A Caribbean Madness: Half Slave and Half Free

An historical novel is often a tour de force, an attempt to recreate a past by a writer with the different perspective and value system of the present. Complete authenticity may be impossible, but the attempt to project the reader into a different place and time has a certain fascination. The vicarious reliving of history may also bring new insight into present problems. Two contemporary Caribbean women have made fictional recreations of life in the West Indies at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the period of turmoil and struggle when the colonial regime of plantation life based on slave exploitation was breaking down. Their novels reflect the female point of view, not just of the writers, but of the protagonists as well, and form complementary portraits. Wide Sargasso Sea, by Jean Rhys, concerns Antoinette Mason, a colonialist white girl sensitive and confused by her bicultural environment in Dominica. La Mulâtresse Solitude, by Simone Schwarz-Bart in collaboration with her husband, André, depicts the precarious life of a young maroon slave girl in Guadeloupe. Though the vantage points of the protagonists appear to be diametrically opposed, still some general conclusions about colonial life by both writers are remarkably similar. The double image they provide of a young woman dependent and sensitive, the one slave, the one free, illuminates our picture of this bicultural society. Both heroines die mad; the social conflict they experience proves unendurable. Their fictional biographies are poignant reflections of the past interpreted from the point of view of women writing today.

Both writers have set curious restraints upon themselves even beyond those required for the standard historical novel. Jean Rhys has created not a sequel but a prologue to Charlotte Brontë's classic Jane Eyre (1847), a Gothic romance in which the orphaned English governess Jane falls in love with her employer, Edward Fairfax Rochester. She cannot marry him, however, because he is legally bound to his insane and bestial wife. Although Charlotte Brontë was ahead of her time in showing Jane Eyre to be an independent, firm character, still the prudery of Victorian England made the novelist's task difficult. How could Jane ultimately accept Rochester and his deception in hiding away his mad-wife?
Rochester’s past somehow had to be made forgivable. In only about five packed pages, Brontë sketches his Jamaican first wife, Bertha Antoinette Mason, as monstrous. She is doomed to insanity, an inheritance from her alcoholic Créole mother, and is vulgar in her tastes. Rochester does not know at first that she had lived dissolutely and was unchaste before their marriage. Even so, her ensuing madness alone would be insufficient cause to make her despicable or to invalidate the marriage by Victorian standards. Rochester’s first marriage is arranged from England by his avaricious father. Edward, a younger son without other expectations, marries to gain Antoinetta’s income of thirty thousand pounds. He arrives in Jamaica only a month before the marriage and has a fever for three weeks. He is dazzled and infatuated by the beauty of his fiancée, who is kept at some distance. Four years later, after her breakdown, despising her, he takes her to England in secret and has her confined and cared for at his estate, Thornfield Hall. He suffers maiming and blindness when he tries in vain to rescue her from his ancestral home, that she had set ablaze when she escaped her quarters. Thus, ultimately, he is legally and ethically free to marry Jane.

Jean Rhys published her own version of Antoinetta’s story in 1966. She had worked on it for nine years. She uses the background of her own childhood in Dominica for the honeymoon section of the novel. She interprets the traumatic experiences of Bertha Antoinette Mason by modern liberal standards and psychological analysis. Rhys does not minimize the possibility of her heroine’s inheritance of instability, but she also makes believable the disorientation of Antoinetta’s mother, Annette, whose frenzy could have been provoked by the conflagration of the family villa in Roseau. Rhys makes much of Antoinetta’s own reactions to the conflicting cultures around her — the stiff and limited colonist morality set against the mysterious underworld of obeah magic, slave solidarity, incommunicable legend and language, and fear yet attraction for the majority black world which does not accept her.

1 It is an interesting coincidence that Brontë’s contemporary who first praised her work, William Makepeace Thackery, and to whom Brontë dedicated the second edition of Jane Eyre, was himself tied to an insane wife whom he could not legally divorce. Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre (New York: Random House 1944: 1847)
Rhys sympathetically explains the vague charges of low life and degeneracy given by Brontë. Antoinette loves and wishes to marry her light-colored cousin, Saudi. Her passion has to be illicit because marrying across racial lines is forbidden to women of the white colonizer society. Thus Rhys explains the charge of unchastity. Later, desperate to win back Edward's love, Antoinette tries obeah drugs and almost poisons him, causing him the 'hideous and degrading agonies' that Brontë's Rochester feels and later describes to Jane. After the frustrations of the failed marriage, Edward forcibly removes Antoinette to England and keeps her in virtual captivity and isolation there, perpetuating her alienation.

From Brontë's few details about Rochester's first wife, Rhys constructs a credible and sympathetic portrait of a young girl, caught in cross-cultural fear and violence, a woman dependent upon a callous and imperceptive partner in an arranged marriage. Rhys shows that Rochester's early lust and later repugnance for Antoinette make her situation intolerable. Lacking support from her family or from the small Anglicized white community of the island planters, Antoinette seeks help in the mysterious and envied power of the blacks around her, who also generally reject her, but her attempt only intensifies his disgust. He rejects and transports her.

Simone and André Schwarz-Bart show the other, slave side of colonial life as equally intolerable. They too perform a tour-de-force reconstruction, building upon a one-sentence entry in Guadeloupian history: 'La mulâtresse Solitude, allait être mère; arrêtée et emprisonnée, elle fut suppliciée dès sa délivrance, le 29 novembre 1802.' Oral histories and

1979), referred to as Staley: '... her own fate [is sealed] in a private schizophrenic world between two times, races, and cultures' (pp. 104-5).

4 The joint authorship is indicated several times although the Seuil edition gives only André as author of La Mulâtresse Solitude (Paris: Seuil 1972) referred to as MS. In advance publicity, 'le Cercle du Livre de France' gives André as author and Simone as collaborator. This reference also mentions their joint goal of telling the history of Guadeloupe in a cycle of novels of historic reconstruction (advance notice of choice for June, 1972 selection.) In the translation into English by Ralph Mannheim, A Woman Named Solitude (New York: Atheneum 1972) Simone is listed as co-author. Donald Herdeck in his Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographic Critical Encyclopedia (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press 1979) lists La Mulâtresse Solitude as her work 'with André Schwarz-Bart' (p. 506). In Le Dernier des justes, André Schwarz-Bart lists works to come, and the publisher notes: 'En collaboration avec sa femme, Simone, André Schwarz-Bart a entrepris la publication d'une suite romanesque,' La Mulâtresse Solitude (pocket-book edition). The Seuil publisher's note lists joint authorship.

5 Dedication MS, 7. Further historical references to the actual Solitude appear in the
legends of Simone's own forebears fill out the story. The authors' purpose is historic: they planned this novel to be the first of a series in a fictional cycle devoted to Guadeloupean history, 'le premier d'un cycle qui, de 1760 à nos jours, entend raconter ce qu'a été la marche lente des esclaves vers la liberté et l'égalité des droits.' André Schwarz-Bart won the Prix Goncourt in 1959 for his Le Dernier des justes, the fictionalized history of a Jewish family from the year 1000. The Schwarz-Barts had previously collaborated on a nostalgic novel of a Guadeloupean servant woman in a French convent, Un Plat de porc aux bananes vertes. For them, Solitude is a pivotal figure, and they mention her as legendary ancestor of the heroine Mariotte several times in this novel. In Simone's single-author novel, Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, a similar slave ancestor, Minerva, is described.

La Mulâtre Solitude begins in West Africa among the Diolas of the Senegal region in 1750. A young woman, Bayangumay, a reincarnation of her grandmother, is captured and sold into slavery. Aboard the slave ship, she is raped by one of the white sailors. Their daughter, Rosalie, is born on the plantation 'Habitation' in Guadeloupe in 1772. She is light, of sapotilla skin, and has one green eye — an abnormality attributed to those conceived in rape and much prized for exotic beauty in adolescent slave girls. But the little girl rejects her differences, and she tries to copy her mother's blackness, her African speech, and her dance motions. Even though her mother has been lamed and mutilated after frequent escape attempts, the child Rosalie senses that Bayangumay will try again to rejoin her own kind. When her mother does escape to the hills, leaving Rosalie abandoned, the child begins to stammer. She is obsessed with the hope that one day her mother will come to get her.

Rosalie, now called 'Deux-Âmes' because of her eyes, lives a schizophrenic life. Her owner gives her to his young daughter as a birth-

preface to Simone Schwarz-Bart's Un Plat de porc aux bananes vertes (Paris: Seuil 1967), referred to as Un Plat, 2; see Oruno Lara, Histoire de la Guadeloupe (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie universelle 1923), and Maryse Condé in 'Autour d'une littérature antillaise,' Présence Africaine 81 (1972).


7 See note 4 on Le Dernier des justes. It is interesting to note that the last juste 'a perdu son visage, comme rabbi Jonathan; il est devenu fou, comme rabbi Néhémias; et même chien, comme le Juste de Saragosse,' just as Solitude becomes mad and thinks she is a dog (Back cover, Seuil edition, editorial comment).

8 See Un Plat, 105, 114, 117.

day gift. The white child, Mademoiselle Xavière, sometimes affectionate and compassionate, often sadistic, threatens to abuse Rosalie physically, or to sell her to a cruel neighbour. Rosalie learns to hold in her own thoughts and aspirations, but when she hears that her mother lives in the high hills with a black leader and has borne a black baby, Rosalie as a mulatto feels utterly displaced and desolate; she longs to be other. At first she tries docilely to join with the whites, and adopts all the graces — she learns to sew, to speak French, to play the harp, and to sing — but, sent to feed the hens, she accidentally poisons them with raw cassava juice. Fascinated by their contortions, she imagines punishing her mother, who rejected her, and her owners who terrorize her. She belongs in neither world; she even becomes non-human and thinks she is a canine zombi-corne. She starts barking in her sleep, waking her mistress. At age eleven she is put out at night to sleep in the kennels. From this time on she never really recovers her sanity.

Subsequent slave lists and brief historical notes testify that she is sold and resold, branded and rebranded, and forced to work as a field hand. Beautiful but abstracted, passive under duress, frequently unresponsive, she passes from one owner to another. Now she calls herself ‘Solitude.’ When she is abandoned by her French master as he retreats from the emancipation of Blacks in 1789, she seeks her mother and the mountain refuge. The maroon guerillas there do protect her, but they do not adopt her as one of their own. In a foray to the plantation gardens to steal food, Rosalie sees an armed soldier and runs toward him crying out a slave-song refrain, ‘Tuez-moi!’ Inadvertently she runs him through instead. Even though she does not realize what she has done, she has by this murder won the acceptance of the maroon band. Now they do call her nègresse.

In 1802 the French treaty with the English, who still condoned slavery, negated the French emancipation in the colonies. Blacks were rounded up all over Guadeloupe. In the novel, Solitude holds out longer than many, hiding in lairs she discovered when she thought she was a dog. She experiences a short idyll with a Mozambique run-away, solitary like her because the maroons do not understand his dialect. It is his child she carries at her capture. She is allowed to live until delivery, as the baby is not responsible for her crimes and must become the property of her former owner. She is executed the twenty-ninth of November, 1802, the day after giving birth. Her story ends with this official report, but not her legend.

Although the plots and heroines of these two historical novels are seemingly different, the writers have much in common in their presentation of the newly independent Caribbean societies they describe. Both
draw on their own family and island backgrounds, though both are expatriates in adult life. Jean Rhys (1894-1979) left Dominica at sixteen, and only returned once in 1936 for a month’s stay. Yet she used the island setting for much of her work. Her unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*, which she dictated at eighty-six, reflects her lifelong preoccupation with her early home. The only section she concluded was of her Caribbean life, and many of the impressions she recorded are parallel to those of Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.10

Simone Schwarz-Bart, born in 1938 in Gaudeloupe, is two generations younger than Jean Rhys. She had her early education in Pointe-à-Pitre, but completed her education abroad in Dakar and Paris. She now lives in Switzerland. Her first book, though set in France, records the last days of an old Martinique woman whose recollections of her Caribbean past mix and blend with her later service in a French convent. Simone’s other novels deal directly with her Guadeloupian home and heritage.

Both novelists are exile writers located in Europe. Both draw on their own fairly remote past and the histories of their birthplaces to give colour and depth to their fiction. Both write primarily of women and of women’s subservience. But the thrust and development of their fiction is far different. Jean Rhys has today received much critical attention as a feminist writer ahead of her time whose protests are pertinent today, even though she usually tells of the unconventional life she led in the twenties and thirties, and the difficulties she experienced in a post-war society where women were not really emancipated.

Simone Schwarz-Bart, on the other hand, is a relatively young writer who is moving more and more away from present feminist issues to the recapitulation of the legendary Caribbean past. Her women characters are becoming depersonalized, universalized. The Mariotte of her first book, *Un Plat de porc aux bananes vertes*, is a unique individual who tells of her failing eyesight, her yearning for a favorite spicy island dish, and her exasperation with the French nuns she serves. She writes her story to exorcise memories of her past that might haunt her after death, ‘dons nous autres nègres de la Martinique disons qu’en elles reviennent les péchés, les souffrances et les larmes, et l’agitation aveugle de ceux qui ne sont plus.’11 The lead character of the second novel, her own slave ancestor Solitude, is legendary but historical as well. Télumée, protagonist of the third novel, *Pluie et vent sur Téhumée Miracle*, is more generalized, more acted upon than active. She is deserted by her first

10 Cf. *SP*, 25.

11 *Un Plat*, 15
husband, and robbed of her second by his death in a workers' strike she
does not understand. Propelled by events to move from place to place
seeking menial jobs, she is la petite négresse — the ordinary island
woman.

The miracle in Télumée's life is her heritage from the past, the
knowledge of herbal cures, passed on to her by her grandmother. This
Reine Sans Nom in instructing Télumée had emphasized the continuity of
the female line after death: 'notre vie, moi te suivant partout, invisible,
sans que les gens se doutent jamais qu'ils ont affaire à deux femmes et non
pas à une seule.' Télumée's main function is as a link in the chain. In
Schwarz-Bart's most recent novel, Ti Jean l'Horizon (1979) she abandons
the female focus altogether. She recreates the legend of a male Guadelou-
pian folk hero in an imaginary quest of Africa and to the Land of the
Dead. The hero seeks the love of a woman — an ideal image, a pure
spirit, who will be without ruse or affectation — without, presumably,
individuality, personality, or period.

The styles of Rhys and Schwarz-Bart are as different as their goals.
Rhys is highly personal, concise, even bare. Ford Madox Ford recorded
in a preface to her The Left Bank, 'I tried ... very hard to induce [her] ...
to introduce some sort of topography ...'. With cold deliberation ... she
eliminated even such two or three words of descriptive matter as had
crept into her work.' She sees literature as form imposed upon the
diversity and variety of experience. 'I always start with something I feel
or something that has happened and then in the middle it becomes
something else. I add and subtract.' Schwarz-Bart's prose is luxuriant.
She enjoys listing exotic flora, and the odours of flowers and foods. Her
style is musical and she uses repetitious refrains. She incorporates snatch-
es of songs, sometimes suggesting the magic of incantation, of voodoo.
She evokes the past, and writes long novels in which she embroiders a
minimal plot with sensual and pictorial detail.

Other contrasts between these two writers are evident beyond racial
and language differences. The most important contrast is the underlying

12 Pluie, 174. As Maryse Condé has argued, however, Schwarz-Bart's understanding
of the plight of women in Pluie is romanticised and historical rather than actual.
See her review in Présence Africaine 84, Fourth Quarter (1972) 138-9, and La
Parole des femmes: Essai sur les romancières des Antilles de langue française

13 See Staley, 20-1.

14 Cited in Staley, 20-1.

15 See Staley, 10, note 5. Cf. Smile Please, 7.
difference in goals. The much older writer, Rhys, after being virtually forgotten (her works having gone out of print) is now being rediscovered and reevaluated as a feminist writer. She was a reformer who attacked in her actions and her writing the enforced passivity of women in bourgeois society.

Schwarz-Bart is apparently moving in a contrary direction. She is becoming a kind of traditional griot, recalling a valuable past to those who have ignored it: ‘les nègres de Fond-Zombi ne pensaient pas qu’il se trouve un seul événement digne d’être retenu,’ she laments. She claims that others even doubt their African origin: ‘D’autres allaient jusqu’à douter que leurs ancêtres fussent venus d’Afrique.’ By evoking the African origin of the maroon leaders of the past, she shows how Guadeloupians today may regain a sense of worth, a noble heritage ignored for one hundred-fifty years: ‘un sang noble courait dans leurs veines ... c’étaient les hauts faits qu’avaient accomplis leurs ancêtres.’

Despite contrasts, in their historic novels Rhys and Schwarz-Bart voice strikingly similar criticisms of the colonial Caribbean society of the Emancipation period. Their divergent beliefs and preferences influence their characterizations which must also be shaped to fit the constraints of a predetermined plot outline. Although Antoinette and Solitude sometimes react to similar circumstances in much the same way, like their creators they are contrasting personalities.

Rhys’s Antoinette Mason is active, though she cannot change nor fit into her society. Rhys implies that her frustrations are the real basis of her madness. Although she belongs to the ruling class of her society, Antoinette cannot enter the slave culture surrounding her. If she tries, she is rejected. When she is little, her one supposed black friend stones her. Her brother leaves her by death. Her mother deserts her, driven mad by the loss of her son and the burning of the plantation. Later Antoinette witnesses her mother’s sexual acts with the black jailer-warden. Antoinette, sane, cannot emulate this relationship legally with her own cousin-lover because he is coloured. The conventional world around her

16 Schwarz-Bart, Ti Jean L’horizon (Paris: Seuil 1979), referred to as Ti-Jean, 11.
17 Ti-Jean, 14; Staley, 1-2: ‘In her brutally honest but not infrequently humourous depiction of the isolated, abandoned, even paranoid world of her women characters who yearn vaguely for a lost beauty and passively but doggedly attempt to survive, Rhys achieves a vital interest and importance. Her subtly rendered, complex, and revealing attitudes toward race, social classes, the bourgeois world in which her heroines are victims, and, most important, toward women in their relationships with men and each other, come remarkably close to our own deepest human concerns.’
will not allow such a marriage. After her marriage to Rochester, Antoinette takes Edward to her garden villa in the Dominican mountains where she feels at home in its luxuriant foliage and beauty, but Edward feels uneasy because the people and places there are too intense. Antoinette loses the passionate happiness she had felt in their first sexual unions because she becomes repugnant to him; she is too dominant, too passionate. She tries to restore his first affection by obtaining an obeah love potent to force his desire. In resentment, he outrages her by taking a black servant girl and having intercourse where Antoinette can hear them. She reacts violently. Throughout their marriage, she struggles but loses. She has money which becomes his; it does not give her freedom. She has beauty which later he finds too exotic, even suspect. She has passion which he cannot and will not return. She finds no solace in the black world around her. Even in her madness, she is active. In both Brontë’s and Rhys’s accounts, she stabs, she steals a key, she ignites a house. In moments of recognition, she yells, reviling and accusing her husband. Ironically, it is her activity, her protest, that results in her own immolation and thus legally frees Rochester to marry Jane.

In contrast, Solitude, Schwarz-Bart’s heroine, though neither inert nor unfeeling, is strangely passive. Her passivity creates much of the poignancy of her story. As a child, she is not allowed an opportunity to act or to accompany her mother to the mountains. As a ten-year old she proves herself a talented and bright pupil when she is taught music and French, but she can never utilize these accomplishments to better her condition. Finally, sheltered in the mountain hideout of the maroon escaped slaves, she subdues her own musical art in trying to adapt her voice and intonation to African, not Créole, songs and rhythms. She laments her lack of grace in African dancing. She does not even actively respond to abuse. Frequently branded and reauctioned, she suffers silently. She seems at times unaffected by her environment: her eyes go blank. Once, in searching for her mother’s maroon band, she walks out into the river, is held afloat by her billowing skirt, and is pulled out of the river by her hair; she does not even try to swim. During her brief episodic happiness with the Mozambique escapee, she hardly communicates with him. It is he who envisages fondling their unborn child, who speaks to it in his own tongue, who bodily protects Solitude from the gun barrage that takes his own life. Solitude wanders throughout, beautiful, pathetic—hardly the image of a revolutionary activist heroine.¹⁸ Like the other

¹⁸ See MS, 128. The Schwarz-Barts in this novel omit some of the historic references to the actual Solitude mentioned in their earlier novel, Un Plat, which might be interpreted to give a more active and more cognizant portrait.
female protagonists in Schwarz-Bart’s works, she is more acted upon than active, more compliant than energetic.

Yet, ironically, through this traditionally ‘feminine’ lack of initiative, Solitude becomes all the more impressive as a national epic heroine. Her violent crimes are inadvertent, so she remains saintly. She mistakenly poisons the hens, not realizing that raw cassava juice can be poisonous, then she impales a soldier as she rushes toward him begging for her own death. Afterwards she successfully leads the last little band of rebel women to safe concealment, showing them the animal lairs which only she, as animal spirit, can know of. At the final stand of the slave revolt she watches the massacre of women and children by the French soldiers. Her eyes glazed with shock, she seizes an abandoned gun and shoots a French grenadier. At the same moment the bastion of the enemy explodes, killing three hundred French. In the retaliatory bloodbath, she is captured and condemned. Solitude’s execution is deferred until her child is born and can be turned over to Solitude’s former owner. The day after her delivery, her public execution is well attended. She is led to her death; she smiles acceptance of a spray of flowers; she does not resist.

There are not many national heroes who are women. Joan of Arc, of course, is an exception. Even more than Joan, Solitude remains frail, innocent, gentle. It is high irony that she is an effective insurgent. She kills the enemy, but she remains blameless because she knows not what she does. Antoinette’s wild passion ruins her; Solitude’s serenity sustains her. Neither, however, can maintain sanity in the bicultural colonial world of the West Indies.

What common characteristics of this eighteenth and early nineteenth-century colonial world so oppressed these unlike women? What reasons for their disorientation can be clarified and reinterpreted by their twentieth-century creators? Obviously Rhys and Schwarz-Bart draw heavily on their own childhoods and family backgrounds to reinterpret this past. As women, they deliberately choose to reflect the woman’s position, then and now. What similarities exist in their fictionalized historical settings?

Both writers portray their heroines as vulnerable children subject to the seemingly capricious and inconsistent behaviour of parents and surrogate parents. Both writers stress the heroines’ hopeless but tenacious desire to be black even in a white-dominated world. Both writers show the anguish of rejection and alienation the outsider feels. Both women portrayed also belong to a culture in flux. The post-emancipation era in the Caribbean colonies can neither resolve nor withstand the uprisings and violence accompanying this social change.

Although the two contrasted protagonists, Antoinette and Solitude, are so unlike, they, nevertheless, experience strikingly similar childhood
traumas. Both are strongly attached to their mothers, yet they fail to please and are not sure why they cannot. Rhys even constructs an explanation of the mother Annette's rejection of her daughter contrary to Brontë's sweeping accusation of hereditary vice, alcoholism and insanity. Annette's own disorientation becomes credible given the series of disasters she faces in an alien culture in Rhys's version.

Both Antoinette and Solitude as children experience almost total rejection by parents, peers, and society. With no real tie to their fathers, they cling to their mothers, whom they see as models. They do not provoke and do not understand their mother's abandonment. They also even lose peer companionship. Antoinette's home companion is her brother, Pierre, who dies when she is ten. Solitude is a cocotte, a mulatto child slave. At eleven, Solitude loses contact with his peer group when she is exiled to the kennel.

Neither Antoinette nor Solitude can belong to the prevailing black

19 The theme of parental rejection is recurrent in the works of both Schwarz-Bart and Rhys. In Un Plat the little girl Mariotte-enfant-Câpresse has a special feeling of closeness to Raymonique, though she is never certain he is her father. She is bitterly hurt when he walks off to prison without a word to her, nor can she understand why. In Pluie Télumée's mother, Victoria, meets a man she truly loves, Haut-Colbi, and then sends Télumée away to be brought up by her grandmother. In Ti-Jean, the ancestor-Magician Wadamba has a daughter, Awa, later christened Éloïse. He abusers her and insults her when she is slow at learning the herbal secrets he teaches her, but he permits her to go to the valley and marry for love. Later she learns that her father has tricked her. As a result, she can only miscarry. Then her husband is mysteriously killed in a bus accident. Wadamba returns, rapes Awa, and thus conceives a child who can live, who will resemble his ancestor, who will be a legendary hero for Guadeloupe. Awa finally rebels and strikes her father in her sudden recognition that he is the cause for all her misfortunes, that he refuses to acknowledge the child he has created, and that he continues to laugh at her and her entreaties.

In Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea the mother Annette's rejection of Antoinette is paralleled in minor incidents. Antoinette's father, Cosway, does not appear in the novel, but his parenting of bastards was common gossip. Christophine tells Rochester that Cosway was not Daniel's father, but that Cosway did frequently joke about his bastards. The Cosways' behaviour was considered typical for plantation owners.

The theme of parental disappearance after which a girl is either brought up by unfeeling step- or surrogate parents, or sent to a paupers' school is common in nineteenth-century novels. Perhaps this part of Jane Eyre particularly fascinated Jean Rhys. Rhys recalls in Smile, Please several instances of her own mother's rejection of her and also her fear of her own black nurse, Meta, a surrogate parent of her early childhood. Rhys recalls her own mother as distant rather than cruel, imperceptive, perhaps. Her mother's behaviour, intensified, occurs fictional when Annette Mason is truly unaware yet vaguely resentful of her child's presence.
culture of the Caribbean environment. Both long desperately to be accepted, even though the black group is exploited and despised. They have many reasons. Jean Rhys recalls that even as a child she associated black with beauty. Schwarz-Bart in historic retrospect shows that to be mulatto only intensifies Solitude’s cultural schizophrenia.

In her short stories, novels and autobiography, Rhys reiterates the same desire to be black that her character Antoinette expresses. To Rhys, a black girl of the islands has more freedom, particularly sexual, than the white islander, who must conform to the constraints of the colonist: the white girl must marry conventionally; she must display ‘English reserve’ in deportment and language; she cannot practice or even recognize obeah magic. Antoinette cannot endure these inhibitions of the English colonial world of 1839. She must maintain her identity and her sanity.

Solitude’s lightness is as unbearable as Antoinette’s whiteness. Theoretically, her light mulatto colour sets her apart as superior from the slaves, who are black field hands like her mother. It also isolates her. At age four she runs off from the plantation house and rubs mud on her face to get darker. When as an adult she finally escapes to the maroon hideout, she weeps when the leader asks her her colour. The maroons finally accept her as black after she kills the white soldier. Nonetheless, her legend endures ironically in her name, ‘la mulâtresse Solitude.’

Colour is both a symbol and a realistic factor in the disorientation of both heroines. Their names, too, symbolize the fragmentation of their lives. Although Charlotte Brontë writes of Bertha Antoinetta Mason, Rhys uses only the name Antoinette until Edward Rochester calls his wife ‘Bertha’ after their marriage. Edward is English, and, in her eyes, white, cold arrogant. By calling her Bertha he is rejecting her mother and the French part of her island heritage. Antoinette, a French diminutive, comes from Annette, her Créole mother’s name. Her Martinican nurse and only friend speaks French Créole. The island of Dominica, though until very recently a British possession, suffered strong French influence. Antoinette at times of crisis tells Edward not to call her Bertha, and his insistence seems to her a kind of magic to deny half of herself. Captive in England, she is further removed from any French heritage.

Simone Schwarz-Bart also emphasizes naming in the colonial world of slavery, where masters labelled slaves with pronounceable and often degrading names. Bayangumy does not have the right to name her own daughter. She herself is renamed Bobette on the du Parc plantation.

20 SP, 33
21 See WSS, 135-6, 147.
22 On the effects of such name-changing, see her MS, 42.
The owners, to simplify bookkeeping, keep a 'permanent ledger,' in which it is explained that 'le nom des morts allait aux vivants qui le rendaient le moment venu, avec l'âme. Une vieille Rosalie venant à mourir, on l'enterra... Et la nouvelle Rosalie prit la place de l'ancienne, en un cri léger, sur le grand-livre de la Plantation.' It was traditional for the owners to use non-African names — classical names of deities, pet diminutive names, names of the distinguishing marks of the wearers — a hated practice. The maroon Moudongue calls such names no-names. By the time Rosalie is given to Xavière as cocotte, she is called Deux-Âmes because of her eyes of two colours. At the same time, of course, she is being trained in two worlds: the white and the yellow — both apart from the black. Finally, as field slave, 'elle prononça les paroles qui devaient s'attacher à elle, tout au long de sa brève éternité: — "Avec la permission, maître: mon nom est Solitude."'

Both authors sketch their isolated, alienated protagonists against the background of a doomed society. Just as these characters cannot survive, the societies which form them also cannot endure, half slave and half free. Emancipation comes, bringing with it disillusion, outrage, and mob violence. Barbadian historian Edward Brathwaite, commenting on Wide Sargasso Sea, insists on the impossibility of reconciliation between the disparate Caribbean ethnic groups: 'white Créoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally, as a group for any spiritual identification between white and black.'

Antoinette struggles, but loses her sanity first, and then her life. Solitude outwardly conforms, but, in delirium, she kills — and then is killed. Though one character represents the ruling white class and the other the coloured slave caste, both are women, and so reflect alike the impotence of rebelling against a male-dominated world. No wonder that the women writers who created these characters, coming from similar islands but from different worlds, choose to emphasize some common reactions to the rejection, oppression and exploitation of women. The portraits do more than recreate the past. The writers draw from their own ancestry, their own childhood and their own reactions and experiences as women. The distant figures of Antoinette and Solitude reflect back to us today the poignancy and tragic waste that occur whenever the exploited cannot mentally or physically survive the stress of subjugation.

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23 MS, 45
24 MS, 75
25 Louis James, Jean Rhys (London: Longman 1978) 69