

# The True “Caribbeanness”: Resistance and Inclusiveness - On the Symbolic Meanings of Obeah and Christophine in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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**Abstract:** As an anti-colonial rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, the *Wide Sargasso Sea* is recognized as Caribbean writer Jean Rhys’s masterpiece. It tells the narrative of the Cosway family, mixed-race descendants of British colonists in Jamaica, West Indies around 1834. Current studies of this book have mostly focused on the white Creole protagonist, Antoinette; however, the black nanny, Christophine, and her obeah are integral to the plot and have received little attention from scholars. In response to the fact that both obeah and Christophine are controversial, this paper examines the history and disputes about Obeah, and gives a suitable answer from two points of view in terms of Christophine’s role and her retreat in the novel. Besides, for Christophine, obeah is a subversive weapon against postcolonial European dominance, whereas for Antoinette, its failure exposes the persistent cultural prejudices of Eurocentric ideology and the fundamental contradictions of colonial culture. By analyzing the symbolic connotations of Obeah and Christophine, this reading could offer readers insights into authentic “Caribbeanness” and the ways in which oppressed people reject the legacy of colonialism, white privilege, and Western hegemony. It also suggests that Rhys’s inclusive views on culture and ethnicity, which reveal her true writing intention and the work’s realistic significance. This paper concludes that her treatment of Christophine is neither authoritarian nor racist but rather a reflection of the author’s appreciation and respect for the black community. Most of all, her contribution to the dismantling of social barriers that are rooted in racial inequalities can be seen most clearly in the all-encompassing and inclusive perspective of a variety of ethnic and cultures that is portrayed in her treatment of Obeah and Christophine.

**Keywords:** Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Obeah, Christophine, Caribbean Culture

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## 1. Introduction

Jean Rhys (1890-1979), a British writer born in Dominica, was hailed as “one of the finest British writers of our century” by A. Alvarez in the *New York Times Book Review*. Emphasizing any one of these identities fails to do justice to the richness of her work and overlooks how it puts into question the very categories she has been placed into. She has been variably regarded as a modernist, a postcolonialist, a British, and a Caribbean writer. To Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the audacious, feminist, and blatantly anti-colonial riposte. It is widely regarded as Jean Rhys’s magnum opus and tells the narrative of the Cosway family, the mixed-race descendants of British colonists in Jamaica, West Indies, around the time of 1834

Emancipation, who are socially isolated from both the local natives and the whites. Antoinette Cosway Mason, or Bertha as her husband comes to name her, narrates the first and last sections of the piece, while her English husband, Rochester, narrates the second.

The *Wide Sargasso Sea* took her nine years to complete. Jean Rhys, who had previously been underappreciated as a writer for over forty years, shot to prominence after its publication in 1966. In addition to catapulting Rhys to fame, this work also gave rise to the Rhys Study movement in literary criticism. With the rise of feminism and postcolonial studies, Rhys is more recognized as a writer from the Caribbean or the West Indies due to her complex and multifaceted identities. As the “classic of both feminist and postcolonial revisionism,” *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been the

subject of numerous scholarly analyses, many of which have situated their debate within the expansive canon of Caribbean literature and culture. [18]

Until the 1980s, feminism and postcolonialism formed the backbone of most analyses of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a literary work. Discussions of Rhys's work have centered on Antoinette, notably the connection between the heroine's white Creole identity and her dual social membership. Caribbean literature serves an important purpose by giving a voice to those who might otherwise be silenced. As the most distinctive and only black lady in the work who interacts frequently with white Creoles, Christophine is a peripheral character who is wordless from the beginning. And obeah, as one of the constituent elements of local Caribbean culture, is consistently stigmatized as evil or criminal. However, despite the fact that Christophine and her obeah play vital roles in the work, scholars have never paid them sufficient attention in terms of their symbolic value. While Rhys does Obeah and its practitioner justice in this novel.

By examining the roles and symbolic significance of Obeah and Christophine, this reading concludes that the author seeks a solution uncontaminated by patriarchy and colonialism through the use of a feminine style of writing and language in her depiction of Obeah and her careful descriptions of Christophine, thereby safeguarding the marginalized and defending the uniqueness of Caribbean culture. In doing so, this research could provide readers with insights into authentic Caribbeanness and the resistance strategies of oppressed people. In the meantime, it investigates Rhys's inclusive views on ethnicity and culture, which are her genuine intent concealed within the text.

## 2. Obeah & Christophine: The Magical Art of Resistance

### 2.1. Origins of Obeah in Caribbean: Religion or Superstition

The origins of Obeah<sup>1</sup> are shrouded in mystery, although it is believed that it arose out of a complicated web of cultural beliefs and repressive historical circumstances. It was carried to the West Indies by West Africans who were held as slaves. In spite of the fact that numerous authors of Caribbean or Caribbean-descended ancestry have done obeah justice in literature and history, the official views on obeah have always been negative, and it is still prohibited in many countries today. "Pretending to have communication with the devil" or "assuming the art of witchcraft" were its original definitions [9], and obeah is inextricably linked with words like "black magic," "witchcraft," "superstition," and "paganism."

Initially, "West Indian landowners regarded Obeah something of a joke," but as obeah became more closely identified with slave revolts, slaveholders began to see it as a threat. [8] For example, obeahmen played a key role by presenting slaves with lucky fetishes and anointing them with

oils that made them feel they were invulnerable during the 1760 Tacky Rebellion<sup>2</sup>. [8] Plantation owners "began to see Obeah as a problem as white anxieties over slave rebellions continued to grow in correlation to burgeoning black populations on the islands." [7] To combat this, the colonial authority of the time passed a number of laws specifically targeting the issue. "The 1760 Jamaica Act was the first legislation passed in the Caribbean to criminalize black people (not white people) from possessing Obeah fetishes or materials." [7] Although the prohibition against obeah became null and void upon the abolition of slavery in 1834. Acts such as the 1833 Vagrancy Act and the "first stand-alone Obeah Act, passed in 1854," making obeah a criminal punishable by flogging and imprisonment, were rapidly enacted by the Jamaican government to ensure that obeah remained an offense. [10]

The question of whether or not Obeah may be considered a religion has always been at the center of heated debate. One of the earliest arguments that obeah is supposed to be legalized because anti-obeah acts contravene the principle of religious freedom was made by Frances Marcelle Clyne-Gairy<sup>3</sup> in the 1970s. While such viewpoints have repeatedly been deflected by the opposition. Many scholars' definitions of "religion" are used in counterarguments to show that obeah is not a religion. Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that "the concept of 'religion' as a *demarcatable system of doctrines-scriptures-beliefs*." [17] David Scott examines the religious notion while reflecting on the current Buddhist history of Sri Lanka, which undoubtedly influences nationalism. He insists that "religion" only meant "the state of life bound by monastic vows" and had a narrow, technical meaning. [17] Even favorable analysts, citing Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Margarite Fernández Olmos as examples, believe that "Obeah is not so much a religion as a system of beliefs rooted in Creole notions of spirituality." [9] Though Wilson Harris does not directly address the question of whether or not Obeah is a religion in his essay evaluating Rhys's work, he does express strong opposition to the influence of Obeah's feudal superstition. "Obeah is a pejorative term", he claims, because "it reflects significantly a state of mind or embarrassment in both black and white West Indians, a conviction of necessary magic, necessary hell-fire or purgatory through which to re-enter 'lost' origins, 'lost' heavens, 'lost' divinity". [5]

Similar to the widespread folklore surrounding the rites and beliefs of the occult practice known as obeah, the Spiritual Baptist faith<sup>4</sup>, has its own share of legends. They both share the experience of being explicitly outlawed by

2 The Tacky Rebellion, also called Tacky's War or Tacky's Revolt, was a widespread slave rebellion in the British Colony of Jamaica in the 1760s.

3 See Frances Marcelle Clyne-Gairy, "An Analysis of the Law Relating to Obeah in the Commonwealth Caribbean." LLB thesis, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, 1975.

4 The Spiritual Baptist faith is a Christian religion created by enslaved Africans on the plantations they came to in the former British West Indies countries. It is a syncretic Afro-Caribbean religion that combines elements of the many varied traditional African religions brought by the enslaved populations with Christianity.

1 It is sometimes spelled *Obi*, *Obeya*, or *Obia*.

colonial acts. The colonial authorities officially said that Spiritual Baptists created too much noise and disturbed the calm during their barbarous worship practices, which led to the prohibition of the faith in 1917. Although it was never directly stated, the real reason for hostility towards the devotees was that most of their activities originated in an African past. [6] As a result, in the second part of the twentieth century, “adherents of the Spiritual Baptist faith and their allies successfully mobilized claims to religious freedom to achieve repeal.” [9] The prohibitive ordinance of the Spiritual Baptist faith was in place in Trinidad and Tobago for 34 years, yet obeah has been considered as criminal acts in most of the English-speaking Caribbean for more than 200 years. Opponents of anti-obeah laws argue that obeah should be decriminalized on the basis of religious freedom, but they have been unsuccessful thus far. This reality has proven that it is much harder to write obeah into the category of “religion” than to make the equivalent move for Spiritual Baptism.

In conclusion, there is considerable disagreement among academics about the precise place of Obeah as a cultural phenomenon. There is no denying, however, that Obeah was a tool of the oppressed in their fight for freedom. For the oppressed group, this kind of “African-centered ritual and religious observance which expresses an oppressed people’s desire for secure grounding of self in communal strength and integrity” is exactly what they need. [14] Located at the crossroads between politics and spirituality, obeah has been called the “magical art of resistance” for its ability to give both its practitioners and those who seek its aid the confidence to stand up against injustice. Many obeah practitioners rose to positions of authority within their communities, earning the respect and reverence of their fellow citizens and the dread of European colonists who recognized the danger posed by Obeah’s influence.

## 2.2. *Christophine’s Obeah: Resistance to Colonialism*

“The history of African-Caribbean spirituality facing colonialism and racism has been a history of respect for the power of words as weapons in resistance to injustice.” [11] According to historians, obeah is a system of spiritual healing and justice-making practices. [2] It is labeled “evil witchcraft” by white plantation owners but is seen as a kind of sacrosanct spiritual power by black believers. In the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Obeah’s mysterious practices and power as a belief surface through the remnants of Christianity.

Christophine, the nanny, is the best representation of Obeah as a symbol of defiance against colonial oppression. Imperial colonial oppression continues in the post-slavery era under numerous guises, including governmental policymaking and enforcement, political oppression, institutionalized racism, and economic exploitation. The mother Annette’s dowry includes the hiring of Christophine, a black nurse from Martinique. Since Christophine is shown by Rhys as having a very dark complexion, this may have connotations, signifying something related to black magic, which adds to the mystique and awe evoked by the work. She

is “not like the other women” because “no other negro woman wore black, or tied her handkerchief Martinique fashion.” [13] The housekeepers help out because they are afraid of Christophine; she never gives them money, instead, she has them bring over fresh produce as payment. In addition, her power of resistance lies in her insightful language and her special status as an obeah woman, which not only poses a threat to imperial privilege but also supervises Rochester’s ambition to assert dominance. As Zhang Feng clearly points out: “As the source of power, her ‘black language’, combined with the mysterious Obeah—the ‘black art,’ composes a threat and challenge to Rochester’s Englishness and cultural supremacy.” [23] In an effort to control the obeah woman out of fear, Rochester writes a letter to the police letting them know where Christophine is.

However, Christophine is not a traditional and inferior “subaltern woman”<sup>5</sup>, but a woman warrior who is courageous enough to challenge the white authority by drawing on the power of Obeah. Christophine is unfazed by Rochester’s threats to use the police and British law against her. Instead, she serves as his judge and catalogs all the evil things he has done to Antoinette, leaving Rochester speechless. In this way, the colonizers’ discourse, which guarantees them control over the West Indies, is undermined by the strength of the Obeah language. Even as Rochester prepares to use that ludicrous English legislation to reveal Christophine’s “illegal” usage of obeah, Christophine continues to strongly defend Ann, saying that the claims of her insanity are based on hearsay and arguing that she should be given back possession of her property. By using the undeniably obeah, Christophine alters the colonial power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized.

Even though the local rules practiced by the British are rather hostile to her, as an Obi-Witch, Christophine is able to have a greater voice at all levels of society and participate more actively in the concerns of post-colonial Caribbean culture. Never did she speak to Antoinette and Rochester like a submissive servant might. When Christophine and Rochester finally face each other, she uses her extensive tales of obi-witchcraft to scare him away from Antoinette for the sake of her protection. And Rochester firmly believes that it is the obeah that pushes himself into the role of a slave worker by having him unconsciously repeat her words in his heart. “It seems that the culture that he subjugates now begins to subjugate him,” Mary Lou Emery, an expert on Rhys, said: [3]

Now every word she said was echoed, echoed loudly in my (Rochester’s) head.

“So that you can leave her alone.”

(Leave her alone)

“Not telling her why.”

(Why?)

5 This refers to Spivak’s concept of “subaltern,” “referring to groups that are excluded from mainstream political discourse and may be of different classes, races, genders, ages, or occupations, but equally forgotten groups.” [18] “Subaltern woman” refers to a woman from the Third World and countries that have colonized or are still colonizing.

"No more love, eh?"

(No more love) [16]

What's more, Christophine, from her distinct religious-philosophical vantage point, is able to see through the colonizers' hypocritical masks, and she mocks the new, more insidious colonial system that is hidden in the law and the "civilizing mission" in post-colonial societies:

No more slavery! She has to laugh! These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people's feet. New ones worse than old ones more cunning, that's all. [13]

To sum up, Christophine has become a buffer for the social paradoxes at all levels of Caribbean culture, since black people love the sacredness of obeah while white people dread it. She has the ability to understand the interplay between different groups and their actions in the local upheaval, and she wastes no time fighting for the rights of good, innocent whites and cautioning the newly freed blacks against vengeance and hubris. She assesses the circumstances, plans her own route, and does her best to maintain a commitment to fairness without losing sight of her initial goal. To avert a recurrence of history, she exposes the neocolonialists' evil doings and fights for justice against them. Here, she enables the obeah-representative Caribbean voice within herself to be heard. The obeah is "not only a sign of resistance but also a hope for liberation." [11]

### 2.3. The Failure of Obeah: Prejudices in Eurocentric Ideology and the Contradictions in Colonial Culture

Obeah is a tool of justice, a weapon of resistance against imperial colonization, and a way for the black West Indians that Christophine represents to make their own voices heard. However, it represents entrenched prejudices in Eurocentric ideology and the inescapable inconsistencies of colonial culture for the Creole white lady Antoinette.

Outwardly, Antoinette aims to use the power of obeah to resist Rochester's physical, spiritual, and financial oppression, but in reality, she is doing so to achieve her own personal goal of finding love based on her false perceptions about Rochester. In the second section of the novel, Antoinette asks Christophine for assistance in an effort to employ witchcraft (obeah) to sway her husband. She is advised by Christophine that obeah does not work on white people. Ann is neither a white Englishman like her husband nor a black Caribbean man like Christophine. She lacks the unwavering respect and admiration that a black man has for Obeah, as well as the disdain and terror that a white guy feels for her. Instead of healing their marriage, the action of Ann giving Rochester the remedy (an aphrodisiac, actually) she begged from Christophine just serves to deepen the rift between them. When Antoinette experiences the devastating effects of the aphrodisiac and Rochester's betrayal, she loses faith in the obeah.

In reality, the failure of obeah's "performance" is a result of Antoinette's ambivalent sentiments toward the obeah and her ignorance of the embedded prejudices in Eurocentric

ideology and the inevitable conflicts between two people of different races. Antoinette's opinion on obeah swings like a pendulum. On the one hand, she believes in obeah's mystery and power, but on the other, she is scared of it. During her mother's wedding to Mr. Mason, Antoinette overhears the conversations of the guests. Why would a highly affluent white gentleman marry "a widow without a penny to her name and Coulibri a wreck of a place?" People in the Spanish town soon became abuzz with mention of it, "the whole thing is a mystery. It's useful to keep a Martinique obeah woman in the premises... Christophine and obeah changed it." [13] Ann was struck by the mysterious and unpredictable character of obeah during this incident. Besides, the childhood experiences of the protagonist heighten its horror and mystique. One day, while waiting in the nanny's room, she suddenly felt a shiver go up her back. Then she sees the following:

The door was open to the sunlight, and someone was whistling near the stables, but I was afraid. I was certain that hidden in the room (behind the old black press?) There was a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, and a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly. Drop by drop of blood was falling into a red basin and I imagined I could hear it. No one had ever spoken to me about obeah – but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. [13]

This description contains traces of Gothic elements. Here Jean Rhys mirrors Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Rhys read the book about the time she conceived *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The descriptions of "a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut" are animal sacrifices in obeah rituals. As a child, Ann was cast in a mysterious, frightening gloom by these events and rumors. As she shifts her pendulum through adulthood, Antoinette becomes acclimated to obeah due to her reliance on and confidence in Christophine. The majority of the books in her room are related to obeah. In addition, she faintly relates nanny's omnipotence and mystery to obeah's effects and seeks their assistance anytime she is in danger. There is absolutely no doubt that Ann's transformation in her view of Obi from before to after is not a result of her identifying with the black belief system, but rather the result of her growing dependency on and faith in the nanny, as well as the realization that Obi could assist her in accomplishing her own goals.

In conclusion, the protagonist Antoinette, a white Creole, and her black nanny Christophine, a black Creole, two women of different ethnic, both suffer from gender, racial, discursive, and cultural oppression under colonization, and both rely on the power of Obeah to resist. Notable is the fact that the levels of resistance between the two are different. Christophine is a woman warrior, fighting against imperial colonial tyranny with her inclusive and righteous perspectives while protecting Antoinette as if she were her own child. Through her words and deeds, Christophine, speaking for the most downtrodden black women in the colonies, undermines colonialism and the western stereotyped and homogenized picture of women in the Third

World, ultimately freeing herself from male tyranny and colonial rule. In contrast, Antoinette is more like a pendulum. She displays contradictory attitudes about male dominance and colonial discourse that are both resistant and pleasant, subversive and complicit, and this kind of vacillation and uncertainty is one of the primary causes of her terrible demise in the fire. Furthermore, rather than spiritually and culturally identifying with obeah, she uses the power of obeah to get what she wants. And Obeah's failure leads to her tragic end as a madwoman in the attic, illustrating the inherent conflicts between Eurocentric and colonial worldviews. Rochester's readings of Obi-Witchcraft recounts are rife with European preconceptions about the locals, also reflecting this cultural separation. Meanwhile, the "living dead (zombie)" is another icon commonly connected with Obi-Witchcraft. According to Caribbean tradition, "zombie" refers to the dead who appear alive or the living who have died. When Antoinette is taken prisoner in the attic of Thornfield Hall, her flesh-and-blood condition mirrors this mythology.

### 3. Christophine: Jean Rhys's Inclusive Views of Ethnic Identity

#### 3.1. The Implications of the Role Christophine

At the conclusion of the second part, Christophine is threatened with imprisonment when she suggests to Rochester that he return a portion of Antoinette's dowry. After a heated argument, Rochester banishes Christophine from the story, and she "walked away without looking back." [13] Some postcolonial critics have differing opinions regarding Christophine's role in Rhys's book. They contend, led by Gayatri Spivak, that Christophine is portrayed as a subaltern speaking subject in Rhys's work, and that her work is implicated in the same imperialist writing as *Jane Eyre*. Spivak holds that Rhys's work is "written in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native." [18] Veronica Marie Gregg also believes that "it is true that Christophine is formed according to the stereotypes of black promiscuity and the black mother who favors the white child over her own." Briefly, there are multiple instances throughout the narrative where Christophine is "put in her place." [6] Although Lucy Wilson views Christophine as an admirable, strong-willed character who contrasts with weak-minded, white heroines, she thinks that Christophine is a problematic figure, and even the manner in which Wilson praises Christophine is viewed with suspicion by other academics. Additionally, in terms of the narrative method, Spivak has pointed out vehemently that Christophine, the black lady, is left out of the story of the white Creole woman, becoming "tangential to this narrative" [18], separated from the action of the novel, and eventually disappearing without a trace. She contends that Rhys's overwhelming focus on white Creoles suppresses the voices of black Creoles, making Christophine another "Other" and demonstrating that Rhys has not yet broken the constraints of European fiction.

My reading attempts to contradict Spivak's claims in two ways. On the one hand, Christophine's departure results from the novel's combination of historical setting and story development. "Spivak's reading of Christophine ... [is] relatively indifferent to the historical specificities of Christophine's and Rhys's sites of enunciation," as Sue Thomas's superb study makes clear. [20] As mentioned previously, against the backdrop of obeah being classified as an illegal conduct, the Obeah Act dealt with obeah wizards and witches as follows: following the prosecution, they were condemned to jail, flogging, hard labor, and fines, depending on the severity of the circumstances. The text also notes that, at the time, obeah was expressly outlawed by Jamaican law. Half under the burden of the law and half based on her very clear-eyed view of the situation, Christophine believes that helping others would be meaningless if they were susceptible to illusions like a moth to a flame. Therefore, she decides to withdraw from this difficult competition this time, leaving Antoinette's fate to herself. Consequently, Christophine's departure makes sense, but her reluctance and withdrawal never signify failure and cowardice but rather a fundamental deconstruction of imperial falsehood and confidence. Rochester's status and authority as a white man have already crumbled, as indicated by Christophine's passionate words: "No police here... no chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is free country, and I am free woman." These words keep reverberating in his thoughts, and he is permanently mesmerized by Christophine's voice and the Obeah. Indeed, Rochester is deterred by her fearless gaze when he looks at her and acknowledges, "she was a fighter, I had to admit." [13] In contrast, Christophine emerges from the story unscathed.

On the other hand, the focus on the perspective of white Creoles in *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not imply that it suppresses the voices of black people, particularly when the two actually coexist in the newly decolonized Caribbean society, where their status is neither master nor servant nor exploiter nor exploited. In this regard, Spivak's criticism necessarily falls into the rut of binary opposition. First and foremost, the historical context and narratives of the novel reveal the complexity of Caribbean society, which makes its social scale and hierarchy extremely fragile, as well as the daughters of the former slave owners' rank decline following emancipation. Even Tia, a black youngster, recognizes that "old time white people nothing but white nigger<sup>6</sup> now, and black nigger better than white nigger." [13] So Antoinette and Christophine do not belong in the "master/subordinate" category. Next, Antoinette's attitude toward Christophine is one of reliance and confidence, not coercion. "Oh Christophine, do not grow old. You are the only friend I have, do not go away from me into being old." [13] The narrative

6 "White nigger" here refers to the white Creoles. Against the background of racial and class antagonism, Antoinette, as a half-breed descendant of the British colonists, is both hated by the local blacks and despised by the white aristocracy. The white Creoles are called "white cockroaches" by the native blacks and are considered "white niggers" by their fellow countrymen when they try to integrate into the white British community. [15]

continually demonstrates Ann's devotion to and trust in her black nanny, with even the scent of her garments symbolizing a sense of safety: "Her clothes smelled of clean cotton, starched and ironed ... She smelled too, of their smell, so warm and comforting to me." [13] How could such an intimate, skin-to-skin odor comfort Antoinette if it contained racial undertones? This feeling and reliance are crucial components of the ideal group relationship that Rhys wishes to express.

Furthermore, Spivak clarifies her initial argument in her following work, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, where she asserts that Rhys caused Christophine to fade away to protect marginalized people: "I must see the staging of the departure of Christophine as a move to guard the margin." [19] This shift in perspective supports my reading's interpretation that, first, Spivak agrees with the logic and legitimacy of Christophine's retreat from the story, and, second, she confirms that Christophine is safe on the sidelines since Rhys is guarding the vulnerable. As a result, we may conclude that Rhys's treatment of Christophine is neither repressive nor racist but rather a reflection of the author's feelings toward the black community: jealousy, admiration, and even longing.

### 3.2. Rhys's Inclusive Views of Ethnic and Cultural Identity

Obeah and Nanny Christophine together signify the common or collective memory of Caribbean identity and the author's great commitment to that land. Also, Jean Rhys's opinions on Obeah and her appreciation and respect for the strong solidarity of the black community are reflections of her liberal ideas about ethnic identity.

Critics haven't paid much attention to Rhys's relationship with the obeah, but when it comes to the obeah, which is seen by everyone as heinous and illegal crime, it's clear that Rhys has a fair and inclusive view of different Caribbean cultures. In her unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*, Rhys mentions Obeah, which "is a milder form of voodoo." [12] Her family has an obeah cook named Ann Tewitt. "Even in my time, nobody was supposed to take it (obeah) very seriously, I was told about her in a respectful, almost awed tone." [12] Rhys spent the majority of her childhood in the kitchen, where a seed of respect for black culture was established at that time. The Obi cook exerted great influence on her growing up. Rhys recounts in an interview that "she (the Obi cook) once told me my fortune, and most of it has come true." [1] Rhys never thinks of obeah as anything other than a fantastical legend full of magic. During her childhood, she made great friends with Francine, the original version of Tina in the novel, who likewise vanished without uttering a single word. Francine told her many exciting stories, most of which derived from obeah legends; "she (Francine) always insisted on this ceremony before starting a story." [12]

Moreover, Rhys's upbringing in the West Indies had formative influences on her thinking and writing themes, including her non-confrontational and welcoming attitude toward the black group. Rhys attended a Roman Catholic convent school as a young child, where she learned a great

deal about the Church from Roman Catholic nuns. She had a special fondness for the Mother Superior, whose eyes were the color of black velvet. In her memoirs, Rhys devoted an entire chapter to her convent experience. When she first entered the Roseau Cathedral, her spirit was attacked by "the movements of the priest, the sound of Latin, the smell of incense," and she was even more captivated by the fact that the blacks were sitting not alone but mixed up with the whites. [12]

These Catholic education at the convent school and her direct exposure to the Negro culture through the obi cook and her black companion shaped her childhood. And afterwards, it allows her to gain a deeply observant and perceptive perspective on the ethnic and races. In Thomas Staley's interview with Rhys, she openly expresses her yearning for and adoration of a more unified black community. "She (Jean Rhys) remembers how badly she wanted to be black because they used to go to dances every night and they had lovely dresses..." [16] Rhys also states candidly that only when she was a youngster living in the West Indies did she have the opportunity to merge several cultures without inconsistencies, regardless of external influences:

Side by side with my growing wariness of black people there was envy. I decided that they had a better time than we did, they laughed a lot though they seldom smiled. They were stronger than we were, they could walk a long way without getting tired, carry heavy weights with ease. Every night someone gave a dance, you could hear the drums. We had few dances. They were more alive, more a part of the place than we were. [12]

It can be found that the *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a perfect representation of Rhys's inclusive perspective on ethnic and cultural identity. At the end of the novel, when Antoinette sets fire to the Thornfield estate, she does not think of her family or the Creoles in the same group. Instead, she sees her only childhood playmate Tina in the firelight, who mysteriously vanished as a child but was forced to cry and throw stones at Ann during the night of the black riot. In the obeah doctrine, fire symbolizes the purifying of all things. To put an end to Ann's life with fire is to purge the contradictions that cannot be assimilated into actual society. Moreover, based on the legendary prototype of Narcissus, both the image in the mirror and the image in the water are reflections of the subject's self-identity, with the distinction being that the water in the pool is more permeable. [22] The conclusion suggests that by plunging into the pool, Ann will be able to integrate the colonial blackness and creole whiteness that afflict her on the route to a shared identity. This echoes Rhys's open-mindedness and forward-thinking outlook and also indicates the underlying message Rhys is trying to convey: only by welcoming people of different ethnic and skin tones into our friendly circle will the Creoles achieve their quest for spiritual and cultural identity in modern society and realize the desired future. And only in this way will the scene Rhys has been anticipating—when Christmas arrives and she looks out onto the empty London streets and stares at the Christmas tree delivered to the house, "I stared at the tree and tried to imagine

myself at a party with a lot of people, laughing and talking and happy”—occur. [12]

## 4. Conclusion

The author deliberately and anachronistically locates this work in the post-emancipation British West Indies in the 1830s, a time when obeah was considered a crime and a time when blacks were exploited by whites in hiding, in order to take a different approach and imbue obeah and Christophine, the Obeah woman, with rich symbolic connotations. For Christophine and the black West Indians, obeah is the weapon of subversion against postcolonial European power. And obeah, in turn, enables her to have a greater voice at all levels of post-colonial Caribbean society and renders her a woman warrior to make her own Caribbean voice heard. In the handling of Obi and the character, Rhys offers us a progressive and inclusive understanding of ethnic and culture, rather than simply exposing these cultural and social paradoxes and walking away. Admittedly, as a Creole woman, Jean Rhys has a level of understanding and compassion for her community that white European authors can never match.

Analyzing the functions and symbolic significance of obeah and Christophine can provide readers with insights into true Caribbeanness and the ways in which marginalized people resist the legacy of colonialism, white privilege, and Western hegemony, which persists not only in a particular historical period, but also in contemporary society. Rhys aims to find a solution that is not tainted by patriarchy and colonialism by employing a feminine style of writing and language in her portrayal of Obeah, a unique cultural phenomenon, and the special protection of Christophine. And in doing so, to defend the distinctiveness of Caribbean culture, the wellspring of her enduring Caribbean character, from the onslaught of influences from other regions of the world and different continents. [21]

Most importantly, it can make us aware of Rhys's inclusive ideas on culture and ethnicity, which are her true aim concealed inside the language. It is her progressive and inclusive views, as reflected in the work, that enable her to achieve what she could not do in the real world, such as the eradication of racial barriers resulting in the free flow of black and white identities. As Wilson Harris specified, Rhys's "mythic" treatment of West Indian Obeah enabled Rhys to transcend the social barriers imposed by her skin color. [21] This is precisely where the realistic significance of this research lies. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the extent to which the white Creole did sympathize with the black Creole is demonstrated when Christophine and Tia show Antoinette Cosway a great deal of protection and concern. Throughout this oeuvre, she paints for her readers an extraordinary facet of the West Indian experience and shows her respect for the robust black community. Hence, the nearly century-long *Wide Sargasso Sea*, written by Jean Rhys in her seventies after she had been absent from her West Indian birthplace for fifty years, is her contribution to the breakdown of social

barriers grounded in racial differences.

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