Sherry, website cited.

172 Ibidem.

173 Ibidem.

174 Schapiro, Barbara Ann. *Boundaries and Betrayal in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea*. Literature and the Relational Self. Ed. Jeffrey Berman. New York: New York University Press, 1994. pp. 84.

175 Lewkowicz, Sherry, website cited.

176 Ibidem.

177 Drake, Sandra, op.cit. pp. 194.

crisis of identity can come only with a satisfactory resolution of her relationship to the part of the Caribbean that is not derived from Europe — in this novel, especially the Black Caribbean.<sup>178</sup>

Antoinette, who is Caribbean, colonial, and female, is reduced in the course of the novel to economic and psychological helplessness by European colonialism and patriarchy. History and culture, inscribed as narrative, plot structure, and symbolism, make the story ultimately one of triumph, accomplished in the terms of the Afro-Caribbean belief system,<sup>179</sup> represented by the the supernatural elements of the *Obeah* and Christophine.

It is this connection that highlights the power of the feminist fantasy and its explorations of the problems of being for women in a society which denies them not only visibility but also subjectivity<sup>180</sup>, scrutinizing the categories of the patriarchal real, revealing them to be arbitrary, shifting constructs:<sup>181</sup> as a matter of fact, Rochester cannot accept that his wife was, in a way, more powerful than he was when she was home, so he deliberately chooses to take everything that gives her power.

Antoinette Cosway's identity is connected with her roots and her homeplace: as long as she herself rejects the root culture of her native America, which at its substratum — its "bottom line" — is so deeply African in origin—as long as she remains oriented to Europe—Antoinette is at Europe's mercy. In Rochester's terms she is "Antoinette marionette"; in the Afro-Caribbean idiom, she is a zombi<sup>182</sup>. But when she accepts Christophine, and her protective, purging, and empowering gift of fire, her finally victorious struggle against European-colonial imposition of the zombi state—her ultimate regaining of an identity stolen by cultural imperialism—her final realization and action become an American battle against a European colonialism.<sup>183</sup>

The point is not whether zombis are "real" or not: the point is that, ever since Europe colonized the Americas, African beliefs have been derided as foolishness<sup>184</sup>, but in Rhys' novel, these beliefs and these practices reveal themselves to be much more powerful than they seem, being able to revitalize a human being by giving her identity back, and allowing her to take revenge in violent ways (reflecting the psychological violence that she has been submitted to) and that European

178 Ibidem.

179 Ibidem.

180 Cranny-Francis, *A. Feminist fiction. Feminist uses of generis fiction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990. pp. 77.

181 Ibidem.

182 Drake, Sandra, op.cit., pp.194.

183 Ibidem.

184 Ibidem.



powers and colonizers should not underestimate them.

## Chapter III

### **Rosario Ferré's *The Youngest Doll* and *The Sleeping Beauty*.**

#### **3.1 Rosario Ferré's Amphibious Identity.**

Rosario Ferré was born in Ponce de León, Puerto Rico, on September 28th 1938<sup>185</sup> into one of Puerto Rico's wealthiest families. Her father, Luis A. Ferré, was founder and leader of the Puerto Rican Progressive Party for many years, and the Governor of Puerto Rico from 1968 to 1972.<sup>186</sup>

Ferré received her primary education in her hometown Ponce, but, since her father was a fervent supporter of the Americanization and annexation of Puerto Rico to the United States, he decided to send her daughter to the United States so that she could learn to speak and write in English as a first language.<sup>187</sup>

Consequently, in 1951, at the age of thirteen, she was sent to Wellesley, Massachusetts, where she attended Dana Hall School.<sup>188</sup> She returned to Puerto Rico in the 1970s, she enrolled in the University of Puerto Rico and began her writing career as the founder, editor and publisher of the journal "Zona de Carga y Descarga".<sup>189</sup> In 1985 Ferré enrolled in the University of Maryland, College Park where she graduated with a Ph.D. in Latin American Literature.<sup>190</sup>

In 1975, she began her writing career in Spanish, with her first collection of short stories, *Papeles de Pandora*. She translated her own novel into English in 1991, under the title "The youngest Doll", as another short story contained in the collection.<sup>191</sup> In 1986, she published her first novel, *Maldito*

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185 "Rosario Ferré" from wikipedia.org <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosario\\_Ferr%C3%A9](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosario_Ferr%C3%A9)> (accessed 12/8/2013)

186 "Luis A. Ferré" from wikipedia.org <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luis\\_A.\\_Ferr%C3%A9](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luis_A._Ferr%C3%A9)> (accessed 12/8/2013)

187 "Le due lingue di Rosario Ferré" from the website <<http://www.caribenet.info>  
<[http://www.caribenet.info/oltre\\_manna\\_bilinguismo\\_ferre.asp?l=>](http://www.caribenet.info/oltre_manna_bilinguismo_ferre.asp?l=>)> (accessed 12/8/2013).

188 "Rosario Ferré" from wikipedia.org

189 Ibidem.

190 Ibidem.

191 Ibidem.

*Amor*, also self-translated into English as "Sweet Diamond Dust" in 1989<sup>192</sup>. For this novel, she was awarded in 1992 a prize "Liberatur Prix" award from the Frankfurt Book Fair.<sup>193</sup>

Then she began to write the first versions of her other books in English, such as *The House on the Lagoon* (1995); *Eccentric Neighborhoods* (1998) and *Flight of the Swan* (2001)<sup>194</sup>, along with many essays about her experience as a bilingual writer and a self translator, such as *Destiny, Language, and Translation; or Ophelia Adrift in the C & O Canal* (1991) where she inquires about her double identity as a Puerto Rican who lived in the United States for many years. In 2002, she published a bilingual edition of poems *Language Duel/Duelo del lenguaje*.<sup>195</sup>

Ferré worked as a professor at the University of Puerto Rico and was a contributing editor for *The San Juan Star*, which was once Puerto Rico's English language newspaper<sup>196</sup>. She is also recognized at "Illustrious Ponce Citizens Plaza", a landmark in Puerto Rico, celebrating the most important citizens of the town, for her contributions in the field of literature. She currently resides in Puerto Rico, with her third husband.<sup>197</sup>

### **3.1 Between two languages and two cultures.**

Rosario Ferré is, by virtue of her education and nationality, a bilingual writer. She belongs to two cultures at the same time: Puerto Rican, thus Latin American, and North American.

She lives in a culture formed by two very different components, that sometimes live in harmony with each other and sometimes live through rough conflicts.<sup>198</sup>

She is, by her own admission, a hybrid, as she states in an interview in 1998:

“As a Puerto Rican writer, I constantly face the problem of identity. When I travel to the States I feel as Latina as Chita Rivera. But in Latin America, I feel more American than John Wayne. To be Puerto Rican is to be a hybrid. Our two halves are

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192 Ibidem.

193 Ibidem.

194 Navarro, Mireya "Bilingual Author Finds Something Gained in Translation". In :*New York Times*, 08.09.1998

195 "Rosario Ferré" from wikipedia.org

196 Ibidem.

197 Ibidem.

198 "Le due lingue di Rosario Ferré" from the website <http://www.caribenet.info>  
<[http://www.caribenet.info/oltre\\_manna\\_bilinguismo\\_ferre.asp?l=](http://www.caribenet.info/oltre_manna_bilinguismo_ferre.asp?l=)> (accessed 13/8/2013)

inseparable; we cannot give up either without feeling maimed.”<sup>199</sup>

In her essay *On Destiny, Language, and Translation; or Ophelia Adrift in the C & O Canal*, she explores her act/identity as a writer and a translator, comparing the act of writing as an act of translation itself.<sup>200</sup> In fact, she defines writing as a struggle to interpret the meaning of life. In this way, the translator is a shaman dedicated to deciphering conflicting human texts, searching for the final unity of meaning in the speech.<sup>201</sup>

Commenting on her bilingualism and her affiliation to two cultures at the same time, she states that only a writer who has experienced history, moral and cultural values in any given language can be said to be a true bilingual writer.<sup>202</sup> As a Puerto Rican, she had the privilege of knowing both English and Spanish and both North American and Latin American way of life.<sup>203</sup>

According to her, writing in two different languages is a very different experience in terms of writing and seeing the world: when she writes in English, she feels that the the “landscape of idiomatic, symbolic, communal references.. [is] well within [her] reach”<sup>204</sup>, she thinks in terms of a cultural translation, not unlike translating a poem from a past century into a modern language<sup>205</sup>.

Spanish Language, on the other hand, is the language of her dreams, of her childhood and it is strongly connected with her cultural identity.

Interestingly, when describing the Spanish Language, she engages in a curious connection between the latter and the word plays she was taught as a child, stating that the practice of undermining the meaning of the words is an habit of Latin American children and Latin American writers. She says this reflects a question of the social order that a person is obliged to accept without sharing the language processes<sup>206</sup>. This attitude has an anarchic nature, common in Latin American culture, which has also its roots in the faith in supernatural values<sup>207</sup>, in the power of image and the power

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199 Rosario Ferré, “Puerto Rico, USA” from *The New York Times* 19 march 1998.

200 Ferré, Rosario, *On destiny, language and translation*, in Anuradha Dingwaney e Carol Maier, *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 1995, pp. 41

201 Ibidem.

202 Ibidem.

203 Ibidem.

204 Ibidem.

205 Ibidem.

206 Ibidem.

207 Ibidem.

of transforming the world into a better place.<sup>208</sup> It is clear that, unlike Jean Rhys, Rosario Ferré has a much better relationship with her double identity and double culture. Nevertheless, she does recognize the pain and the laceration that her condition can inflict: in the same essay, she declares that, having been an immigrant, even belonging to a wealthy family, she did undergo exile as a way of life and as a style of life<sup>209</sup>, and that coming and going from two countries and two languages, can constitute an anguishing experience<sup>210</sup>, as it implies a constant recreation of divergent worlds.<sup>211</sup>

She also identifies herself as a feminist. In fact, she often writes about the condition of the modern Puerto Rican women and how only women constant awareness can fight the silencing tactics that still surround them.<sup>212</sup> It is consequently not surprising that her themes range from the plight of Puerto Rican women, usually upper-class, to the island's colonial status<sup>213</sup>, showing the limited roles women play in Puerto Rican society and imagining different possibilities to achieve a new female identity. Ferré combines elements of indigenous and European folk tales, and highlights feminist themes as the relationship among genders, races, and classes, the traditional literary representations of women, the oppression of women in patriarchal cultures and their usually poignant struggle against it.<sup>214</sup>

In particular, the figure of the doll is a recurring theme that represents not only women's struggles against the patriarchal system but also the concept of idealized femininity, as can be seen in her short stories *The Youngest Doll* and *Amalia*<sup>215</sup>

Another theme that Ferré deeply explores is the issue of race and identity. Her first novel, *Sweet Diamond Dust (Maldito Amor)*, is a parody of the “land novel” genre, and it outlines Puerto Rican twentieth-century history from the perspectives of four influential rich women who live through

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208 Ibidem.

209 Ibid., pp. 47.

210 Ibidem.

211 Ibidem.

212 Hopscotch, *Women on the Verge: The fight against silence*, A Cultural Review, Volume 2, Number 2, 2001 pp. 176-179

<<http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/hopscotch/v002/2.2ferre.html>>(accessed 15/8/2013)

213 Cengage, Gale, "Ferré, Rosario – Introduction." Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 129. 2000. [eNotes.com](http://www.enotes.com/rosario-ferre-essays/ferre-rosario/introduction). <<http://www.enotes.com/rosario-ferre-essays/ferre-rosario/introduction>> (accessed 15/8/2013)

214 Ibidem.

215 Ibidem.

important periods of the island's change,<sup>216</sup> exploring the difference between the treatment of women and men Ibid.ng on the island. Similarly, *The House on the Lagoon*, traces the relationship between a wealthy husband and his wife, who bickers with increasing frequency about politics, social attitudes,<sup>217</sup> underscoring the link between knowledge and power, interweaving themes of race, class, gender, and sexuality to uncover the ways the past shapes the present and affects self-identity.<sup>218</sup>

It should be noted, however, that, while Rosario Ferré strongly identifies as a Puerto Rican and a Latin American writer, politically she does not oppose the annexation of Puerto Rico to the United States. She claims that they have been Americans for almost a hundred years<sup>219</sup> and that the majority of Puerto Ricans are happy with their American citizenship.<sup>220</sup>

In her own words:

“As a Puerto Rican and an American, I believe our future as a community is inseparable from our culture and language, but I'm also passionately committed to the modern world”<sup>221</sup>

This is in stark contrast with Jean Rhys, who felt the burden of her double identity as an Englishwoman and a Creole for all her life, even claiming that she did not consider herself as an English writer. Rosario Ferré is an example of how the cultural identity does not always correspond to the political identity of a person: on one hand, she feels that her duty as a Latin American woman writer is perpetuating the tradition in which she grew up and she thinks that Puerto Rican future depends on its people's ability to sustain themselves and helping each other<sup>222</sup>.

On the other hand, she also criticizes the romanticized view of the island held by some people, particularly immigrants who fled to the USA.<sup>223</sup>

### **3.3 The Youngest Doll: Femininity and the Double.**

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216 Ibidem.

217 Ibidem.

218 Ibidem.

219 Ferré, Rosario, “Puerto Rico, USA” from *The New York Times*, 19 march 1998.

220 Ibidem.

221 Ibidem

222 Ferré, Rosario, *On destiny, language and translation*, pp. 48.

223 Ferré, Rosario, “Puerto Rico, USA” from *New York Times*.

*The Youngest Doll*, originally written in Spanish under the title *La muñeca menor*, is part of a collection published in 1976 with the title *Papeles de Pandora*, an obvious reference to the female character of the Greek myth about women's dangerous curiosity. As previously mentioned, the collection was retitled in her own English translation, because of the double entendre that the original Spanish term offered, meaning "paper", but it has another definition as "the dramatic roles given to actors to represent, and yet another meaning are the functions or roles that people perform in life."<sup>224</sup> By choosing this title, Ferré implies that the *Papeles de Pandora* are the social roles assigned to women by patriarchal hegemony.<sup>225</sup>

*The Youngest Doll* tells the story of a woman who, bitten by a prawn in the river, develops an ugly wound in her leg that will not heal: the prawn has nested in her calf, and thus she can never marry<sup>226</sup>. However, she establishes a loving relationship with her nieces, devoting herself to make dolls for them. At first, they are simple rag dolls, but with time they become more and more elaborate, to the point that the family celebrates the "birth of a new doll"<sup>227</sup>. When her nieces marry, she fabricates a full-sized honey-filled for each one of them, as a wedding present.

Meanwhile, the narrator reveals that the aunt's attending doctor could have cured the old woman's wound from the start, but instead he chose to prologue it in order to pay for his son's medical education.<sup>228</sup>

When the youngest niece and the doctor's son decide to marry, the niece's wedding present doll is even more special, because it is warm and with diamonds imported from Europe embedded in the its eyes.<sup>229</sup> Unfortunately, the marriage does not go very well, for the niece gradually discovers that her husband is only interested in putting her on display on their house balcony, and begins to suspect that "it wasn't just her husband's silhouette that was made of paper, but his soul as well"<sup>230</sup>.

Her suspicion is soon confirmed when she finds him stealing the doll's diamonds eyes, and later

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224 Martín, Angela, *Rosario Ferré's "La muñeca menor": Fantastic Gendered Space*, Florida Atlantic Comparative Studies Journal; June 2010, Vol. 12 Issue 1, pp. 41 <<http://home.fau.edu/peralta/web/FACS/genderedspace.pdf>> (accessed 16/8/2013)

225 Ibidem.

226 Ferré, Rosario, *The youngest doll*. University of Nebraska Press, 1991. pp. 39

227 Ibidem.

228 Ibidem.

229 Ibidem.

230 Ibidem.

plans to sell them. Before he can do it, however, the doll disappears and the niece tells that probably the ants ate it because it was filled with honey. As time passes, the doctor's son realizes that his wife does not age, always sitting motionless on the balcony, so he enters her room one night, and he notices that she does not breathe, and at that moment his wife's eyelids open, revealing from the empty eye sockets the "frenzied antennae of all of those prawns"<sup>231</sup>.

The story, which up until the end was relatively realistic, ends on this fantastic note, resolving the implied reader's hesitance to consider the tale as real or marvelous,<sup>232</sup> complying Todorov's criteria that the fantastical elements are based on the implied reader's hesitation about her/his perception of the tale's reality.<sup>233</sup> The author's interweaves an uncanny or strange event into the text that elicits an emotional response from the reader: a hesitation about the real nature of what is happening. The principal cause of the implied reader's doubts is the uncanny that is the key to the fantastic.<sup>234</sup>

In Ferré's story, the doll represents a very familiar object associated with childhood innocence. The uncanny is the doll, a replica of the adult character, which no longer strikes that familiar chord in the reader<sup>235</sup>, The implied reader's uneasiness is heightened by the story's descriptive language and its progressive parallelism between the girl's and the doll's behavior. It is uncanny that either the doll possesses the girl, or the girl becomes the doll.<sup>236</sup>

As in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the short story has a strange, mysterious character who has weird, ambiguous powers, that it, the aunt herself. Differently from Christophine, however, she starts as the protagonist, focusing on her tragic life and her act/bid. ty of crafting beautiful dolls, and only at the end the story shifts its point of view towards the niece and her husband.

The Maiden Aunt is a sort of a mother figure for her nieces, though it can be said that a completion of a doll was equivalent to creating or g/bid. ng birth and since she knew she had been cheated out of any possibility of having biological children because of the prawn, these dolls were her daughters.<sup>237</sup>

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231 Ibidem.

232 Martín, Angela, *op.cit.*, pp. 44

233 Ibidem.

234 Ibidem.

235 Ibidem.

236 Ibidem.

237 Betancourt, Juanita Rodríguez. "View of Women in Fantastic Literature: Poe, Benitez Rojo, Arreola and Rosario Ferré." pp. 8. <[http://bibliotecavirtualut.suagm.edu/Publicaciones\\_profesores/Juanita\\_Rodriguez/View%20of%20Women%20in%20Fantastic%20Literature.pdf](http://bibliotecavirtualut.suagm.edu/Publicaciones_profesores/Juanita_Rodriguez/View%20of%20Women%20in%20Fantastic%20Literature.pdf)> (accessed 16/8/2013)



Certainly, the resemblance between the dolls and the nieces foreshadows the ultimate destiny of the youngest niece, who, *Ibid.* with her greedy and authoritarian husband, becomes a doll herself, unable to age and always sitting motionless and ageless.

The Aunt is even hinted to have some prophetic powers, as every time she gives a doll to her nieces, she tells them: “Here is your Easter Sunday”,<sup>238</sup> announcing to them the fact that each doll represented an opportunity of freedom and, if the need arises, hoping that they would understand how the dolls could give them freedom.<sup>239</sup> It is unclear if the aunt knows the truth about her own condition, but it is clear that she has obviously understood who her niece's future husband is and what his real goals are: she embeds the doll's eyes with diamonds (money that could assist the niece in her resurrection)<sup>240</sup> as a mean to escape from him, but when he later decides to pry them out to sell them, the reader realizes that the niece can no longer escape to avoid her subjugation and transformation.<sup>241</sup>

She also uses the diamonds for the eyes of the dolls only after she had left them submerged at the bottom of the river, so that the eyes “would learn to recognize the slightest stirring of the prawns' antennae”<sup>242</sup>, which could be possibly suggesting the dangerous threat that the prawns pose.<sup>243</sup>

However, some of the Aunt's traits and characteristics can be seen as genuinely disturbing and aggressive: the description of how she received and prepared the materials for the dolls' confection was detailed and at times gruesome and could be compared to the creation of Frankenstein's monster.<sup>244</sup>

“Then she would make a wax mask of the child's face, covering it with plaster on both sides, like a *Ibid.* face sheathed in two dead ones”.<sup>245</sup>

The author's choice of words, playing with the dichotomy dead/alive, uncannily hints that the aunt's creation is alive, trapped within a dead matrix used to cast the face of the doll,<sup>246</sup> and the final image

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238 Ferré, Rosario, *The youngest doll*. pp.40

239 *Ibidem*.

240 Martin, Angela, pp. 50.

241 *Ibidem*.

242 Ferré, Rosario, *The youngest doll*, pp. 40

243 Martin, Angela, pp. 50.

244 *Ibidem*.

245 Ferré, *The youngest doll*, pp. 40

246 Martin, Angela, *op.cit.* pp.46.

of the doll filled with prawn's antennae coming from its eyes, though effective, is surely disturbing and horrifying, and it could be seen as a vicious vengeance towards her niece's husbands for more than just one reason.

The doll is, effectively, the niece's double, a lifeless doppelganger, foretelling the niece's conversion into objects.<sup>247</sup>

Unlike the zombi in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the niece's transformation into a doll goes unexplained, not even in a fantastical manner; it is not certain at which point she became one, though it occurred certainly after the doll's supposed disappearance. It is clear, however, that she became one through her husband's behavior, which certainly recalls some of Rochester's pettiest characteristics: he has no respect towards his wife and her family, or towards her possessions, and he wants her to be silent and passive, just like one of her dolls.

Indeed, the niece's husband is described as having no soul, and being rather vain and shallow. It is stated also that the niece only married for the rather absurd reason that she was "curious to find out what dolphin flesh was like".<sup>248</sup> However, it is important to remember that the character is a woman who has been raised in an aristocratic home where women were kept isolated from the world and had limited experiences and knowledge.<sup>249</sup> The curiosity for the dolphin flesh could be seen as symbolic of the longing and desire to experience life in general,<sup>250</sup> and therefore she chooses to be committed to a man who has less than noble intentions towards her, with disastrous results.

Like Antoinette, who slowly becomes a zombi, succumbing to the madness that has always followed her and losing any power over her life, the niece slowly becomes like an inanimate object: the doll, after losing her diamond eyes, "remain[s] as always seated [...] on the piano, but with her eyes modestly lowered"<sup>251</sup>, a fate mirrored by the niece who keeps being sitting on the balcony, with closed eyelids. The metamorphosis is complete and the implied reader realizes that the young wife has been robbed of the knowledge the aunt gave her and stripped of her subjectivity.<sup>252</sup>

Interestingly, this transformation seems to affect other people as well: every time someone sits around them, they hear a scent that makes them think of "slowly oozing sweat" <sup>253</sup> and then feel a

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247 Ibid., pp.49.

248 Ferré, *The youngest doll*; pp. 41

249 Betancourt, Juanita Rodríguez, *op.cit.* pp. 9.

250 Ibidem.

251 Ferré, *The youngest doll*; pp. 41

252 Martin, Angela, *op.cit.*, pp. 50

253 Ferré, Rosario, *The youngest doll* , pp. 42

strange, uncontrollable impulse to rub their hands “as if they were paws”<sup>254</sup>, almost as if her transformation were contagious. However, the husband himself, does not seem affected by the change happening in his wife, on the contrary, her ageless seems to be the very thing “missing from [his] otherwise perfect happiness”<sup>255</sup>, probably because he cannot recognize it for what it is: the proof of her subjugation.

Similarly to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the ending is purposefully ambiguous: it could either be interpreted as an act of revenge towards the husband, who wished for a perfect wife and he received a doll full of disgusting creatures instead, and as an act of deception of the youngest niece who escapes the control and abuse, or, on the contrary, as the final act of violence towards the niece, who changed from a human being into a shallow simulacrum of a woman.

Nevertheless, the theme of the Supernatural in this tale is strongly tied to the feminine subversive power: women’s social position in the domestic space masks a stagnant dead-end situation if she accepts it as the norm.<sup>256</sup> The aunt, who has been trapped by the doctor and his son, pours into her role to which she seemingly accepts with apparent conformity: she secretly becomes a creator of life,<sup>257</sup> seemingly conforming to patriarchy’s social strategy but she tactically resisting her oppressor’s control by creating the dolls,<sup>258</sup> and using them as a weapon towards men's attempting to control women and their identity.

### **3.4 Sleeping Beauty: the subversion of the fairy tale.**

*The Sleeping Beauty*, first published in 1976 under the title *La bella Durmiente*, is part of the same collection of *The Youngest Doll*. As evinced from the title, it draws upon elements of children's fairy tales,<sup>259</sup> obviously Charles Perrault's *Sleeping Beauty*, but also T.H. Hoffman's *The Sandman*, its adaptation for the ballet *Coppélia*. Differently from *The Youngest Doll*, which has an omniscient narrator, in this tale the author uses multiple point of views, in various forms, such as letters and Newspapers' articles, narrating the story of a conspiracy between a wealthy father and a Catholic

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254 Ibidem.

255 Ibidem.

256 Martin, Angela, *op.cit.*, pp. 46.

257 Ibidem.

258 Ibid., pp. 47.

259 "Ferré, Rosario – Introduction." website cited.

nun that destroys his daughter's ambition to become a ballerina after he arranges her marriage to a young aristocrat.<sup>260</sup>

The story's protagonist, María de los Ángeles, expresses herself through dance, and dreams to become a first-class ballerina,<sup>261</sup> but the people around her have different plans for her: the Mother Superior of the Catholic School she attends wants her to become a nun, while her father wants her to marry and provide him with male heir.<sup>262</sup> When her father prohibits her from dancing, she falls ill and becomes comatose, waking up only after her fiancé the rich Felisberto Ortiz, allows her to continue pursuing her goal, and kisses her. However, once married, Felisberto does not keep his promise, and he attempts to control her,<sup>263</sup> forcing her to have a child, although she does not want it because it would impede her career. As a result, she becomes alienated from everyone, and she ends up cheating on her husband in a motel, sending him two notes hoping to be discovered.<sup>264</sup> The ending is tragic: one day, Felisberto arrives in the motel room while María's lover is asleep and commits suicide after murdering her.<sup>265</sup>

Most of the story is narrated through different point of views, mainly through the correspondence between the Mother Superior and María's father, Felisberto's unsent letter to her father, clipping of the society pages and María's two notes.<sup>266</sup> This technique allows the reader to have many different insights on what is really happening to the characters, and challenges the reader to discover the truth.

Throughout the short story there are various references to famous classic ballets, such as *Giselle*, the aforementioned *Coppélia* and, of course, *The Sleeping Beauty*. These three ballets mirrors María's struggles towards freedom, until the moment of her tragic death.<sup>267</sup> The connection of María with the protagonist of these fairy tales is clear from the start, as we read her first note where María recalls her miraculous awakening, describing it as it were the eponymous fairy tale, with a herself as

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260 Ibidem.

261 Weldt-Basson, Helene Carol. *Subversive silences: nonverbal expression and implicit narrative strategies in the works of Latin American women writers*. Associated University Presse, 2009. pp. 146.

262 Ibidem.

263 Ibidem.

264 Ibid., pp. 147.

265 Ibidem.

266 Ibidem.

267 Flores-Silva, Dolores. "“La bella durmiente” de Rosario Ferré y su sueño emancipador." *Revista Surco Sur* 1.2 2010 pp. 16.

a protagonist who walks alone and accidentally pinches herself, at which point she feels “herself falling”<sup>268</sup> and “everything slowly dissolving, melting around her”<sup>269</sup>, sleeping for so long that “her bones were thin needles around inside her, piercing her skin”<sup>270</sup>, until her fiancé, called “[her] prince, [her] love”<sup>271</sup> kisses and awakens her. In reality, of course, she has fallen ill and is comatose, and her mind transforms her parents' veto of dancing into something that is forbidden for mysterious reasons, though she also states that now that the “social commentators”<sup>272</sup> and the “society ladies and the nuns are dead”<sup>273</sup>, she can finally wake up and continue dancing.

María's disconnection with reality and strange perception of what is happening around her is evidenced by the fact that, unlike the other coherent writings, her note is presented as an interior monologue written in third person, as a stream-of-consciousness, and it is not signed.<sup>274</sup> The second ballet mentioned by the story, *Coppélia*, an adaptation of Hoffman's *The Sandman*, occurs chronologically before the wedding. Interestingly, *Coppélia* also features a woman who pretends to be a doll, albeit with humorous intentions.

María, who at this point is still a ballerina, stars in it as Swahilda, who takes the place of a mechanical dancing doll, leading its inventor, Doctor Coppélius, to believe that he has been able to bring it to life. María begins her role normally, gracefully imitating the charming movements of the automaton,<sup>275</sup> as the choreography demands. Suddenly, however, she departs from her choreographed part and improvises her own surprising twist to the tale. First, she puts the body of the doll *Coppélia* on a table and begins to smash it to pieces and, when the doll is reduced to debris, she does a wild solo dance “decapitating dolls, breaking clocks, and emitting a god-awful sound from her mouth just as if a spring on her back had sprung, making her go out of control”<sup>276 277</sup>.

Once again the doll represents women's passivity, artificial ornamentation, and its breaking by

268 Ferré, Rosario, *Sleeping Beauty*, Nebraska University Press, pp. 101.

269 Ibidem.

270 Ibidem.

271 Ibidem.

272 Ibid., pp. 102

273 Ibidem.

274 Weldt-Basson, Helene Carol, *op.cit.* pp. 147.

275 Scoular, Bryan T. *Over Our Dead Bodies: Emilia Pardo Bazán, Rosario Ferré, and the Feminine Fantastic*. Forum for Modern Language Studies. Vol. 44. No. 4. Oxford University Press, 2008. pp. 447

276 Rosario Ferré, *Sleeping Beauty*, pp. 106

277 Scoular, Bryan T. *op.cit.*, pp. 447

María's hands represents her attempts to throw off all the restraints that limit and cancel her individuality,<sup>278</sup> albeit briefly. This gesture, however grandiose, is not without its consequences: it is after the scandal created after this accident that her father forbids her to dance, and consequently she falls into a coma becoming (or appearing to become), in this interlude of the fantastic, a fairy-tale figure.<sup>279</sup> As Suzanne Hintz puts it “All the external forces that oppose her professional dancing career cause a spell to fall on Ferré's *Sleeping Beauty*”<sup>280</sup>, that it is only broken by her fiancé's promises to allow her to keep her dancing, and it is only at that moment that she agrees to marry him.

Unfortunately Feliberto's real intention and ideas of a proper marriage are quite different. His abusive nature and deceptiveness is disturbingly described in another note, when María compares her condition with the protagonist of another ballet, *Giselle*. The male protagonist of the ballet to *Giselle* pretending to be a peasant, while he is actually a prince. In her mind, María conflates the two characters and she fears that Loys (the ballet's male protagonist) is “bent of finding her hiding place [...] and she can never be a Willi [a supernatural creature similar to a fairy] again”<sup>281</sup>, even if she later reassures herself that “he truly loves her and he won't get her pregnant”<sup>282</sup>.

As stated above, her husband does not keep his promise, on the contrary, the notion that she does not want to give him a heir infuriates him and finally he forces himself on her.<sup>283</sup> By doing this violence, Feliberto affirms his possession, thinking to cement the relationship between them through a son, thereby establishing equality with the elite into which he has married, and asserting his primacy in her life over her art.<sup>284</sup>

Interestingly, he states in an unsent letter that he writes to his father-in-law that he did so because he refused to be considered a “puppet”<sup>285</sup>, a slave of his wife's whims. His motivations seem to be eerily similar to those of his wife, but, while his wife reacts by aggressively smashing a real doll and then turns herself into a passive fairy tale figure, he reacts by trying to subjugate her by a

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278 Norat, G. “Del despertar de ‘La bella durmiente’ al reino patriarcal”, *Lingüística y Literatura* 15 1989, pp. 23

279 Scoular, Bryan T. *op.cit.*, pp. 447

280 Hintz, Susan, *Rosario Ferré: A Search for Identity*, New York, 1995, p. 144.

281 Rosario Ferré, *Sleeping Beauty*, pp. 109.

282 Ibidem.

283 Ibid., pp. 111

284 Scoular, Bryan T. *op.cit.*, pp. 449

285 Rosario Ferré, *Youngest Doll*, pp. 107

horrifying violence in order to turn Maria into what he wants her to be. This is another, though far more brutal, example of how men in the patriarchal society have much more possibilities of affirming their own identity than women, often by controlling them through violence.

After her trauma, María starts disassociating herself from her usurped body, first by identifying with the Willi, then by imagining herself as the very antithesis her husband and her family's expectation of her: a circus performer and a prostitute.<sup>286</sup> This is an extreme reprise of the act of smashing of doll, earlier in the story, but with the added element of the vindictiveness of *The Youngest Doll*.<sup>287</sup> If her husband treats her like an object, then she will play the part and accept money for sex. The ballerina dresses herself up like a caricature of a male fantasy of a garishly-dressed sex worker, emptying herself of all sentiment.<sup>288</sup>

Much like the niece of the *Youngest Doll*, María disappears into the role of her double, imagining that she is a death-defying tightrope walker and trapeze artist, though she reminds herself that a real circus performer “wouldn't have gotten married”.<sup>289</sup> At the end, though, even this little revolution is contained, because her father covers up the truth about her death, dressing her as a virginal bride, with people commenting at the funeral that she looks like when she used to perform *The Sleeping Beauty* on stage.<sup>290</sup> Thus, she sadly returns to the gender role from which she had tried so hard to escape. It is also worth noticing that, in the short story, María's point of view appears only twice, despite being the protagonist. This subtle silencing technique is highlighted by the fact that, reading through the other characters' letter about her we see no evidence that these characters have ever talked with María about the convent, marriage, or her love of dance,<sup>291</sup> and the nun even warns her father ominously, defining the dancing act as a world dangerous to the girl's body and soul, going as far as asking “What good would it do her if, to gain fame in the world of entertainment, she lost her soul?”<sup>292</sup>, revealing the oppressive forces of religious dogma and patriarchy.<sup>293</sup>

Once again, Rosario Ferré opens up the workings of love and marriage in modern-day Puerto Rico

286 Scoular, Bryan T. *op.cit.*, pp. 448

287 Ibidem.

288 Ibidem.

289 Rosario Ferré, *Youngest Doll*, pp. 120.

290 Scoular, Bryan T. *op.cit.*, 448

291 “Rosario Ferré: criticism” from the website <http://voices.cla.umn.edu>  
<<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/ferreRosario.php>> (accessed 16/9/2013)

292 Rosario Ferré, *Sleeping Beauty*, pp. 105.

293 “Rosario Ferré: criticism” website cited.

to show both their inner machinery and their traps for young women. Through her use of metamorphoses and doubles of the fantastic, her characters inhabit the figure of the doll, a substitute for perfect femininity, and rip it apart from the inside out,<sup>294</sup> defying the ideal of femininity and the perfect woman that often women are meant to represent.

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294 Scoular, Bryan T. *op.cit.*, pp. 448



## Conclusions

Jean Rhys' *Wide Saragasso Sea* and Rosario Ferré's stories illustrate the way post-colonial fiction offers to deconstruct the concept of identity whose ambivalence remains open to any re-imaginable interpretation. Post-colonial fiction is an ambivalent set of texts that offer a fertile terrain for the never-ending investigation into the third space of identity. Founded on the concept of difference, identity opens onto otherness which reveals itself as a process of signification that feeds on ambivalence and interpretation, calling for perpetual destabilization of meaning.<sup>295</sup>

With the destabilization of cultural frontiers between nations, identity emerges as a philosophical challenge. Without offering possibilities of reaching definite answers, identity, as a process of interrogation, will continue to raise questions about the self in its incessant efforts to apprehend the unattainable other. Post-colonial fiction invites us to believe that in our attempts to answer questions about our relations with others, and no matter what new directions may the concept of identity take in the future, what matters most is perhaps the balance that should be sought for in order to avoid all forms of fixity of meaning that characterize essentialist thinking.<sup>296</sup>

Indeed, this is an attitude found in both Jean Rhys and Rosario Ferré's works, and the reason why I found compelling drawing a comparison between the two authors, however distant they may seem.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys' depiction of the effects of British colonialism in the West Indies is a dark one since it brings violence, destruction as well as a forced merging of cultures that entrap rather than liberate those who, like Antoinette, inhabit the uneasy space of in between that resists identification.<sup>297</sup>

Conversely, Rosario Ferré's short stories, present a unique view of women and their complexities, using them as symbols of endurance and resistance against the patriarchal and colonial system.<sup>298</sup>

In this view, the Supernatural adds a new element to the narrative, one that goes beyond merely exploring the possibility of the unknown and fiction's power to transform the reality and the reader.

It represents transgression of the limits imposed to women from a rational and patriarchal point of

295 Karkaba, Cherki, *op.cit.*, pp. 98.

296 Ibidem.

297 Kadhim, Nibras Jawad. "Double Exile: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*." *College Of Education For Women*, Baghdad University. 2011 pp. 600

298 Karkaba, Cherki, *op.cit.*, pp. 99.

view, using it to show another reality, which has been forgotten and considered invisible for a long time.<sup>299</sup>

By inserting fantastic elements originally from the Caribbean folklore both authors try to subvert the values and the discourse of the traditional male and dominant society and male point of view, which is not only the most represented in literature and media in general, but also frequently thought as more rational, logical and objectively truer.

The Fantastic element shows the fragmentation of the real, revealing the real as a negotiation of conflicting discourses engendered by specific socio-economic conditions and denying the definition of the real commonly proposed in realist texts as an essentially unchanging product of an essentially unchanging 'human nature'.<sup>300</sup> Indeed the fantastic element serves the role of, as Rosemary Jackson identifies it, tracing "the unsaid and unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent"<sup>301</sup>.

The goal of Fantastical Feminist literature is to render visible a part of a culture that is able to confound, bemuse and defy not only the notion of a dominant reality, but also the power structures, both colonial and male-dominant, that pervade it. It is not a mere and futile escape from reality, but it assumes instead a strong social and sometimes political connotation.<sup>302</sup>

Recently, the folklorist and fantastic elements of Caribbean origins have gained a new found popularity into people's consciousness thanks to to modern Western Pop Culture, especially Hollywood films, but, as it might have been noted, they are vastly different from what they used to represent and symbolize. As a matter of fact, one of the effect of the colonization has been the use and the appropriation of much of the Caribbean culture and folklore, to the point of rendering<sup>54</sup> them utterly unrecognizable from their source material, effectively using another silencing techniques.

Indeed, the use of fantastical elements in post-colonial literature can be seen as a re-appropriation of certain cultural elements that have been used by the wrong people, reflecting the heroines' attempts to gain freedom and independence and going beyond their "identity crisis" by using their own culture against their masters and male figures of their life.

Having being marginalized by the "real world" and the "literary world" for so long, Rhys' and

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299 Rodero, Jesús. "Lo fantástico feminista: metamorfosis y trasgresión en Rosario Ferré y Rima De Vallbona." *Neophilologus* 93.2, 2009 pp. 277.

300 Cranny-Francis, *op. Cit.* pp. 76.

301 Jackson, R. *Fantasy: The literature of subversion*. Londres: Methuen, 1981. pp. 4

302 Rodero, Jesús. *op. Cit.*- pp. 277

Ferré's female characters try to fight back to gain a voice and a role in their own story, often rewriting the classic Western Canon and its masterpieces such as *Jane Eyre* and classic Northern and German Fairy-tales such as *The Sandman* and *The Sleeping Beauty*.

The action of rewriting the classics is not an action of disrespect and unreasonable contempt towards the original authors, but rather an act of vindication towards a culture of oppression that has forced them to be silent and accept passively the role that has been imposed to them, often by writing them as flat stereotypes, such as the “madwoman in the attic”, the “princess in distress” and “the silent and good looking doll”.

*Jane Eyre's* Bertha Mason was the West Indian mad wife whose presence was nothing more than an hindrance for her husband, and Jean Rhys tried to explore the subtle and nasty implications of this stance, in order to deconstruct Bertha's character and ultimately reconstruct her into a new, different character, ready to take her revenge and giving her a catharsis which, not incidentally, coincides with the ultimate tragedy of her husband, who loses his eyes as a result. Similarly, the tragic death of Rosario Ferré's heroines are strongly linked with the stereotypes typical of the Western and Patriarchal world: *The Youngest doll's* niece becomes the pretty wife on display that her husband wants her to be, *The Sleeping Beauty's* character wants to subvert the rules of classical ballet and, by extension, society, and then she identifies with the contrary of what both of these embodies, effectively becoming “the other” and is punished for it.

As Antoinette Cosway character remarks in the middle part of *Wide Sargasso Sea*: “*There is always the Other Side*”<sup>303</sup>: Rhys' and Ferré writings are an example of strong and feminist attempts to bring the side that has never been considered or brought to the light, not only in order to explore the consequences of colonialism, patriarchy and oppression, but also in order to redefine these paradigms by exposing them as a false constructs and far from universal.

If the tales themselves often feature tragic characters meeting tragic and fatal endings the intent behind them is certainly more optimistic, oriented to give a voice to the voiceless and a point of view to those people who have been deprived of one for a long time.

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303 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 90

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