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A Fragmented Self: Psychological Dissociation and Trauma in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea through Pierre Janet's Dissociation Theory

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Abstract
This study examines the psychological disintegration of Antoinette Cosway in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), with the specific objective of identifying the interior psychological mechanism by which colonial dispossession, patriarchal violence, and unresolved childhood trauma converge to produce identity fragmentation, a dimension left comparatively unexplored by existing postcolonial and feminist scholarship. Data were collected exclusively from the primary literary text, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (André Deutsch, 1966 first edition). For close readings, four passages of the novel were chosen that reveal the process of dissociative rupture through the language and narrative structure of the text: Antoinette's description of her love for her mother, Annette; her reaction to the burning of the Coulibri Estate; her addressing Rochester with questions concerning her own self; and her repeated fire dream ending with Thornfield. The choice of the passages was guided by the formal markers of dissociative process in the text, such as Antoinette's fragmented perception, thoughts and memories, her confusion between different aspects of life, etc. The theoretical background is provided by Pierre Janet's Dissociation Theory that is represented by *L'Automatisme Psychologique* (1889) and developed by modern trauma theorists such as van der Kolk (2014), Brewin (2019), Spiegel et al. (2013), Lyssenko et al. (2018). The analysis demonstrates that the dissociation in Antoinette involves four steps in which the trauma becomes progressively worse: childhood traumas in terms of relationships and environment create the *idées fixes*; the liminal position in terms of culture of being a Creole woman means that the external confirmation of the identity does not take place; the naming by Rochester "Bertha" marks the end of dissociation between the past self and the new self; finally, the collapse at Thornfield marks the complete inability to synthesize and integrate the self, achieved through shifting to the third person by Rhys. In this regard, this study brings to the literature on *Wide Sargasso Sea* a

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psychologically sound framework of analysis. The use of the Janetian approach is not meant to replace postcolonial and feminist theories of criticism of the book; rather, the idea here is that colonial and patriarchal oppression become the exact triggers of the dissociative process.

Keywords: Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Pierre Janet, dissociation, trauma, fragmented identity, postcolonial literature

Introduction

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) holds a unique place among the postcolonial literature of the twentieth century. As a prelude to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Rhys brings back into focus the voice of the "madwoman in the attic," a voice that has been silenced, anonymous, and animalized in Brontë's novel; and she restores this voice to Antoinette Cosway, a Creole woman whose psychological breakdown can be explained through her concrete historical, social, and psychological situation. Contrary to the belief that madness is a natural disease, Rhys carefully explores the sociological and psychological processes through which a person's identity is deconstructed.

There is quite a lot of scholarship produced on *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The postcolonial critics analyzed how Rhys subverted the imperial story, thus showing the nature of racism and violence in colonial Jamaica and the commodification of Creole women in the marriage economy of that society (Ashcroft, 2017; Donnell, 2021). The feminist interpretation has been concentrating on the patriarchal structures that turned Antoinette into the property: first of all, the legal property that Rochester owns, and then the unwillingness to recognize the cultural background and the renaming of Antoinette to "Bertha" (Gale, 2020; Rabi et al., 2025). The postcolonial and feminist approaches are crucial for understanding what happened to Antoinette within the framework of these contexts. However, they mostly consider the impact of the outside world and neglect the way this impact leads to the destruction of Antoinette's personality. Studying trauma provides a critical connection between external factors and internal realities. According to modern theories of trauma, incidents that are beyond the processing ability of a person are not incorporated into their autobiographical memory but remain as unprocessed affective and sensory imprints, affecting perception, emotions, and behavior (van der Kolk, 2014; Brewin, 2019). The portrayal of Antoinette in Rhys's work is in line with this approach, since her childhood memories, recurring visions of fires, and her increasing emotional numbness indicate that she has a mind affected by unresolved traumas. Hence, trauma theories help analyze Antoinette's situation as a clinical rather than a moral or metaphorical one (Latif et al., 2026).

In the context of studies related to trauma, however, Pierre Janet's theory of dissociation provides an especially precise theoretical instrument of analysis. In his pioneering *L'Automatisme Psychologique* (1889), Janet theorized that the moment in which experience becomes too much for consciousness to integrate does not lead to forgetting but to dissociation, where the overwhelming experience splits off and takes on the form of a separate psychological system manifesting itself through dreams, compulsions, and affective flashbacks (Abdulwahab et al., 2026). Though prefiguring many aspects of current trauma psychology (Spiegel et al., 2013; Lyssenko et al., 2018), Janet's model of

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dissociation introduces into historical literature the vocabulary to speak about identity fragmentation and allows for analysis of Antoinette's breakdown as a gradual structural process rather than a series of incidents (Swati et al., 2026).

Despite being subject to various types of analysis, including from postcolonial, feminist, and, more generally, trauma theories, a thorough use of Janet's Dissociation Theory as a theoretical framework for this study is underexplored. It is important because Janet's theory not only tells us why Antoinette suffers but precisely how suffering leads to identity fragmentation. This research fills the above gap. The point is that the mental breakdown of Antoinette is to be viewed as a form of dissociation—a condition resulting from childhood trauma, relational abandonment and culture shock, and finalized by Rochester's forced change of identity. Dissociation serves as a unifying principle that explains the convergence of these factors into a coherent psychic effect.

This paper is structured around the following two research questions: How does Antoinette's journey in *Wide Sargasso Sea* reflect the stages of dissociative fragmentation according to Pierre Janet? How does Jean Rhys code the process of dissociation through the structure and symbols of her work? The study will be conducted through close textual analysis in which selected excerpts from the book will be analyzed through a Janetian lens and contextualized within current literary discourse about postcolonialism and feminism in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Below are the outline and structure of the paper. The theoretical framework section develops the theory of dissociation proposed by Pierre Janet and its ties with modern trauma theory. The methodology section discusses the choice of using close qualitative reading and the reasons for that. Four sub-sections comprise the body of the analysis and cover the four major stages of Antoinette's dissociative journey: the source of dissociation in childhood trauma, the exacerbation of identity loss through cultural displacement, Rochester's reinforcement of dissociation and Antoinette's descent into madness at Thornfield.

Theoretical Framework: Pierre Janet's Dissociation Theory

In this paper, the Dissociation Theory developed by Pierre Janet will be used as the key theory of analysis. The choice of Janet's theory is made due to the fact that it addresses the particular way in which trauma interferes with the mental wholeness, namely the breakdown of integration, and the fact that the mechanism coincides perfectly with the mental processes of Rhys' protagonist, Antoinette. In order to move on to the analysis of the text, it is important to set the theoretical background properly, since "dissociation" is a multi-faceted term. In *L'Automatisme Psychologique* (1889), Janet proposed the notion of dissociation in which he stated that for normal psychology to occur, there should be an integration of experiences and formation of a cohesive consciousness. Normally, the process of integrating new experiences occurs within what Janet referred to as the "personal synthesis," which entails a coherent narrative of the self incorporating memory, emotions, perception, and identity. However, when the experience surpasses the "psychological tension" available in an individual for integration, then the process of integration does not happen. Rather, it is a dissociation, separated from normal consciousness and kept separate as a self-contained entity known as "Fixed Idea" *(idée fixe),* continuing to shape behavior and emotional responses without being conscious to reflective thought. Importantly, the dissociated material does not become extinguished but remains

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active in a separate psychological system that intermittently breaks through into consciousness via dreaming, hallucination, and automatic actions (Janet, 1889, cited in van der Kolk, 2014, p. 182-183).

The psychological study of contemporary traumas has significantly advanced and elaborated on Janet's theories. Spiegel et al. (2013) affirm that dissociative processes, including depersonalization, identity disruption, and amnesia, are among the most consistent reactions to trauma, and that such phenomena involve the disruption of memory, identity, and perception integration processes. Further, Lyssenko et al. (2018) prove that the prolonged experience of traumatic stress, especially at developmental stages, leads to the phenomenon of structural dissociation, which is defined as the separation of the personality into an apparently normal, everyday-functioning "part" and an emotional one that is stuck in a traumatic period. Van der Kolk's (2014) neuroscientific studies show that the traumatizing memories are encoded differently from the regular autobiographical memories; namely, they are stored in a disconnected form of somatic and sensory pieces instead of being integrated in narrative form, which explains their intrusive nature. The same principle applies to the theory of dual representation by Brewin (2019).

Three elements from the Janetian model play key roles within the context of this study. Firstly, the idea of *idée fixe* helps understand why the childhood traumas of Antoinette—being rejected by her mother and witnessing the destruction of the Coulibri estate—are not things of the past that are only remembered but form the core of her present perceptions and behavior. Secondly, Janet's idea about how identity fragmentation is caused by the failure to integrate can explain why the identity of the person being put under pressure will not just be weakened but will actually split, forming two separate identities which never get integrated with each other. In Rhys' novel, this becomes literal through the Antoinette/Bertha split. Finally, dissociation being a process in Janet's model can help read the structure of the novel in terms of stages of psychological disintegration.

A certain methodological clarification must be made about the use of a clinical theory formulated in nineteenth century France in order to analyze a mid-twentieth century text written in the Caribbean. It is important to remember that Janet's theory was formulated against the backdrop of European clinical practice and its use on the characters in Rhys's novel will reenact the very same pathologizing process that the novel criticizes. In this analysis, the Janetian model will thus be used not to diagnose Antoinette, but rather to interpret the dissociative logic constructed by Rhys in her text. The point is not that Antoinette "has" a dissociative syndrome, but that Rhys makes use of dissociation, i.e. splitting of identity, eruption of unintegrated memories, gradual dissolution of personal integrity.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study will be qualitative close reading. Close reading is suitable for this particular research since the dissociative phenomena being investigated have been inscribed in the text linguistically, through elements such as narrative point of view, syntax, repetition, symbolism, and the structure of the text's different parts. This kind of psychological analysis of literature has a long-standing tradition in trauma studies where the formal aspects of the literary text are seen as encoding experiences that are difficult to

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represent (Caruth, 2016; Herman, 1992). The analysis will be carried out by focusing on specific textual moments and not through an exhaustive summary of the plot since it is in the very moments of disruption and contradiction where dissociation is evident.

There are four types of textual evidence that will be analyzed in the following paragraphs. First of all, there will be an analysis of the direct quotes from Antoinette's first person narration to detect identity disturbances, memory disturbances, and dissociation on the level of her affects. Secondly, there is the analysis of the usage of the symbols such as fire, mirrors, color and naming by Rhys as the formal equivalent of the dissociative return of the unintegrated material. Thirdly, there is an examination of the three-part structure of the novel and shifts in narrative point of view as formal manifestations of fragmentation. Finally, there is the analysis of the sections in Rochester's first person.

Secondary sources have been derived from three disciplines: literary criticism of Rhys and postcolonial literature, trauma theory, and psychology of dissociation. This has been done not in terms of separate theories but through interconnected views, where the former sheds light on how the inner process works, while the latter explains the ideological framework within which this process is triggered, and the literary criticism provides the context within which the text fits into the literary history of the Caribbean and Britain. All references to the text are taken from the first edition of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by André Deutsch (1966).

It will be an overambitious project to attempt an exhaustive analysis of the book. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a text full of polysemies, and there is no claim to cover all aspects of the meaning of this work. The scope of this paper is limited in order to explore the logic of dissociation that determines Antoinette's psychological development from her abandonment to the moment when she breaks down, and show that Janet's theoretical approach gives a fruitful tool for the understanding of this process.

Analysis and Discussion

Childhood Trauma and the Origins of Dissociation

The early life of Antoinette Cosway unfolds in a series of events, in the language of Janet, which exceed the capacity of Antoinette for psychological integration. There are two events that are formative: the first is the love-hate relationship between Antoinette and her mother Annette; the second is the burning of Coulibri Estate. Neither of these events is a single occurrence that can be recovered in memory. Each event leaves behind it a residue that becomes an *idée fixe* that produces continual affect without being accessible for reflection.

Antoinette's relationship with Annette is marked from the beginning by conflicting emotional requirements that make stable attachment impossible. This can be seen in a single line from the book:

"My mother, whom I loved and feared, hated me." (Rhys, 1966, p. 20)

In its own syntax, this sentence has become dissociative; love, fear, and hatred exist independently and in juxtaposition, without connectives, as if there is no way to create out of these emotions one cohesive experience of emotionality. From the point of view of Janetian psychology, this structure describes exactly what happens during childhood relational trauma when the caregiver who provides attachment is at the same time a threatening figure, creating an impossible affective situation where the emotional structure that could make

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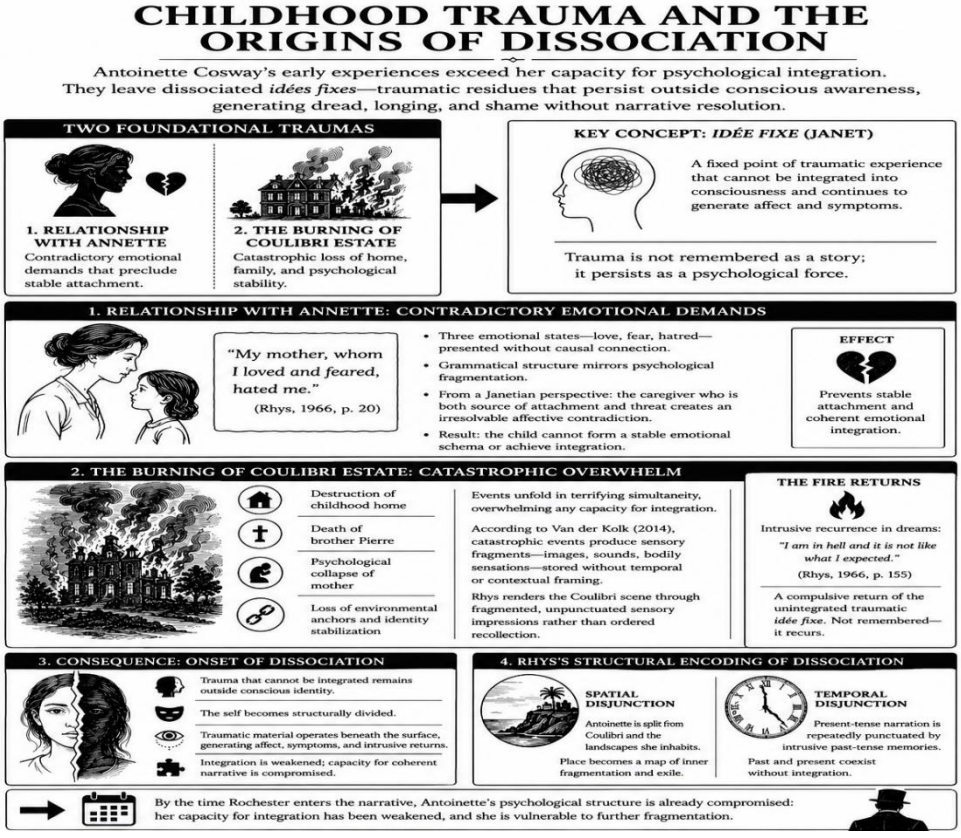
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possible the synthesis of these emotions is impossible to form (Herman, 1992). The fire of the Coulibri Estate in Part One exacerbates the fragmentation by removing the environmental supports that serve as stabilizers of the self. Antoinette is confronted with the destruction of her childhood home, the death of her brother Pierre, and the total breakdown of her mother, which happen not sequentially but simultaneously in a manner that renders integration impossible. As van der Kolk (2014) explains, a catastrophic event generates not coherent memories but fragmentary sensory data: disconnected sensory impressions and images that are recorded without a sense of context or time. In Rhys's description of the scene at the Coulibri Estate, this process can be seen clearly because the depiction is fragmentary and unsynchronized in terms of sensory data. Importantly, the fire is not confined to the past; it recurs later in the form of Antoinette's nightmares:

"I am in hell and it is not like what I expected." (Rhys, 1966, p. 155)

In such cases, the phenomenon described by Janet is a compulsive recurrence of the *idée fixe*. The fire is not remembered but recurs because of its failure to be integrated from the start (Caruth, 2016).

In Janet's opinion, the consequence of the experience at an early age is dissociation, whereby a split self is formed and whereby the conscious self is unable to reconcile the trauma taking place beneath the surface. Rhys spatializes the concept through Antoinette's experience with Coulibri and other landscapes surrounding her, while she also temporalizes it through the interruptions in Antoinette's narrative; that is, Antoinette's narration in the present tense together with memories in the past tense interrupting her narration. When Rochester comes along in the story, Antoinette's mind has already been affected.



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Identity Fragmentation and the Dissolution of the Self

With the coming of Antoinette to maturity, the dissociation process started in childhood is further augmented with her status as a person of cultural marginality. In terms of a Creole girl in post-abolition Jamaica, she becomes a person who is in the third space, a term coined by Bhabha (1994). Antoinette does not belong to the Black people in Jamaica, who call her a "white cockroach," since she represents the vestige of plantocracy; on the other hand, the English colonialists consider her Creole background as a sign of her mental instability. Hence, her status excludes her from having any stable social mirror in which identity can be formed and reinforced. Without any such mirror, identity maintenance becomes more complicated and thus Janet's model suggests the weakening of integrative self.

Antoinette's explicit articulation of this fragmentation occurs in her direct address to Rochester:

"So between you and the stranger, what am I?" (Rhys, 1966, p. 102)

The question has formal power in itself. It is posed to Rochester but goes beyond him, addressing "the stranger" about whom she speaks; the stranger here being the self who Rochester has started to build for her, and who he will later call Bertha, opposite to the self she was before Rochester appeared. The sentence structure illustrates the separation in question. The pronoun "I" is put at the end of the sentence, caught up between two mutually exclusive locations, unable to take up any position. From Janet's standpoint, the sentence represents a moment when the personal synthesis has broken down: no longer there is one "I", which unites experiences together.

In Rochester's part in this crisis, his denial of recognition plays a critical role. Rochester does not see Antoinette as a person, as a subject with an inner life, but as an object who needs to be interpreted using certain existing colonialist and patriarchal scripts that make her exotic, mad, racially suspect, and legally his own. Through the dominant narrative voice in the latter half of the novel, Rochester's systematic interpretation of Antoinette's speech and behavior via discourse of suspicion, which refuses the validity of her self-representation, becomes a part of the process. Indeed, it is not simply a part of Antoinette's fracturing process, but its very cause. Taylor's (2017) analysis of the dialogic nature of the formation of one's identity sheds light on how the lack of recognition can destabilize one's identity.

Antoinette's transformation into "Bertha" exemplifies this process. "A name, in Janet's scheme, was a prime example of such an anchor, linking current experience and biographical memory." It does not matter that Rochester uses "Bertha" to insult Antoinette – by replacing "Antoinette" with "Bertha," he tears her away from the thread of recognition which created her identity. This is made clear by how Rhys depicts it through Antoinette's perception:

"Names matter." (Rhys, 1966, p. 121)

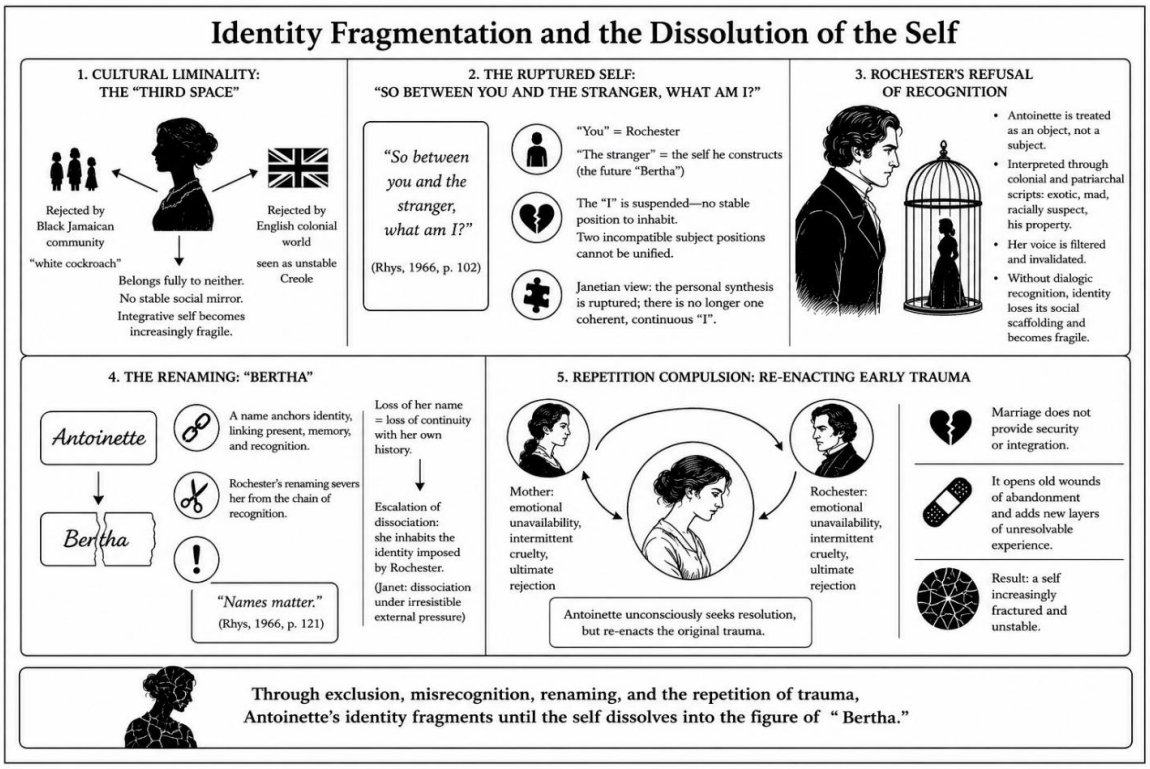
It is not merely a commentary on social custom but a commentary on the psychological structure of personality. Her losing her name corresponds to an increased dissociative state – without her name which links her to her past, Antoinette begins to assume the position of the person Rochester has created, the process described by Janet whereby identity is dissociated under irresistible external pressure.

The concept of repetition compulsion in trauma victims described by Herman (1992) is relevant in this case as well. According to Herman, people who have

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formed their early attachments in environments of threat and abandonment subconsciously recreate such situations in their later life, looking for a resolution for the earlier trauma but only repeating it. Antoinette's psychological investment in Rochester, who reproduces every single aspect of the treatment she received from her mother – the lack of emotional availability, intermittent cruelty and ultimately rejection – fits this profile.



Rochester's Control and the Enforced Dissociation of Identity

In the third segment of the novel, the author describes the worst phase of Antoinette's dissociation when her identity is destroyed through Rochester's patriarchal and colonial power. The main difference between this phase of Antoinette's dissociation and other previous moments of the heroine's fragmentation lies in the fact that it is imposed from outside. In the previous phases, the disruption of Antoinette's integrative capacity happened inside, and this made her fragile. Now, this power from the outside helps to form another identity for Antoinette and thus to finish the dissociation process.

All of Rochester's actions are systematic. The protagonist learns the history of Antoinette's family specifically to prove the fact of the existence of the hereditary madness in her family to use the fear of Creole "degeneracy." Antoinette's testimonies are believed by Rochester only in case if they confirm his previous opinion. Rochester stops showing any sexual attention to Antoinette in order to punish her for what she did as he used to show his mother's conditional love. Lastly, Rochester gives Antoinette a new name. Every action described above is an example of lowering of Antoinette's "psychological tension," as Janet would call it.

Antoinette/Bertha dissociation is represented in the narrative structure of the book. With the development of Rochester's renaming of Antoinette, the fragments of her first-person narrative become more frequent – she does not see the connection between past events, the separation between sleep and reality is

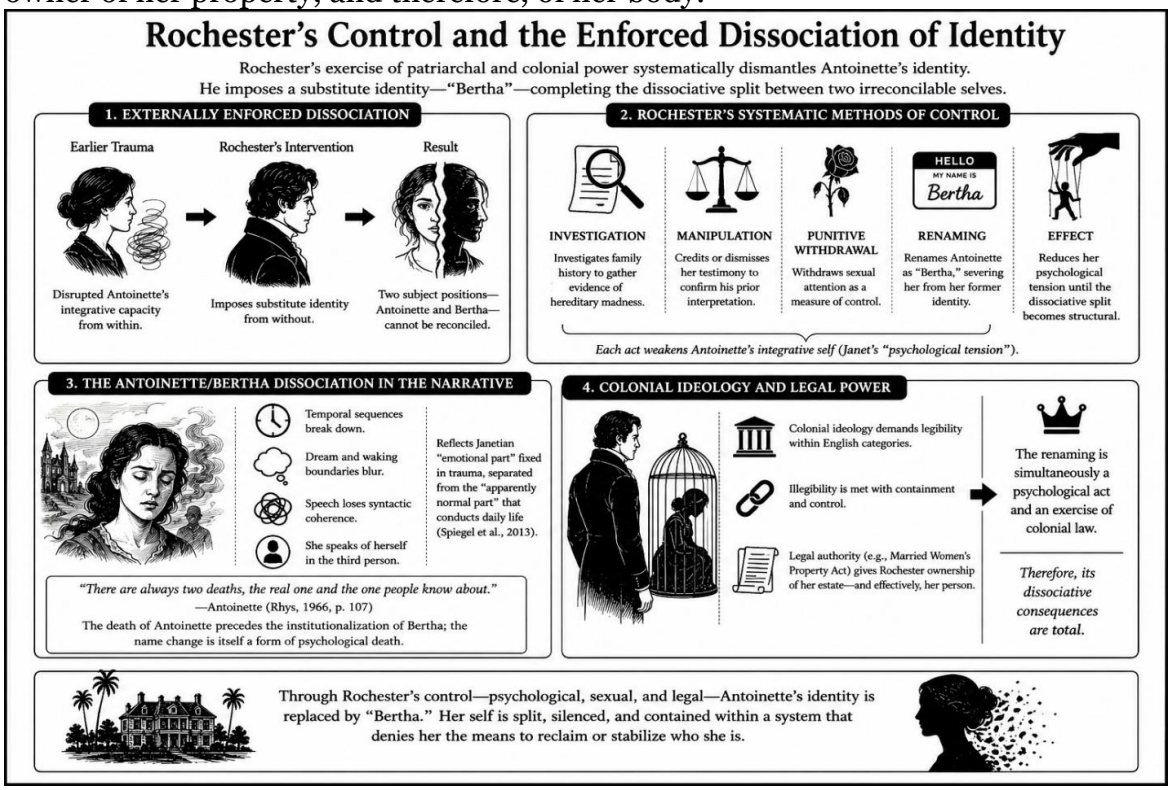
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lost, and her speech stops having syntactic connections that used to be present in her early narrative parts. She starts referring to herself in the third person during those times when she experiences the greatest feeling of dissociation; this shows the Janetian "emotional part" of the personality that is stuck in trauma, unable to unite with "apparently normal part" conducting the interactions.

"There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about." (Rhys, 1966, p. 107)

Antoinette's death is prior to the institutionalization of Bertha, since the act of changing her name is one of psychological death. The discussion by Donnell (2021) about how colonial ideology operates through the production and management of "official" identities among colonized peoples is useful here. Rochester does not merely act on his own as a cruel private citizen but becomes the mechanism of a colonial ideology that demands that Caribbean women fit into the English category of identity and deals with those who do not with containment. Through the figure of Rochester, Rhys dramatizes the systemic aspect of this process by making his legal status clear: Rochester's authority over Antoinette is not merely an affective power but a juridical one; the Married Women's Property Act, in force in England at this time, makes him legally the owner of her property, and therefore, of her body.



Memory, Dreams, and the Final Collapse of Consciousness

In the latter part of the novel, Antoinette has already entered into the last phase of dissociation that Janet identified as the total breakdown of personal synthesis: where the integrative mechanism fails to maintain the most basic level of coherence and the individual becomes totally dominated by the dissociated mechanism. Rhys illustrates this condition using Antoinette's third person narrative style in Part Three of the novel—another literary technique that itself is a marker of dissociation: since the subject cannot anymore speak in a first person

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form due to the absence of the first person himself or herself.

Memory, in the last section, becomes an intrusion, rather than recollection. It is not Antoinette who remembers Coulibri – it is Coulibri that intrudes into Antoinette's mind through various sensations that are felt in the present tense, as though happening at the very moment. This is exactly what Brewin (2019) defines as situationally accessible memory that does not go through the process of integration and contextualization within an autobiographical narrative, but emerges in its fullest form along with all the emotions of the original experience. The fire in the hallucinations of the last section is not a symbolic choice made by a rational consciousness. This fire becomes the manifestation of a traumatic fixation that has determined the course of Antoinette's psychology throughout her life. According to Caruth (2016), the trauma reoccurs not because the survivor wants to remember it, but because it has never been properly registered in the first place.

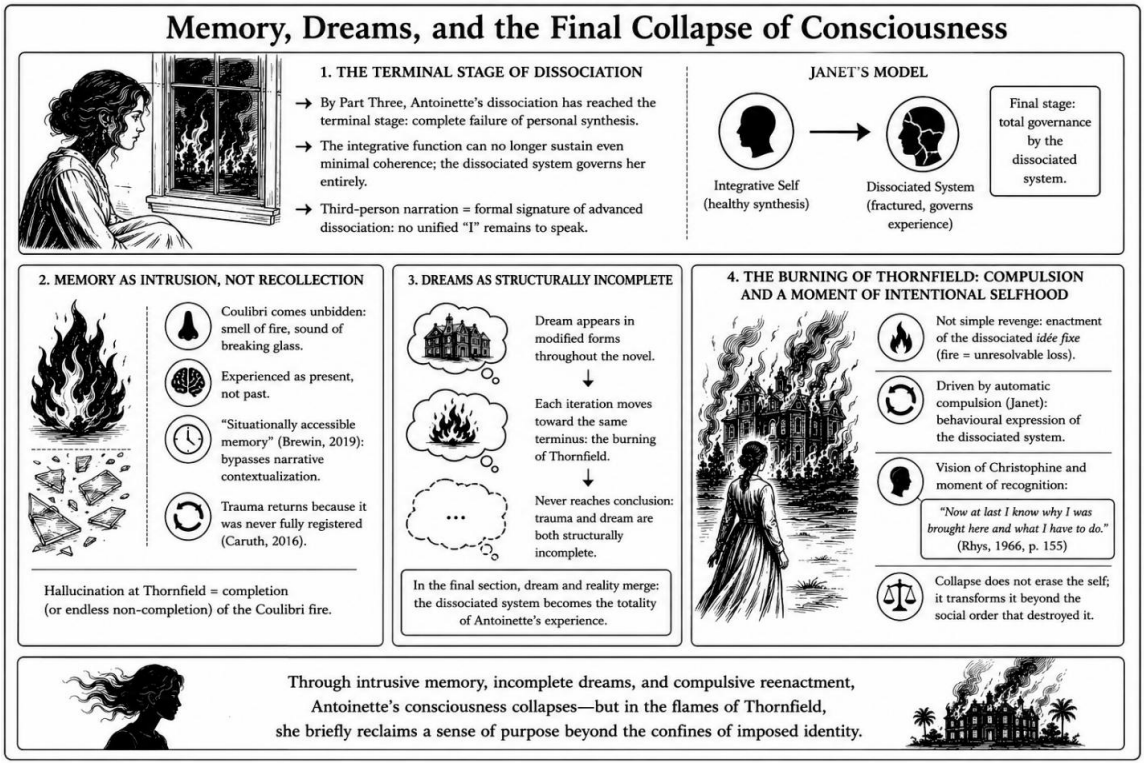
The repeated nightmare that Antoinette experiences, which occurs in varying forms throughout the novel, is the most definitive formal manifestation of the return of unintegrated material through dissociation. Each time she dreams the nightmare, it takes her one step closer to reaching its end—burning down Thornfield—yet in each earlier version of the dream, she never reaches its end. It is an incomplete dream structure, just like the traumatic experience that underlies it is an incomplete structure; both resists completion, which is necessary for the process of integration. In the final chapter, there is no difference between the dream world and reality because the dissociated structure is now the entire world of Antoinette.

Thornfield's burning is not, therefore, an act of revenge, although this has been seen as such. According to Janetian psychology, it represents the expression of the *idée fixe* which had haunted Antoinette from Coulibri onwards – loss can only be experienced by her through the medium of fire. What motivates the act is not an exercise of reason but an automatic compulsion of the kind described by Janet, as the outward manifestation of the dissociated complex. Nonetheless, the novel rejects any such simplistic interpretation of the pathological nature of the act: Antoinette's vision of Christophine at the end, and the sudden realization –

"Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do." (Rhys, 1966, p. 155) —even if only for a moment and in catastrophic fashion—a feeling of self as an agent of intentionality. Rhys is meticulous in maintaining this ambivalence—the disintegration of the psyche does not mean the annihilation of self but rather its transformation into something beyond the reach of the social forces that destroyed it.

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Conclusion

It has been shown in this study that the theoretical model provided by Pierre Janet's Dissociation Theory is highly suitable for analyzing the case of Antoinette Cosway as presented in Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The use of Janet's ideas such as personal synthesis, *idée fixe,* and the failure of psychological integration in the process of development allowed revealing the nature of Antoinette's gradual breakdown.

Four linked phases were discerned during the process analysis. In early life, the relational trauma caused by Annette's conflicting demands and traumatic experience of the catastrophic loss of Coulibri Estate lay down the basic dissociative framework: traumatic experiences which surpass Antoinette's integrative capacity are detached from consciousness and retained in the form of unresolved *idées fixes*. During teenage years and adulthood, cultural liminality—Antoinette's inability to belong to either Jamaican or English identity—adds to the fragmentation by depriving her of external validation needed to form a stable sense of identity. The marriage to Rochester provides a complete dissociation through violent patriarchal and colonial practices imposed on Antoinette by giving her another identity of "Bertha."

Theoretical contribution of this project consists in proving that the Janetian model is not in contradiction with postcolonial and feminist interpretation of the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but enhances it. The very fact that the colonial and patriarchal regime creates conditions that lead to suffering of Antoinette makes it necessary for her to experience dissociation in the particular way, since the colonial negation of Creole identity is psychologically the same as the negation of recognition that causes disruption of personal synthesis according to Janet. The splitting of Antoinette/Bertha is at the same time the colonial act of identification and the Janetian act of identity splitting.

A number of limitations inherent in the study need to be recognized. The use of a

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nineteenth century European clinical paradigm in relation to a postcolonial literary text poses risks in terms of interpretation, and these risks have been handled in this study by treating Janet's paradigm as an analytic tool rather than as a template for diagnosis. This study has also been selective, concentrating on the logic of dissociation rather than all aspects of the novel. Future studies could profitably apply this methodological approach to consider the dissociative consequences of Christophine as a counter-narrative to Rochester's identity annihilation, or even to compare the dissociative aesthetics of Rhys with the colonial psychological violence represented in other postcolonial literature.

Ultimately, *Wide Sargasso Sea* will not allow us to take Antoinette's breakdown as either a matter of nature or as an individual failure. Instead, the novel demonstrates, formally and precisely, how the shattering of the self is a historical process—that which has been caused, constructed, and completed through particular actions of colonial and patriarchal power upon a particular psychological weakness. Janet's theory of Dissociation Theory illuminates for us the process by which this history is created. Ultimately, what the novel laments, and what the theory helps to understand, is the irreversibility of personal integration.

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