

## Research Article

# The Dead Mother Metaphor: Unravelling the Maternal Enigma in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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**Abstract**

one of the set texts of the postcolonial canon, has long been read through the cultural/ethnic (۱۹۶۶) Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well as the feminist/modernist lens. Toppling such priorities via a predominantly psychoanalytic lens, the present study draws attention to how an overemphasis on cultural displacement and racial discrimination has very explicitly overshadowed the mother-daughter bond at the heart of the fictional world of Rhys' masterpiece. Drawing on André Green's theory of the dead mother complex and the mother-centered theoretical framework it invokes, the present article regards Antoinette and Rochester's star-crossed love/hate story of infatuation as a plot which gives representability to the rather unrepresentable maternal trauma around which Antoinette's life revolves. Through a Green-ian reassessment of the maternal absence/presence as the most pivotal substrate upon which the whole text is built, this study, thus, reevaluates the fractured Annette/Antoinette bond as the focal point around which the more (post-) colonial aspects of the novel simmer. It is only in the hitherto untapped space opened up by Green's concept of the dead mother leading to a reconsideration of the decisive role that the dysfunctional Annette plays in the trajectory of her daughter's life that Antoinette's relationship to the private/public world around her, her later entrapment within a loop of doomed relationships, her melancholically-inflected word-view, and her gradual descent into a mental space beyond normative sanity can be read as substitutive signifiers for a traumatism associated with an enigmatic maternal void whose haunting absence/presence is constantly-but-variably voiced throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

**Keywords:** Dead Mother Complex, Maternal Absence/Presence, Trauma, Mourning, Melancholia, Jean Rhys, André Green**Introduction**

Set in the Caribbean around the mid nineteenth century when, as a result of the Slave Abolition Act (1833), the colonial power of England in the West Indies had dwindled, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1666) relates the story of what the Cosways, one of the white creole ex plantation owners, went through in the aftermath of the Act. Against a backdrop of racial tensions and socio-cultural instabilities of the post-Emancipation Jamaica which loom large over the lives of both the black and white, the novel decidedly follows the political, socio-economical, cultural, racial,

and more importantly, psychological fluctuations in the lives of the recently widowed Annette Cosway and her children, particularly her daughter Antoinette. Following the disturbances in Annette/Antoinette bond, a bond between a mother and daughter bearing names which are almost anagrams of one another, and all that later plague them each in the different-yet-similar trajectories of their lives, Jean Rhys weaves her mother/daughter narrative of cultural disorientation and psychological disfigurement within the (post-)colonial context of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

As Cook rightly claims, in Rhys's fiction "place is never simply geographical, nor is trajectory solely a matter of direction; both are complicated, often deeply layered concepts"—an observation that leads her to highlight the importance of prioritizing "the deeper, internal, and psychological places [that] her works explore" (2016, 6). Certainly, the necessity of paying attention to the interiority of Rhys's fiction, including the psychological intricacies and nuances of her *Wide Sargasso Sea*, has not been totally disregarded by either the amateur or the established Rhys scholars. It is striking, however, that an over-emphasis on socio-political issues around which the novel revolves has obstructed the perception of crucial psychological aspects of the mother/daughter relation which, as Victoria Burrows aptly suggests, is "encrypted within the outer framework of the white creole historical trauma" (2004, 27). It is for the sake of dis-encrypting such a relation while attending to the maternal contours of the socio-political space into which such a historical trauma of the loss of "imperial whiteness" (Burrows 2004, 60) is inserted that the present study, drawing on André Green's 1985 momentous essay "The Dead Mother," distinguishes itself from such enlightening postcolonial-feminist works like Burrows' *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Toni Morrison* (2004).

Despite its having been cognizant of Annette's relation to Antoinette's plight in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and attuned to the decisive role such a mother/daughter core trauma plays within the more socio-political shell of the novel, Burrows' study has nevertheless proceeded in the absence of a contemporary Neo-Freudian mother-centered psychoanalytic theoretical framework and has, thus, fallen short of unravelling the novel's rather unresolved maternal enigma—which is exactly where the present study aims to intervene and make its Green-ian psychoanalytic contribution. Using Burrows' work as a point of departure while reversing her socio-political priorities regarding Rhys's novel, the present study, thus, gives more force to the psychodynamics of Annette/Antoinette's relation without, no doubt, fully foregoing the socio-political implications of such dynamics. It, then, not only discusses the crucial relevance of Green's notion of the dead mother scenario to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but also analyzes the critical relevance of such a psychoanalytic concept to both the private as well as the socio-political context of the novel. Doing so will simultaneously lead to the emergence of a more psychoanalytically-inflected understanding of the multiply-mediated post-emancipation white creole female "translocational positionality," to use a term by Floya Anthias (2008), and, to the reconsideration of the psychoanalytic complexities which altogether comprise the ma-

ternal ambivalence at the heart of Rhys's fictional world. To this aim, the following questions in relation to Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* need to be addressed:

How does Green's theory of the dead mother aid in gaining a new insight into the traumatic mother/daughter dynamic encrypted within the doomed love story between Antoinette and Rochester? I. e. how and to what extent does Antoinette's childhood experience of her mother's melancholia in the racial situation of post-emancipation Jamaica shape and define her later choices of love-objects in life?

If Antoinette's plight presents a literary rendering of the workings of the dead-mother complex, what defenses/ploys are employed by her throughout the novel as a means of escaping the maternal void she's inhabited by i. e. the gap that defines her life?

To what extent can such a Green-ian re-reading of Rhys's text throw some light on the

maternal ambivalence around which all the socio/political aspects of the novel revolve?

### Literature Review: The Untrodden Terrain

Rendering a brand-new reading of Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a "cult text," to borrow Spivak's term regarding Brontë's *Jayne Eyre* (1985, 244), of both the feminist postcolonial canon and the canon of the Anglophone Caribbean literature, which can refreshingly attend to the intricacies of the text, calls forth a strenuous effort. Well received since its publication almost sixty years ago and ranked by Modern Library as one of the "100 Best Novels," it is, as Elaine Savory and Erica L. Johnson rightly argue, "a work still vibrantly alive for a new generation of readers" (2020, 17). It cannot be denied, then, that many scholars have hitherto approached Rhys's masterpiece through various angles which, as both the table of contents of *Wide Sargasso Sea at 50* (2020) with its fifty-odd years of hindsight and the introductory chapters of Kathryn Cook's psychoanalytic study (2016) attest to, predominantly includes the modernist, the feminist, and the postcolonial lens.

What many of such readings share is the attention they have given to the alienated, fragmentary, and traumatized narrativized self (also reflected in the novel's dominantly modernist aesthetics) which Antoinette, being doubly pressurized by both patriarchy and racism, has been forced to forge. It is, thus, colonial history, racial inequality and/or gender bias that, in many of those studies, have been introduced as the root-cause of Annette/Antoinette's plights. Furthermore, seeing the unnamed Mr. Rochester

of part II of the novel as the cruel and coldhearted colonialist/patriarch of the story, such studies have most often come to conclude that it is mainly her husband's indifference towards and betrayal of her that prepares the ground for Antoinette's final mental breakdown and descent into madness. One also cannot ignore the intertextual links that many of those studies, following Spivak's (1985), have made between Rhys's novel and Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Considering *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as a prequel to *Jane Eyre* (1847), such readings have often turned to the former as a model "counter canonical novel" in which "the [postcolonial] process of 'writing back' against the western literary canon" is best revealed (Lane 2006, 18). *Wide Sargasso Sea*, after all, is Rhys's attempt at re-writing the story of Bertha Mason of *Jane Eyre*, the so-called "mad-woman in the attic," to use Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's term (1979), from a postcolonial perspective, hence proving how "so intimate a thing as personal and human identity might be determined by politics of imperialism" (Spivak 1985, 250).

All this, however, as both Cook's 2016 Freudian/Lacanian reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Savory and Johnson's 2020 study also lay bare, have been done at the expense of the psychoanalytic outlook. While in the latter a separate section solely dedicated to the psychoanalytic readings of the novel hardly exists, the former laments that, at least till the time of its publication, few works had addressed the psychological nuances of Rhys's oeuvre, in general, and her *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in particular, from a predominantly psychoanalytic outlook (2016, 15). Even within what Cook calls "the dearth of existing psychoanalytic scholarship devoted to Rhys's fiction" (2016, 18), however, a list of full-length critical studies of her novels which base their premises on psychoanalysis exists, among which Deborah Kelly Kloepfer's (1989), Heather Ingman's (1998), and Anne B. Simpson's (2005) studies stand out. While many of such works converse with a wide range of psychoanalytic theories from Freud, Jung, and Lacan to Horney, Klein, Winnicott, Fairbairn, Riviere, Kristeva, and, most recently, even Bion (see Naomi Winter-Vincent's 2022 study), none has discussed Rhys's works in conjunction with Green's psychoanalytic concept of the dead mother. Therefore, although the present study, in line with Simpson's, Ingman's, and Cook's studies has directed its attention to what Simpson rightly calls "the vexed dyad of mother and child" (2005, 7-8), it differs from them all in terms of both its Green-ian frame of reference and its sustained focus solely on Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Aiming to fill a gap in the psychoanalytic theory by focusing on the concept of the dead mother and the be-

reavement that ensues from the loss of the breast through a more structural, theoretical, and metaphorical lens, Green's long-recognized essay "The Dead Mother" marks a milestone in the history of the psychoanalytic literature of loss. Not only does Green's essay offer a conceptual framework for a more psychoanalytically-inflicted understanding of the mother-daughter dynamics at the heart of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but it also makes one feel that Green has theorized in his brilliant essay the very condition that Rhys stages in her narrative of dysfunctional love—a structural dysfunction which displays itself on specifically two different planes in the novel: 1) The individual/private plane on which the mother/daughter bond is (re-)shaped 2) The collective plane on which the relationship between the motherland and its ex-colony is (re-)defined. Through the lens of Green's theory, the sporadic events of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, thus, can be translated into a tapestry that reveals, above all, the struggles and conflicts of a melancholic consciousness marked by maternal dislocation, both in the literal and metaphoric sense of the term.

### Theoretical Framework: The Psychodynamics of Blank Mourning

In his seminal paper "The Dead Mother" (1980), Green puts forward his theory of mourning in relation to an absent-present mother who, though not physically dead, amounts to a living-dead figure. His theory of the dead mother complex, then, concerns the fate of children who have been brought up by emotionally absent, if not fully depressed, mothers who, being too distant and too distracted, look/feel almost dead to those around them. Challenging the more father-oriented psychoanalytic theories (of, in particular, Freud and Lacan) while integrating the more mother-oriented psychoanalytic theories (of those like Klein and Winnicott), Green identifies two types of loss each of which can be associated with a particular axis of anxiety: 1) red anxiety, which he links with the bloody acts of wounding, castration, loss of a body part, or even a child via miscarriage, and 2) black and/or white, or rather blank, anxiety, which he links with the un-bloody loss of and separation from the breast, love, and protection, often accompanied by a sense of abandonment. Whereas the first type is often associated with the paternal territory bearing the color red, the second pertains to the maternal realm bearing "the colors of mourning: black or white. Black as in severe depression, or blank as in states of emptiness" (Green 2001, 174). It is certainly in relation with the latter more fundamental type of loss and anxiety that Green fleshes out his theory of the dead mother complex.

Dealing extensively with this more fundamental type of loss revolving around notions of absence, emptiness,

and blankness, Green then relates his notion of the dead mother complex with “a ‘blank’ anxiety which expresses a loss that has been experienced on a narcissistic level” (Green 2001, 174). Such references—on the one hand, to “the general trope of blankness” (Meyerowitz 2023, 320) and, on the other hand, to the experience of loss inevitably bound with the problematics of mourning—enjoins any discussion of the dead-mother syndrome with notions of an (im-) possible or pathological process of blank mourning which, Green believes, is the direct result of “one of the components of primary repression: massive decathexis, both radical and temporary” (2001, 174). The core section of Green’s article will then be dedicated to an elaboration of “this central decathexis of the maternal primary object,” which is itself, as Green claims, the direct result of a sudden traumatic moment of transformation in the psychic presence of a mother who, despite her formerly being capable of forming “a rich and happy relationship” with her child, is now going through a depressive phase and is, thus, not capable of providing her former maternal nourishment in the same vain (2001 174; 177). Faced with what Winnicott calls “defective maternal provision” (1990, 85) but incapable of fully digesting this sudden catastrophic change whereby “without any warning signal, love has been lost at one blow,” the child is left with no choice but to commit, in a retaliatory manner, “a psychical murder of the object” (Green 2001, 178). Such a process of withdrawal of libidinal energy from the once primary source of nourishment, though, comes at a price—the price being what Green calls “a [psychic] hole in the texture of the object-relations with the mother” (2001, 178-9).

The price, however, is even much higher as that massive decathexis of the maternal image proves to be simply one side of the coin. The other side constitutes an unconscious identification with an ensuing emptiness—a space that, having now been emptied out of the formerly full maternal psychic presence, amounts to a yawning gap, a void. It, thus, seems as if due to the instantaneity of change in the quantity and quality of maternal presence and the perhaps unpreparedness of the child’s psychic apparatus to handle that absence/presence, not only cannot the child process and master the imposed loss but also he/she is forced, as Meyerowitz puts it, to internalize “the emptiness of loss itself, the legacy [of which] is stultifying and non-productive, freezing the internal world and entrapping the ego, potentially forever” (2023, 328).

As one witness, such a process is neither reparatory nor reconciliatory, but rather amounts to “the assimilation of the unassimilable, of that which can only be appropriate in a negative mode as lost” (Enderwitz 2015, 10). Unable

to let go of the virtually lost maternal presence, the ego prefers clinging to, incorporating, or rather becoming that absence or blank emptiness to going through the vicissitudes of loss or the apparently blocked, to borrow a term from Nouri Gana, “horizons of mourning,” (2011, 47). A melancholic denial of the maternal loss, then, leads the child to feed, “in a cannibalistic manner” (Green 2001, 179), not even on “an exquisite corpse,” which Abarahm and Torok think the melancholically entrapped ego looks for “continually in the hope of one day reviving it” (1994, 118)—but rather on emptiness i.e. “the hole left by the decathexis” (Green 2001, 183).

It is as a means of dealing with such an emptiness at the core of her/his being that the victim of the dead mother complex will then become entangled in “an early triangular situation” or “a precocious Oedipus complex” in which the one to blame for the mother’s depressive mood is not necessarily the father, but a condensed synthetic entity marked by otherness (Green 2001, 179-180). From this moment onwards, haunted by such an inchoate otherness, the now fully-alienated victim of the dead mother seems to be unconsciously getting themselves locked within a set of defensive methods. Although the purpose of such defense mechanisms is to soothe and to appease, they will, in the long run, prove detrimental since every defensive attempt to hide, to patch or even to (re-)fill the psychic holes left after the drastic change in maternal nourishment and the ensuing radical decathexis and mirror-identification will simply be a means of “re-cathecting the traces of the [originatory] trauma” marked by hatred and a sense of loss (Green 2001, 179). In other words, each and every attempt on the part of the patient to be relieved of a sense of entrapping pain will be tainted with the streaks of the source of trauma.

If, as Meyerowitz claim, the victim’s fate is sealed to be “in the very throes of abject depressive hopelessness, caught in the relentless clutches of an entrapping internal object” (2023, 332), what then becomes of the possibility of (re-)symbolization, or (re-)translation of this melancholically created emptiness-within, of this “enigmatic signifier,” to borrow a term from Jean Laplanche (1999, 12)? If such a symbolization is impossible because, in Vijay Mishra’s words “a trauma around an absence” is formed (2007, 16), is the subject doomed to be forever stuck within the apparently invisible claws of the absent/present mother? Is there no strategy of compensation which, either by restoring the lost maternal object or relieving the subject of his fixated desire for her, can appease the subject’s pain? Is there no possibility of resistance or of a belated going beyond the apparently non-ending cycle of blank mourning? Such questions can be addressed only if Green’s the-

ory of maternal trauma is placed in a relation of complementarity to Rhys's novel. What follows, then, is not necessarily an application of but a negotiation between the psychodynamics of blank mourning in Green's theory of the dead mother syndrome and its parallel literary rendering in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso sea*, via an in-depth close reading that will give a particular attention to Antoinette's dysfunctional relationships with her mother (Annette), her childhood friend (Tia), her surrogate mother (Christophine), her rather toxic husband (the unnamed Mr. Rochester), and her beloved cousin (Sandy).

### A Tryst in a Walled-Up Crypt: Can the Dead Mother Ever be Restored?

What makes Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* relevant to Green's theory of the dead mother is made explicit when one considers the former as an embodiment of, to borrow a term from Marianne Hirsch, "the mother/daughter plot," (1989). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, after all, Rhys relates the events of the life of Antoinette, whose upbringing at the hand of a melancholically absent/present mother Annette, marks her symptomology as the epitome of the dead-mother complex. Annette, thus, one can suggest from Green's perspective, proves to be a clear case of maternal melancholia whose dangerous consequence on the life of her daughter, Antoinette, cannot be exaggerated. It is, after all, Annette's presence as "a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate" (Green 2001, 170) object of love which is at the core of Antoinette's distress and sense of abandonment as a child and which, as one will see later, leads the latter to have "more or less acute conflicts with [other love] objects who are close" to her in her adult life (Green 2001, 176).

Antoinette's predicament, both as a child and an adult, then, makes her fit closely into what Green claims constitutes the dead-mother complex: a childhood depression which is triggered not by the real loss of or separation from the mother, but rather by "experiences of sudden and unendurable maternal loss" (White 2021, 52) followed by a sudden sense of deprivation which the child suffer at the hands of a depressed mother whose exact clinical tableau is offered in the following lines from the second subsection of Green's essay:

*The essential characteristic of this [childhood] depression is that it takes place in the presence of the object, which is itself absorbed by a bereavement. The mother, for one reason or another, is depressed. Here the variety of precipitating factors is very large. Of course, among the principal causes of this kind of maternal depression, one finds the loss of a person dear to her: child,*

*parent, close friend, or any other object strongly cathected by the mother. But it may also be a depression triggered by a deception which inflicts a narcissistic wound: a change of fortune in the nuclear family or family of origin, a liaison of the father who neglects the mother, humiliation, and so on. In any event the mother's sorrow and lessening of interest in her infant are in the foreground. (2001, 177)*

Interestingly, the early dynamics of Annette/Antoinette relation also is a stark literary embodiment of the descriptions given in such a tableau, since what also (re-)defines their relationship, specifically in part I of the novel, is a drastic socio-political change affecting not only their socio-economic condition of life but also their psychic balance.

As Antoinette confesses on the very first page of the novel, things had changed in their lives "so suddenly, so without warning" that she now felt her "father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed—all belonged to the past" (Rhys 1966, 17–18). The Emancipation Act had made the Cosways lose their status, prestige, money, and colonial power, hence causing the recently-widowed Annette and her children to suffer the pangs of poverty. More destructive and detrimental for them all, though, are the feelings of racial anxiety, humiliation, and unbelonging-ness as well as a sense of rejection and abandonment by both the white and the black citizens of Jamaica—feelings reflected even in the opening sentences of the novel which, as Richard Lane suggests, revolve around "a series of negations" (2006, 28): "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks. The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother [either]" (Rhys 1966, 17). It is only against such a backdrop of racial disdain from both sides that this "mother-daughter trauma narrative" of sorts can be detangled, digested, and, thus, articulated (Burrows 2004, 27).

Being neither totally white nor fully black, Annette and Antoinette, thus, are going through hard times in a post-emancipation age of unexpectedly drastic changes of fortune that has not only led them to face abject poverty, but has also brought about for them a sense of racial displacement, if not a curious case of "racial melancholia," a term Anne Anlin Cheng uses in another context in her book of the same name (2001, xi). Being constantly ridiculed and humiliated by nasty jibes ("They called us white cockroaches" [Rhys 1966, 23]) coming from both the white and black people they are surrounded by, they have no way but to experience on an almost daily basis "a racial encounter", which Sara Ahmed defines as "the en-

counter through which the subject assumes a body image and comes to be distinguishable from the Other" (2000, 43). The dark depth and sharp edge of such bitter encounters are, no doubt, most evident in Tia's, Antoinette's short-time black friend's, inferred speech which, given after her being called a "cheating nigger" by Antoinette, gets to the heart of this rather confusingly mixed-up racial stratifications and cultural positionings: "Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, black nigger better than white nigger" (Rhys 1966, 24). It is through those same taunts and jeers that Antoinette learns about her maternal inheritance of loss i.e. her inheritance of a stratum of whiteness which has turned into a marker of otherness.

As if experiencing the loss of the so-called privilege of whiteness and its ensuing sense of racio-cultural displacement on a socio-political level is not damaging enough, Annette's and Antoinette's lives are also suffused with a number of personal losses, each of which has inflicted a narcissistic wound. In case of Annette, such losses are profuse and varied: Firstly, she has very recently lost her rather womanizing and neglectful husband; Secondly, her only friendly neighbor Mr. Luttrell has committed suicide; Next, her beloved horse has been lately poisoned by a couple of ex-slaves; Last but not least, she is pained by the prospect of, and later the actual incidence of, the loss of her physically/mentally sick son Pierre. It is this same prospect and the ensuing death (if not murder) of this same highly-catheted son in the wake of the fire set to their house on the Coulibri state by an angry black mob that, as Antoinette claims, precipitates Annette's depression and eases her final descent into madness: "I don't know what the doctor told her or what she said to him but he never came again *and after that she changed. Suddenly, not gradually* She grew thin and silent, and at last refused to leave the house at all" (Rhys 1966, 19; emphasis mine).

Having been hit by not only one but many of such traumatizing events which, as seen earlier, Green considers as the principal causes of maternal depression in most dead-mother scenarios, Annette is then struck by a number of melancholic responses to all that is going around her, including her interactions with her daughter Antoinette. In what echoes Green's description of an absent-present mother, then, Rhys's text presents the readers with more than a few occasions when Annette has not only lost interest in the world around her, but also acts too impatiently with Antoinette, revealing in between her loss of Eros, the *élan vital*, the urge to live on: "[Death] would have been a better fate. *To die and be forgotten and at peace. Not to know that one is abandoned, lied about, helpless*" (Rhys 1966, 21-22; emphasis mine). Such melancholic acts and mannerisms of Annette, however, are often interspersed

with maniac behaviors and spontaneous decisions, notably her marrying the English colonizer Mr. Mason—an occasion which, at least outwardly, appears to induce a temporary lift in her otherwise downward mental state:

In a week she had a new dress and so had I. The [new] Luttrells lent her a horse, and she would ride off very early and not come back till late next day - tired out because she had been to a dance or a moonlight picnic. She was gay and laughing - younger than I had ever seen her and the house was sad when she had gone. (Rhys 1966, 27)

Ironically, it is Mr. Mason's starkly shameless colonial attitude that will soon trigger the burning down of the Coulibri by the belligerent black people, hence his major role in precipitating both Pierre's death and Annette's final descent into madness. To make matters worse, it is also Mr. Mason's later attempt to arrange a marriage for Antoinette that will later result in the latter's unfortunate marriage to Mr. Rochester, another English colonizer whose inability to love and understand his wife unhinges her and, thus, expedites her final entry into what amounts to, at worst, a state of total derangement and, at best, a psychotic episode.

As it is already implied, then, Annette's manic/melancholic ploys/responses to the catastrophic events of her life does not solely affect herself, but rather negatively impacts her daughter's life too—far-reading impacts which knock Antoinette off balance since her initial exposure to the totally humiliating failure of her constant attempts to reach out, in any ways possible, to her present-yet-totally-absent mother. It is due to those moments of helplessness as such that "a brutal change of the maternal imago" comes along (Green 2001, 177). The following lines from the early pages of the novel, for instance, not only bear witness to that change, but also attest to how the suppressed melancholic rage and affected coldness in Annette inflict pain upon and instill fear in Antoinette:

Long after the sound was far away and faint *she kept her eyes shut and her hands clenched.* A Frown came between her black eyebrows, deep—*it might have been cut with a knife.* I hated this frown and *once I touched her forehead trying to smooth it.* But *she pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her.* She wanted to sit with Pierre or walk where she pleased without being pestered, she wanted peace and quiet. *I was old enough to look after myself.* "Oh, let me alone," she would say, "let me alone,"

and after I knew that she talked alone to herself  
*I was a little afraid of her.* (1966, 20; emphasis  
 mine)

Distressed by the mother's psychic absence yet incapable of digesting what is really happening to her, Antoinette, thus, often takes it upon herself to undo the narcissistic wounds inflicted on them by the deceptive topsy-turvy world in which they are living by attempting to soothe not only her mother's pain ("I touched her forehead trying to smooth it") but also that of her own ("I was old enough to look after myself"). Sadly, such overtly failed attempts at soothing and even unDoing pain, which continue persistently throughout the first part of the novel, culminate later in a scene when Antoinette goes to visit her totally unhinged mother shortly after little Pierre's death. Now that one major reason behind the disruption of their initial mother/daughter bonding has disappeared, Antoinette tries, in a final futile gesture, to reclaim her mother's attention and to mend her rather gaping psychic wound:

I put my arms around her and kissed her. She held me so tightly that I couldn't breathe and I thought, 'It's not her.' Then 'It must be her.' She looked at the door, then at me, then at the door again. I could not say, 'He is dead, so I shook my head. 'But I am here, I am here,' I said, and she said, 'No,' quietly. Then 'No no no' very loudly and flung me from her. I fell against the partition and hurt myself." (Rhys 1966, 48)

No matter how often and in what ways she tries, however, Antoinette's desperate efforts to recapture Annette's lost gaze and to tend to the raw unhealed wound of their fractured bond are all in vain. As Green also observes, the more the child tries "in vain to repair the mother who is absorbed by her bereavement," of all sorts, the more he/she "feel[s] the measure of his[/her] helplessness" (Green 1966, 178). The child, bereft of any hope, thus, is left with no way but either to blame himself/herself for the whole situation or to take refuge in a number of unhealthy short-term and long-term defense mechanisms.

Curiously, Antoinette's deployment of various methods of defense (both as child and as an adult) also fit into the clinical picture introduced by Green. In fact, Antoinette's life is an example par excellence of Green's conception of the dead-mother victim who, in the face of the rather intolerable-yet-inescapable maternal legacy of loss which she has to inhabit either directly or, as will soon become clear, by proxy throughout her life, resorts to a series of equally ungratifying relationships, each of which, by exposing her to maternal like-for-like substitute objects,

proves to be a means of repeating her originary maternal trauma. Antoinette's life, thus, turns out to be a wild display of successive inappropriate object-choices best revealed, to borrow Green's words, in her "inability to withdraw from a conflictual situation, inability to love" or find love, and inability to experience a lasting sense of security and safety as well as satisfaction and happiness in her relationships (Green 2001, 176). Despite an initial promise of reparation, restoration, and re-filling of her psychic holes, all those relationships end up being a number of "re-cathexes, which are expression of destructiveness which has thus been freed by the weakening of [the] libidinal erotic cathexis" of the maternal object (Green 2001, 174)—proving, above all, that the absence/presence of a mother who was, at least for some time, "a source of vitality for the child" (Green 2001, 170) can have both short-term and long-term detrimental effects on the psychic health of her child as well as the destiny of all the other object-choices she will later make in her adult life.

The first and the most promising maternal substitute object-choice she summons to her rather widely lonely world is the dark maid Christophine Dubois who keeps acting as "Antoinette's surrogate, or 'othermother'" throughout the novel (Burrows 2004, 60-61). Aiming to preserve "the capacity to surmount the dismay over the loss of the breast" and "to mask the hole left by the [maternal] decathexis" (Green 2001, 180), Antoinette as a child seeks protection in Christophine's kitchen, her pacifying singing, and her attempts to dull Antoinette's sense of loneliness by finding her friends like Tia. Later as an adult, too, she still takes refuge in Christophine's verbal potency and her dexterity in obeah practices to save her almost failed marriage. No matter how hard she tries to save her "cross-racial mothering relationship" with Christophine (Burrows 2004, 62), however, Antoinette's attempts at, what Green calls, "the creation of a patched breast" (2001, 180) fails since, despite everything, their surrogate mother/daughter bond is overshadowed by Antoinette's alertness of their racial difference: "How can she know the best thing for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate old negro woman, who is not certain if there is such a place as England?" (Rhys 1966, 112)

Ironically, it is also this same othermother who introduces Antoinette to Tia, hence striking up a cross-racial friendship whose final fruit is nothing but adding to Antoinette's store of the senses of alienation and un-belongingness. Still, in the light of Green's theory, Antoinette's friendship with Tia, their initial mutual bonding, and their final break up after the shameful dress-changing scene can be read not only as an unconscious reenactment of Antoinette's traumatizing mother/daughter relationship

marked by an initial bonding and a sudden rupture; but also as an attempt, on Antoinette's part, to buy a moment of her mother's gaze. This attempt, however, like all her other attempts, fails, for in spite of its buying her a moment of her mother's attention, it is marked by a sense of deadening shame that ruins her already damaged self-image: "All that evening my mother didn't speak to me or look at me and I thought, 'She is ashamed of me, what Tia said is true'" (Rhys 1966, 26).

Curiously, it is right after this anxiety-inducing scene that Antoinette, to fight off her sense of shame and rejection, goes to bed early and has one of her three significant nightmares in the course of the novel. Undoubtedly, in line with Green who sees such "various active methods, amongst which agitation, insomnia, and nocturnal terrors are indications" as short-term means of dealing with the maternal trauma in the dead mother case scenario (2001, 178), Antoinette's nightmare of a frightening figure of otherness, too, can be interpreted in two different-though-related ways. On the one hand, it can read as her unconscious means of "the blaming of or scapegoating of an inchoate, condensed, composite figure, which might include the father" (Meyerowitz 2023, 329) or anyone else responsible for the widening rupture in her broken bond with her mother. On the other hand, it can be read as another attempt, on Antoinette's part, to buy, once more, a moment of her mother's attention. Although, such an attempt wakes the mother up and, thus, temporarily works, it only turns out to be another harsh moment of rejection and abandonment by the mother:

The covering sheet was on the floor and my mother was looking down at me:

'Did you have a nightmare?'

'Yes, a bad dream.'

*She sighed and covered me up. 'You were making such a noise. I must go to Pierre, you've frightened him.'*

I lay thinking, '*I am safe*. There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. *I am safe*. *I am safe* from strangers.'

The light of the candle in Pierre's room was still there when I slept again. I woke next morning knowing that nothing would be the same. It would change and go on changing. (Rhys 1966,

27; emphasis mine)

As the constant repetitions of Antoinette's "I am safe" suggests, she, not feeling safe, attempts to give herself an illusion of safety, by taking refuge in the mother nature i. e. "the Edenic imagery of the garden at Coulibri" (Burrows 2004, 42), a state house that tragically burns down by the end of the first part of the novel, hence highlighting the impossibility of all short-term defensive ploys and all promising maternal substitute object-choices (whether human beings or natural landscapes) to bring back the sense of maternal unity and safety she had once felt in the presence of her mother before everything had changed due to the set-on of the latter's melancholia.

Read in such a light, all the events that are recounted in part II and III of the novel, too, can be considered as Antoinette's deployment of the major defenses of decathexis and mirror identification which Green sees as pivotal to every dead-mother scenario. Firstly, right after the metaphorical and later the actual death of her mother, Antoinette is forced to narcissistically retreat to a number of crypt-like spaces or psychic tombs (including the asexualized maternal convent, the sexualized maternal Ganbois, and the asylum-like attic in England) all of which silently-yet-suggestively structure Rhys's novel. Secondly, she opts for living with/and fighting for a husband who not only incarnates the living signifier of her dead mother, but also turns into a reason for the living on of her traumatic experiences of maternal rejection and abandonment—which is, perhaps, why several scenes in part II and III of the novel (namely Antoinette's marriage to the colonial Englishman Mr. Rochester, their habitation in Antoinette's maternal legacy Ganbois, his sexual betrayal of her, her eventual spiral into madness, and her final gesture of setting fire to the English state) simply echo, in an uncanny manner, events of part I (namely, Annette's marriage to the colonial Englishman Mr. Mason, their habitation in Annette's legacy Coulibri, his intellectual and emotional betrayal of her, her eventual madness after the fire at the Coulibri state). In the light of such echoes, one can conclude that it is to safeguard the maternal "cold core" (Green 2001, 187) of her being that Antoinette begins, albeit unconsciously, going through a gradual process of zombification in the second half of the first part of the novel, and not, as many critics have claimed, at the end of the second part. Therefore, although it is true that such a process is aggravated, and even precipitated, via Rochester's paranoid and harmful treatment of her in part II and III of the novel, one is led to read, via Green's lens, the successive events of those two sections of the novel as simply "a reviviscence, and not a reminiscence, an actual traumatic and dramatic repetition" of an unclaimed maternal legacy



of loss (2001, 187). It is this same legacy whose phantom of the massive decathexis and the vast ensuing sense of emptiness and loss of meaning (also referred to as “white depression”) will constantly haunt Antoinette. It is also this same legacy that has led her to look for happiness and possible restitution all in the wrong places.

Christophine, Tia, the lush landscape of Jamaica, Rochester, and even the return to the metropolitan motherland are none capable of either enlivening Antoinette’s dead mother or patching her psychologically unprocessed wound which is organized, above all, around an absent/present maternal void marked simultaneously by a sense of loss and an ambivalent desire. She is, thus, forever doomed to be rotating within the orbit of an ever-present absence experienced as a forever-longed-for but out-of-reach elusive emptiness which is, tragically, the guiding star of all her unfortunate relationships and her final spiral into madness. One, thus, is left to wonder if there had been any alternative path that Antoinette could have taken? And if there truly had been any ray of hope for the amelioration of her condition? Within the boundaries of Rhys’s fictional world, if there had been such a hope, one can conclude, it would have certainly flared up in Antoinette’s relationship with her black cousin Sandy whose unconditional-yet-fleeting love (which, interestingly, makes its warm and protective appearance in all the three parts of the novel) could have prepared the ground for Antoinette’s unburdening herself via the cure talk (i. e. the talk about the fractured history between herself and her mother) which she naively offered to Rochester in part II of the novel. If such an attempt at narrativizing and objectifying the yet-unsymbolized loss around which her white creole melancholiac subjectivity was fostered both on a private and a communal level (i. e. in her relationship with her biological mother as well as her English motherland) had taken place in the presence of an empathic space provided by the loving and protecting Sandy, could there have not been any hope for the rectification of the dead mother wound that Green, at least provisionally, touches on and envisions in his essay?

All this could have certainly happened only if Antoinette had been able to acknowledge and mourn, in one way or another, the pain of the loss of her biological mother as well as her colonial motherland and the privileged position of whiteness associated with it. For Antoinette, however, such a prospective process of mourning does not even unfold as an experience in the first place since till the very end of the novel both whiteness and motherhood become, to borrow a few words from Delphine Munos, “an ambivalence-ridden short hand for loss, departure, deprivation, and separation” (2013, xxv). She, sadly, goes on to

ask for the impossible i. e. she hysterically keeps seeking recognition and validation from a series of dead-mother substitute figures who, being wounded themselves, can neither bestow that recognition upon her nor heal her originary maternal trauma. One, though, is led to believe that if Antoinette had a chance to purge herself of thinking too condescendingly towards blackness, she not only could have bonded more lovingly with her black surrogate mother Christophine, but she could also have been given a chance to heal and grow with her black cousin Sandy. Alas! In Rhys’s world of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette has no way but to literally become Annette—hence to be forever stuck in the throes of the dynamics of a never-ending blank mourning.

### Conclusion

Being framed by Green’s notion of the dead mother complex, the present article has offered a reappraisal, through a psychoanalytic outlook, of the complexity of the broken mother-daughter relationship at play in Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In the process, via an analysis of the indelible mark that is left by the haunting absence/presence of the mother on Antoinette’s erotic cathexes within the (post-) colonial context of Rhys’s fictional universe, it has uncovered how the text intricately signifies the maternal trauma around which the whole plot revolves. Such an uncovering of the complexity of Antoinette’s maternal legacy matters not only because it opens the door for a psychoanalytically-inflected understanding of the private world of characters but also because it facilitates a re-evaluation of the public world to which they are inevitably bound. Making parallels between Antoinette’s personal experience of the emotionally dead and deserting mother (and the psychological decay that follows) and the early-nineteenth-century white creole plantation-owning community’s collective experience of having been suddenly “deserted by the imperial motherland” (Burrow 2004, 26) in post-abolition Jamaica (and the sense of entrapment and psychological tensions that followed), the present study has given voice to the maternal genealogy of loss on both a private and public level.

Being an allegorical (re-)configuration of a kind of maternal traumatism that Green refers to as the dead mother case scenario, Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the present study has claimed, captures a melancholic state of malaise and the stagnation and degeneration that it engenders by probing its root-cause which is a maternal absence/presence—whether it is the absence/presence of Annette, the actual biological mother, or England, the colonial motherland—experienced as an un-introjected sense of loss leading to a sense of personal as well as socio-cultural/histrio-political ensnarement. In following Annette/

Antoinette's mother/daughter dynamics in the light of Green's notion of the dead mother, then, the present study has traced, along with the workings of the Freudian notion of the repetition compulsion, a whole set of short-term and long-term defenses (namely, a radical decaethesis, a mirror-identification with the maternal void, and a defensive [de-]sexualization) often employed in times, to use a Shakespearean metaphor referred to by Vijay Mishra, of being "untimely ripped" from "the mother's womb" (2007, 119)—an enforced and unprepared-for severance accompanied by catastrophic changes and traumatizing effects. Such a reading has not only opened up a space for discussing the prominent role of the trope of motherhood in (post-) colonial settings/projects on both individual and collective levels, but it has also drawn attention to Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a literary grounding for Green's notion of dead mother complex, the psychological gap it causes, and the psychodynamics of the blank mourning it gives rise to. After all, as Green has also divulged, "the gap is the only real thing" (1997, 274).

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