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 **"Women Must Have Spunks": Jean Rhys's West Indian
Outcasts**

Lucy Wilson

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**"Women Must Have Spunks":
Jean Rhys's West Indian Outcasts**

Lucy Wilson (bio)

Since Wally Look Lai Described *Wide Sargasso Sea* as "one of the genuine masterpieces of West Indian fiction" (17), quite a number of critics have focused on the Caribbean aspects of that novel, as well as *Voyage in the Dark* and several of Rhys's short stories. Louis James (111) and Mary Lou Emery (421), for example, have shown that Rhys's Caribbean concerns situate the intensely personal vision of her fiction within a much larger historical context. More specifically, Nancy Fulton has pointed to the parallels between black and white characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (344). Similarly, Helen Tiffin explains that Antoinette's suffering and enslavement by Edward Rochester reinforce her identification with the black Creole community (339), and Antoinette's ambiguous relationship with blacks has been explored by Charlotte Bruner as well (237).

Despite considerable critical attention to Jean Rhys's West Indian themes and characters, however, there has been relatively little focus on the black characters themselves. This is a significant oversight because two black West Indian characters—Selina Davis in "Let Them Call It Jazz" and Christophine Dubois, Antoinette's former nanny and only friend in *Wide Sargasso Sea*—are unique **[End Page 439]** among Rhys's female characters. The "typical" Rhys protagonist, such as Anna Morgan or Antoinette Rochester, is a social outcast cut off from meaningful contact with other human beings. Abandoned but not free, she is powerless to alter her condition. Powerlessness, in fact, intensifies the misery of the social outcast for it cuts her off from the sources of pleasure, knowledge, and discourse that, according to Michel Foucault, are induced by the productive nature of power in society ("Truth and Power" 61).

But unlike Rhys's white protagonists, Selina and Christophine seem to thrive on adversity and to draw strength from their opposition to the prevailing power structures. Although no more a part of mainstream society than Anna or Antoinette, Selina and Christophine draw upon inner resources and possess a kind of resiliency that their white West Indian counterparts lack. Furthermore, their insights into the uses and abuses of power in their respective societies reveal the full scope of Rhys's social vision as well as her commitment to truth, which places her at odds with

centuries of erroneous beliefs and practices initiated and perpetuated in the interests of successive power groups.

Anna Morgan, the actress-turned-prostitute in *Voyage in the Dark*, and Antoinette-Bertha Rochester, the Creole heiress of *Wide Sargasso Sea* who becomes the mad prisoner of Thornfield Hall, are both West Indian by birth and victims by nature. Living in and near London in the 1930s and touring with a third-rate theatrical group, Anna falls prey to the machinations of a debonair insurance man, Walter Jeffries. Anna justifies her acceptance of money in exchange for sex on the grounds that she will "do anything for good clothes. Anything—anything for clothes" (22). This may seem callous, but the conditions of Anna's life—her youth and the fact that she is orphaned, exiled, alone in a foreign land without financial or emotional support—alleviate the crassness of her materialistic aims. "In effect," explains Arnold Davidson, "Rhys uses her protagonist's naiveté as a lever to move the reader to unlikely judgments—judgments that do not simply reiterate the dictates of the society" (56). The structural device that reinforces Anna's naiveté and the reader's predisposition to be sympathetic is the juxtaposition of Anna's bleak, cold, English present with flashbacks to her sunny, warm, West Indian girlhood. It is in these memories that Anna comes closest to her nineteenth-century counterpart, Antoinette (nee Cosway) Mason Rochester.

For both Anna and Antoinette, the warmth and vibrant energy of the West Indies is epitomized in the lives of the black inhabitants of the islands. As a child, Anna spent many hours listening to Francine, the black cook, tell stories. Anna claims: **[End Page 440]**

I wanted to be black. I always wanted to be black. I was happy because Francine was there, and I watched her hand waving the fan backwards and forwards and the...

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2715 North Charles Street
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[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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