



## **Who am I? : Identity Crisis in Wide Sargasso Sea**

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### **Abstract**

The paper aims to find out what causes the protagonist in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the identity crisis, and analyse her character and people around her. In addition, the paper also tries to answer the question that she keeps asking Who am I? throughout the whole paper. In order to find out the causes and to answer the question is raised by Antoinette, the theory of Erikson, the psychologist, is applied. Furthermore, the review of previous literature is going to be discussed in order to analyse the characters. The result shows that the crisis that occurs to the protagonist caused by two main factors; people and displacement. Moreover, Antoinette's role and the answer to her question are being answered at the end of this paper.

**Keywords:** Identity Crisis, Displacement, Wide Sargasso Sea



## 1. Introduction

Identity crisis is a psychological term meaning the formation of ego identity during the adolescence fails Erikson (1968). In that period of adolescence, human beings face with “physical growth, sexual maturation, and integrating their ideas of themselves and about what others think of them” Erikson (1968). Erikson, the psychologist mentioned that those who fail to emerge from that period with their strong sense of identity get confused of roles; not knowing who they are, where they belong to or they want to go. This kind of psychological problem is used by many writers to create their characters in their works, for example, the narrator of *the Yellow Wall Paper* (Jane?), and Louise Mallard in *The Story of an Hour*. One of most notable examples is in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. The protagonist, Antoinette was seen struggling in choosing her identity. She has showed us how much suffering she experienced from confusing identity. Worse of all, the problem of identity crisis of the protagonist leads her to madness at the end of the story. After reading the story, we are able to find out many causes of Antoinette’s identity problem. Displacement is one of the main causes of her identity crisis. In fact, other characters in the story also have effects on her identity crisis as well. Many characters such as Annette, Daniel Cosway, Mr. Rochester, and the black and white people around her see Antoinette as someone whom she is unwilling to be. This means that people don’t care at all about what she wants to be or what she really is. They just try to mould her into any one whom they prefer to. Therefore, at last, we see that Antoinette can’t emerge from this crisis, which causes her losing identity at the end.

## Literature Review

Identity crisis is the term coined by the famous phycologist, Erik Erikson in his influential book: *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (1968). The book has mentioned about the crisis that can occurs to people when they are struggling to get their own identities; especially, in the adolescent and it gets worst if this problem can’t be resolved. Since at this stage, people are supposed to develop their identities enough and should be able to fit in to the mainstream culture and society (Erikson, 1968). The stage of the adolescent crisis can be used to explain the character of Antoinette; the protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, since her identity is revealed to be in crisis since her childhood to the adolescence stage.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is one of notable contemporary books; it is mainly about the main character female who is oppressed by husband or the mainstream culture (Smilowitz, 1986). This paper has tried to show what cause Antoinette the identity crisis and what happens when the crisis can’t be resolved. In addition, this paper is not going to talk about only the displacement which is already widely discussed (Edwards, & Hogarth 2008, Farber 2009, Tennholt 2005) but discuss about other characters who have influences on the crisis. Moreover, the paper also reveals the final identity of Antoinette, following her life ending in tragedy.

## 2. Method

In the book *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), Erikson mentioned the development of personal identity which developed from childhood, youth and adolescence. In the latter stage, there may be the identity crisis occurs and it is sometime severe if it can’t fit, belong, and navigate its own place. As a result, this theory will be applied to this present paper to analyse the characters, especially the protagonist, Antoinette and answer the question that is raised above.



### 3. Results

After the analyzation of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it found that the displacement is the major factor that causes Antoinette struggling in her identity. Besides that, there are also characters that have influences on Antoinette's identity crisis, and the answer to the question "Who am I?" is answered at the end of the section.

#### 1. The Displacement

There are three places in Jamaica, where Antoinette feels she belongs to. She is happy to live in these three places. The first one is, Coulibri, Antoinette's birth place where she feels safe. Although the Coulibri is not as beautiful as it was ever since the emancipation starts, for no more slaves would like to look after the estate, however, Antoinette seems not to care about that. She is happy to live there "All Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone bush. No more slavery... This never saddened me. I did not remember the place when it was prosperous" (11). This means no matter how the estate is or will be, she still loves it as long as it is her home. For Antoinette, "the golden ferns and the silver ferns, the orchids, the ginger lilies and the roses, the rocking-chairs and the blue-sofa... and the picture of the Miller's Daughter" (27), all symbolize good life and peace, which can be found only at Coulibri. Later, Antoinette was sent to a convent, the second place where she found to be the safe and warm place "This convent was my refuge, a place of sunshine and of death where very early in the morning the clap of a wooden signal woke the nine of us who slept in the long dormitory" (33). Staying at the convent, Antoinette got taken care of by the nuns who made her feel warm as she never felt before. Whenever she has a nightmare, the nuns always comfort her by saying "The dream is evil. Put it from your mind-never think of it again and she rubbed my cold hands to warm them" (37). The last place of warmth to her is her honeymoon house, located on the Windward Island, as she said to Christophine about this place "This is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay..." (65). Unfortunately, she was forced to leave these beloved three places. Coulibri was set on fire by the slaves; the arranged marriage forced her to leave the convent and Mr. Rochester's unfaithful behaviour leads her to madness, causing her to leave Jamaica for England. The displacement starts from her arrival at Thornfield Hall in England, where she does not fit herself into it at all. Antoinette suffers a lot from being displaced and is willing to go back to where she loves. As she said, "...why I have been brought here, for what reason..."

I thought that when I saw him and spoke to him... 'I will not trouble you again if you will let me go'" (107). At Thornfield Hall, we can see Antoinette is getting to lose her identity; she starts to question herself like "...I don't know what I am like now", "What I am doing in this place and who I am" (107). The next part which I am going to discuss is what the other characters try to force her to be someone whom she is not willing to be at all. The first character who has great influence on her is Annette.

#### 2. Characters

##### 2.1 Annette

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's mother, Annette is a Creole woman who, as the author describes, is a beauty among the other creole and black people "The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, because she pretty like pretty self" (9). She always dresses beautifully and behaves lady-like. She hates to live in Jamaica, and wishes to leave the place as soon as possible. We can see that in Part one; she often has an argument with Mr. Mason about leaving Jamaica for England. For Annette, Jamaica and the black slaves are harmful; they can



attack her and the family at any time. That is why she tries to make her daughter; Antoinette becomes like an European, marrying to white people and as a result leaves this island. She was always angry whenever she saw Antoinette behaves unlady. She said to Antoinette in Part one, after Tai stole Antoinette's clothes and Antoinette had to wear Tai's clothes instead, that Antoinette "behaved very oddly, [and dressed] even dirtier than usual" (15). From what Annette speaks to her daughter, we can say that she tries to make a lady of the daughter, an act that causes Antoinette to struggle in her search for identity, because later on she found out that being a lady is impossible for her. The other characters who reinforce this argument is the white people.

## **2.2 White people**

The white people here mean the Europeans who live in Jamaica. They also have an effect on Antoinette's identity crisis. As we can see in the story, Antoinette is a creole who is called by the white people "white nigger", and is always insulted by the gossip like "...As for those two children-the boy an idiot kept out of sight and mind and the girl going to be the same way in my opinion-a lowering expression"(17). Antoinette, however, is refused to be like a European girl as her mother wishes. Therefore, the one identity left, which she is willing to be as well, is black people. Unfortunately, later, Antoinette is severely rejected again by the black people.

## **2.3 Black People and Tia**

The black people in the story mean the local people in Jamaica. Most of them are slaves who work for the Europeans. In the story, we can see clearly how much the local people hate Antoinette's family. They call Antoinette "white cockroach", insulting her as "poor beggar" who "ate salt fish-no money for fresh fish" (14). However, although being looked down upon, Antoinette still believes that being a black and living with them can be safe and happy. After Coulibri was set on fire, Antoinette noticed that Tai was there, so she wishes to stay and be like Tia, but sadly, when she runs to Tia "When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it....only something wet, running down my face...We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers..." (27). The story shows us that both white and black people won't accept Antoinette as their member, there is no place left for her. Therefore, she suffered a lot at this point. No wonder, why Antoinette always feels unsafe and needs to struggles for her identity.

## **2.4 Daniel Cosway**

The other character is Daniel Cosway, Antoinette's half- brother. He describes Antoinette and her family as "wicked and detestable". "Wickedness is not the worst. There is madness in that family" (57). From what he said, the madness is in Antoinette's gene, inevitably, she will become as mad as her mother. He told Mr. Rochester that "everybody hates them in Jamaica and also in this beautiful place island..." (57). This is how Daniel sees his half-sister and her mother. This description of Antoinette by her half-brother, misled Mr. Rochester and he became quite sceptical of his wife. Mr. Rochester also projects Antoinette differently from the first time he met her and later, after he behaved unfaithfully to her; leading to her insanity.

## **2.5 Mr. Rochester**

The most influential man on Antoinette is Mr. Rochester. This guy not only causes Antoinette's identity crisis, but makes her mad at last. It first time, after marriage, Mr. Rochester starts to question Antoinette's identity as "I watched her critically. She wore a tricorne hat which became her. At least it showed her eyes which are too large, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are neither English nor European either..." (39). Later on, he gives



Antoinette another name; Bertha, which for Antoinette means an obeah: “You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeah too” (88). For Antoinette, name matters, and changing the name means changing her identity. However, she still tries her best to be herself; she tries to be Antoinette who lives in Jamaica, surrounded by nature and black people. Her dream life can be seen at the end of Chapter three when she was going to kill herself. At that moment she thought of her Coulibri estate, the ferns, the orchids, the flowers and the picture of the Miller’s Daughter, all those things that symbolize happiness to her. But at last, it is useless to think about them. Mr. Rochester keeps calling her Bertha when she lives in England, locked in the attic, where she is given “[a] bed, a black press, the table in the middle and two black chairs carved with fruit and flowers” (106). To say that Antoinette’s identity is forced by other characters is not an overstatement. Her identity is not clear for her; she can’t be either black or white, good daughter or good wife, happiness or safety. Controversially, the role and identity which people try to force in her, both by their actions and mentality, cause her insanity. No wonder, why Antoinette begins to ask herself “who am I?”

#### 4. Conclusion

To answer Antoinette’s question “Who am I?” to Antoinette, we can say that she is totally insane at last; that is her final identity which has been forced to be. Her insanity is cultivated during her childhood to adolescence. It is hidden, waiting to burst out when the time comes. From being treated by others badly, given the identity which she never likes; Antoinette needs to struggle badly with identity crisis. As the psychologist, Erikson mentioned that, the people who cannot get through identity crisis will get confused in their identity. Antoinette is the one who reinforces this argument very well. She confuses and cannot get through it at all. This is why she becomes lunatic and ends her life in tragedy.

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