



THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN JEAN RHY'S "THE DAY THEY BURNED THE BOOKS"

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Abstract:“The Day They Burned the Books” by Jean Rhys provides a sophisticated examination of resistance and identity creation in a colonial setting. The way that Rhys creates her characters’ identities is examined in this essay, especially in light of the intricate power relationships between race and class in the Caribbean. The investigation highlights the subtle and overt ways people negotiate their identities and subvert the prevailing colonial narratives by looking at the experiences of both adults and children. This study demonstrates how seemingly inconsequential deeds and silences may be effective forms of resistance against the repressive powers of colonialism through attentive readings of major passages.” Historical-comparative method , biological and socio-cultural methods have been used in the research.

Key words: Identity formation, resistance, colonialism, post colonialism, race, class, power dynamics

Introduction

“The Day They Burned the Books” by Jean Rhys skillfully blends deep examinations of identity and resistance in a colonial context with the seemingly ordinary observations of infancy. In order to reveal the nuanced yet potent ways in which children subvert the repressive power systems of the adult world, this article explores a crucial section and examines how Rhys crafts the experiences of the characters. The children’s opposition is shown in their humorous acts of subversion rather than their overt disobedience, underscoring the difficulties of resistance to colonial domination.¹

This article will analyze how Rhys uses contrasting character portrayals, symbolic details, and the complex dynamics of childhood relationships to highlight the interplay between identity formation and the various forms of resistance in a colonial setting through a close reading of the chosen passage. In order to demonstrate how seemingly inconsequential acts and silent gestures may become powerful instruments for challenging the status quo, the analysis will concentrate on the divergent behaviors of the adults, especially Mrs. Sawyer, and the children, especially Eddie. The passage’s development of the main themes of rebellion, social hierarchy, and the lasting resilience of childhood in the face of colonialism will be our final discussion point.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The narrative explores the narrator’s perceptions on the adults in their lives, especially Mrs. Sawyer and Eddie’s parents, as well as the relationship between the kids. Adults in contrast: The children’s lighthearted

¹ Jeffress, David. “Postcolonial resistance: Culture, liberation and transformation.” Toronto UP, 2008 p.4.

disobedience is contrasted with Mrs. Sawyer's account of her distaste for the books. This demonstrates the disparities in attitudes and generations. The thorough explanation of Mrs. Sawyer's behavior throughout the book selection highlights her tendency toward judgment and possible cruelty. The narrator's recognition of her "hate" points to a sophisticated assessment of adult conduct. This discrepancy is highlighted by the contrast with the kids' subversive yet seemingly inconsequential behaviors.

Eddie's Character: Although his physical attributes highlight how much he resembles his father, Eddie acts boldly and independently. He differs from the grownups and even the narrator in that he is vivacious and resistant to heat. His resistance to the terrible environment—or possibly the emotional climate he finds himself in—is highlighted by the details of his capacity to withstand heat, which go beyond simple physical descriptions.

The "Home" Issue: Eddie's quiet demeanor when others discuss "home" (England) reveals the complexity of their colonial experience. The narrator's own doubts, infected by Eddie's quietness, suggest a shared skepticism about the idealized image of "home," possibly indicating a disconnect from a distant homeland or questioning the colonial ideal.

Playful Rebellion and Its Consequences: The children's wish to escape the harsh reality and construct their own story is demonstrated by the game in which they pretend to be an Arab chieftain and dying of thirst, which reinforces the earlier playful defiance. In contrast to the more forceful action of choosing a book, the comprehensive description of drinking slowly emphasizes the sensual and thoughtful experience, almost a ritualistic moment.

Mrs. Sawyer's Actions and Their Significance: The impression of a patriarchal power structure at work is further supported by the description of Mrs. Sawyer's activities, which include throwing away books according to the gender of the authors and her severe manner. Her behavior reflects her own biases and the ideals she upholds, and it goes beyond simply throwing away books. A critical perspective on adult behavior is emphasized by the narrator's observation.

Eddie's Relationship with the Narrator: Eddie and the narrator's relationship is strengthened in the final moment beneath the mango tree. Their childlike vow of marriage and combined tears demonstrate the emotional closeness that their common experience of rebellion has engendered. The seemingly unimportant element that highlights the depth of their feelings is the way the tears flow like water from a dripstone.

The main theme is the passage Eddie's reticent demeanor when others discuss "home" (England) reveals the complexity of their colonial past. The narrator's personal reservations, tainted by Eddie's silence, point to a common mistrust of the romanticized concept of "home," which may be a sign of a lack of connection to a faraway country or a concern about the colonial ideal.

Themes of disobedience, social hierarchy, and the difficulties of infancy in a colonial setting are all extensively explored in Sage. The children's behaviors show a subtle but potent opposition to the adult world, which is portrayed as judgmental and harsh. The children's resilience and fragility are emphasized by the physical and emotional details. Eddie and Mrs. Sawyer's disparate descriptions highlight the various ways people interact with their surroundings.

A setting in a room, probably a library or study, is described in this section. It then switches to a conversation between kids and an adult, which ends with a revolt and its fallout. There are a number of essential components:

Setting the Scene: The space is depicted as being fairly weakly lighted in the first description, with the light stepping into "brown-green water." According to Jean Rhys, the room's furnishings—a desk, a rocking chair, and bookshelves—indicate that it is a place for reading and studying. The contrast with the "beautiful" outside world "dark blue sky, mango tree" emphasizes the confinement and perhaps the stuffiness of the indoor space.

Confrontation with Mrs. Sawyer: There is an imbalance of power in the exchange with Mrs. Sawyer. This relationship is highlighted by Eddie's disobedience, saying, "No, not that one," and Mrs. Sawyer's contemptuous reaction, saying, "When Eddie said "No," she did not even glance at him." ³The emotional

2 Rhys Jean "The Day They Burned the Books." "The Complete Short Stories of Jean Rhys, Tigers are Better-Looking", Penguin, 1972, pp. 38.

3 Rhys Jean "The Day They Burned the Books." "The Complete Short Stories of Jean Rhys,

depth of their dispute is demonstrated by his shout, “Now I've got to hate you too,” and her following laughter. Mrs. Sawyer appears to have purposefully destroyed or removed the books by “pulling all the books out... piling them into two heaps”.⁴

The Children's Rebellion: Eddie rebels against Mrs. Sawyer's conduct, and Mildred and the narrator join him, implying a common sense of unfairness or disobedience. An escape from the oppressive environment is implied by the description of their snatching books and then taking off for the garden.

worry and Repercussions: The kids' worry of other kids making fun of them shows the social limitations they live under. Eddie's fear that Mrs. Sawyer may lie to his mother highlights the possible consequences of their behavior. The disparity in authority between adults and children is further highlighted by this worry.

Racial Undertones: Racial dynamics are gently introduced by bringing up the “black children's ridicule.” This is further shown by the discussion that follows on whether someone is “white.” The father's answer points to a nuanced and perhaps pessimistic understanding of racial identity in their culture.

Emotional Bond and Conclusion: The narrator and Eddie develop a closer bond as a result of their shared experience of rebellion, which sets up the moving moment beneath the mango tree. The children's weeping and their mutual desire to get married point to a deep emotional bond that results from their shared sin. The conclusion emphasizes the book taken and the excitement of reading it, implying that this action is essential to their growth.

Overall Theme: In a potentially colonial or post-colonial setting, this piece examines themes of power relations, rebellion, childhood friendship, and the intricate social institutions that affect kids. In the face of adult control, taking the books turns into a potent symbol of bonding and resistance. Both happiness and fear for the future are hinted at in the enigmatic ending. This passage from Jean Rhys's “The Day They Burned the Books” provides a rich environment for examining how resistance and identity are constructed, especially in light of colonialism and racial dynamics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eddie's Fragile Identity: Eddie represents a marginalized identity and is depicted as being weak and unwell. His weakness is further highlighted by the fact that he will soon die (“not long for this world's”).⁵ The strong identities of people in positions of authority stand in stark contrast to this.

Mr. Sawyer's Ambiguous Identity: Mr. Sawyer's profession and social status are purposefully left open-ended, as evidenced by the frequent denials that He wasn't a planter. He was anything but a gentleman. His outsider position and inability to fit into the preexisting colonial system are highlighted by this ambiguity. This disengagement and rebellion of colonial aesthetics is further highlighted by his rejection of the Caribbean and his contempt for the moon, which was frequently glorified by the colonial elite. His identification is further complicated by his marriage to a “coloured woman” inside the strict social rules of colonial context.

Mrs. Sawyer's oppressed Identity: Mr. Sawyer's mistreatment and racial epithets, such as “Look at the nigger showing off” and “damned, long-eyed, gloomy half-caste,” help to establish Mrs. Sawyer's identity. She was helpless under the colonial system, as evidenced by her silence in the face of this violence. Her attempt to “pretend that it was all part of the joke” when she laughed displays a sophisticated coping and survival strategy—a kind of resistance through passivity. The damaging impacts of colonialism and racial injustice on her life are reflected in her once-beautiful but now fading visage. Her covert, obedient act of saving her husband's hair points to a covert kind of resistance and agency.

Mildred's Agency: As a servant, Mildred possesses a distinct form of marginalized identity. She is able to witness and document the injustices occurring in the Sawyer household because of her role. As a kind of

Tigers are Better-Looking”, Penguin, 1972, pp. 38

4 Rhys Jean “The Day They Burned the Books.” “The Complete Short Stories of Jean Rhys, Tigers are Better-Looking”, Penguin, 1972, pp. 37-43.

1. 5 Rhys Jean “The Day They Burned the Books.” “The Complete Short Stories of Jean Rhys, Tigers are Better-Looking”, Penguin, 1972, p.40

obeah, her covert decision to save Mr. Sawyer's hair points to a covert power dynamic and a silent act of resistance.

The Identity of the Narrators in Transition: The narrator's identity is always changing. They appear to be deeply involved with colonial dynamics based on their contacts with Eddie and the Sawyers. It's also noteworthy how they responded to Eddie's rejection of "English" items. The narrator's ongoing process of self-discovery in the face of colonial forces is reflected in their initial enthusiasm with and then disillusionment with the French novel.

Mrs. Sawyer demonstrates resistance by remaining silent and forcing herself to laugh despite her husband's mistreatment. Through this passivity, her internalized strength is alluded to, implying a sophisticated survival tactic in a harsh setting. A more overt act of rebellion is the subtle act of saving the hair.

Eddie's Rejection of Colonial Values: Eddie's rejection of his father's romanticized view of England and his distaste for daffodils 6, which are emblems of Englishness, point to a subtle kind of resistance against colonial imposition. It is important that he rebelled silently against his father's beliefs.

The Act of Stealing Books: The story's latter events, in which books are taken, might be seen as a symbolic act of agency and knowledge reclaiming against the status quo.

The Influence of Narrative and Memory: The story itself serves as a kind of defiance. The narrator is actively opposing the power systems that have influenced their lives by sharing their stories. The story turns into a means of challenging colonial narratives and reexamining them. 7

The intricacies of resistance and identity creation in a colonial context are expertly portrayed in this excerpt. The characters' deeds and reactions reveal the widespread impacts of colonial power and racial prejudice while also emphasizing the covert and overt ways people confront oppression and negotiate their identities. The seemingly minor details—a dismissive comment, a forced laugh, the saving of a strand of hair—become powerful symbols of resistance, suggesting that resistance can manifest in numerous ways, even within the constraints of a subjugated identity.

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3. Rhys Jean "The Day They Burned the Books." "The Complete Short Stories of Jean Rhys, Tigers are Better-Looking", Penguin, 1972, pp. 37-43.
4. Thomas F. Staley. "A critical study of Jean Rhys" Palgrave Macmillan London, pp.84-99.

6Rhys Jean "The Day They Burned the Books." "The Complete Short Stories of Jean Rhys, Tigers are Better-Looking", Penguin, 1972, pp. 37-43.

7 Thomas F. Staley. "A critical study of Jean Rhys" Palgrave Macmillan London, p.85