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Identity and Power: A Study of Thing-Narrative in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea

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Abstract. As the prequel to the "madwoman" Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre, *Wide Sargasso Sea* responds to the obscured lived experiences of the colonized female figure in the canonical text with Antoinette's life tragectory, revealing women's tragic plight caught in the intertwining of colonial power, patriarchal order, and identity crisis. The novel invests material things like plants, costumes, letters, and mirrors with significant narrative functions, rendering them crucial mediators of identity construction, power dynamics and subjective alienation. Drawing on theories of Tang Weisheng's study on narrative of thingness, this paper explores how these things participate in the shaping of the protagonist's fate and the evolution of power relations. The deprivation of things first undermines Antoinette's ties to her homeland, memory and the self, which destabilizes her identity and precipitates the progressive retreat of subject's agency. Subsequently, the displacement of things reconstructs Antoinette's living environment, reinforcing the hegemonic position of colonial and patriarchal power within the process of identity alienation, thereby continuously eroding her subjectivity. The confinement of things ultimately disciplines both body and psyche through completely sealing off Antoinette's identity and annihilating her fundamental agency, consequently driving her toward the tragic ending of self-destruction. By analyzing the narrative agency of material things in the text, this paper aims to enrich existing research on *Wide Sargasso Sea* and to offer useful insights into the predicaments of identity crisis, power imbalance and mental fetter in the human condition.

Keywords: Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, thing-narrative, identity, power

1. Introduction

As the last full-length novel of Jean Rhys in her lifetime, *Wide Sargasso Sea* represents the highest achievement of her literary career. It won the Royal Society of Literature Award and the W.H. Smith Literary Award, and was included in the list of the 100 greatest English novels of the 20th century. The work restores Bertha Mason, the "madwoman" in *Jane Eyre*, as Antoinette, a Creole girl, and traces her life course: excluded by locals due to her special identity, oppressed and imprisoned in the attic by her husband, gradually losing her original identity and power, and finally suffering a mental breakdown. Narrated from a shifting first-person perspective and integrating multiple dimensions such as colonialism, gender and identity, the work is of great significance to contemporary literary studies.

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At present, academic research on *Wide Sargasso Sea* mostly focuses on narrative perspective, intertextuality, feminist deconstruction and post-colonialism. Among them, narrative studies center on polyphony, multiple personae and discursive power. For example, Zhang Deming applies Bakhtin's polyphony theory, Lacan's mirror stage theory and post-colonial counter-discourse theory to analyze the novel's alternating narrative structure of multiple first-person perspectives and the mirror contrast of dual viewpoints, exposing the tearing of colonial identity and reconstructing the narrative discourse power of Creoles [1]. Intertextual comparisons highlight the deconstruction and supplementation of *Jane Eyre* by the work. For instance, Li Yuanyuan analyzes the differences in female narrative perspectives and the reshaping of protagonist images between the two works, and compares the implicit imperial ideology in *Jane Eyre* with Rhys's critical perspective, arguing that Rhys extends feminism to the racial dimension and endows female literature with new connotations [2]. Most feminist studies analyze the dual oppression of patriarchy and colonialism. For example, Li Yingzi uses post-colonial feminism to analyze Rochester's marital acts equivalent to colonial plunder and Antoinette's arson resistance as a woman [3]. Post-colonial perspectives mostly focus on the unrecognized identity of Creoles and the loss of their homeland. For example, Zhu Feng analyzes the double exclusion of Creoles by Black people in the colonies and White people from the metropolitan country, reflecting the dilemma of Creoles surviving in the cracks of the colonial environment [4].

It can be seen that literary inquiries into *Wide Sargasso Sea* are relatively abundant, but most focus on interpersonal relationships, social environment and other aspects, treating material things only as static and auxiliary tools and ignoring the active role of things in narration. Therefore, this paper conducts research centered on the theory of thing-narrative, regarding the material things in the work as independent narrative subjects, so as to provide an innovative path for interpreting the life of the protagonist Antoinette.

In recent years, driven by post-humanism and anti-anthropocentrism, the "material turn" has emerged in the humanities, mainly including Bill Brown's thing theory, speculative realism and new materialism. On this basis, Tang Weisheng draws on the traditional Chinese thought of "looking for thingness in things" and establishes a theoretical framework for the study of narrative of thingness. He divides thing-narrative into three categories: "things functioning as symbols", "things as agents of action", and "things in their ontological essence", classifies the latter two as "thing-nature narrative", and proposes four strategies: "infinitely receding things", "equality of all things", "a world without humans" and "vital things". He expands traditional narrative theory, advocates the agency and subjectivity of things participating in narrative construction, and carries out critical practice through Chinese and foreign texts, providing references for how narrative things generate meaning [5]. These theories aim to break through the limitation of neglecting material objects, reshape the relationship between humans and things, and open up new dimensions for literary research.

Different from traditional narrative theories that only regard material things as static symbolic signs, "things as agents of action" in thing-nature narrative emphasize that material things can actively intervene in narration and affect identity construction, interpersonal relationships, power operation and other aspects. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the gradual disintegration of the protagonist's identity and the constant imbalance of power are realized not only through interpersonal oppression in the colonial environment and marital discipline, but also through the role of various "things as agents of action". From the destruction of things in the Caribbean homeland to the forced replacement of various things after marriage, and then to the things representing original identity and power being completely locked in the attic, a series of material changes run through Antoinette's

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whole life and push her fate to an irreversible ending. Therefore, drawing on the above theories, this paper explores how things in the work actively participate in constructing the protagonist's tragic fate from three levels: deprivation of things, displacement of things and confinement of things.

2. Deprivation of things: identity shaking and power retreat

"Considering that all things are actors, we must admit that any phenomenon is not just the result of human action, but the result of the collaboration of multiple actors including humans. This idea allows us to go beyond humans and analyze the role of things [5]." From the perspective of thing-narrative, things are not simply passive props, but have narrative agency just like humans and participate in shaping narrative outcomes. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's tragic fate begins with the deprivation of a series of "things as agents of action" that represent identity and power. This makes Antoinette's self-perception begin to waver, causes her to gradually lose power under colonial rule and in marriage, and foreshadows her eventual imprisonment and complete alienation.

2.1. Self-cognition ambiguity

As the space of Antoinette's childhood activities, Coulibri Estate carries two completely different systems of things. The Caribbean plants in the garden bear the wildness of native nature and retain their original characteristics amid colonial invasion. They are core things that carry Antoinette's sense of belonging and shape her self-cognition. After her British stepfather arrives, new Western-style furniture and English paintings are forcibly embedded in the native system. Native things endow her with a wild and free life foundation, while foreign things instill in her an English female model that is separated from her native identity. For example, the painting *The Miller's Daughter*, which depicts a lovely and pure English girl, makes Antoinette yearn for it. The entanglement of these two systems traps Antoinette in the middle of a dual identity pull, and she can never have a complete and pure sense of self-belonging. When Black people's anger over racial conflict engulfs the entire estate, all things bearing native identity and memory are burned to ashes, and the material foundation supporting Antoinette's identity begins to shake.

The house was burning, the yellow-red sky was like sunset and I knew that I would never see Coulibri again. Nothing would be left, the golden ferns and the silver ferns, the orchids, the ginger lilies and the roses, the rocking-chairs and the blue sofa, the jasmine and the honeysuckle, and the picture of the Miller's Daughter [6].

Antoinette once compared the beautiful garden at home to the Garden of Eden [6]. Later, after slavery was abolished, the garden also became desolate, and she even "did not remember the place when it was prosperous [6]". Finally, the estate is burned down, the plants in the garden cease to exist, and Antoinette completely loses the spiritual home that sheltered her soul in her memory. Furniture and paintings, as foreign things with colonial attributes, both participate in the construction of Antoinette's identity and promote its disintegration. As a "white cockroach" in the eyes of Caribbean Black people and a "white nigger" in the eyes of pure White people, Antoinette has suffered from identity disorder since childhood [7]. Therefore, European things give her a temporary and illusory sense of white belonging and participate in constructing her split dual identity. But this material system, which is completely contrary to her native identity, can never be compatible with her true self. Eventually, the fire burns down these foreign things, and the false identity collapses completely.

In the process of gazing at its own image in the mirror, an infant gradually recognizes that the image is itself, thus establishing self-identity. Lacan calls this stage the "mirror stage" [8]. People

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can establish their self-image through the reflection in the mirror. Therefore, the mirror in the work also actively participates in the construction of Antoinette's identity, and the absence of a mirror leads to the shaking of her identity. After the estate is burned down, Antoinette goes to a convent where there are no mirrors, and she can only look at her face in a bucket of water. When she is imprisoned in the attic by Rochester, there is not even a surface of water where she can see herself. "There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself [6]." Without the reference of mirror image, Antoinette's way of confirming herself is completely deprived, and her cognition of the ego begins to disintegrate.

The destruction of things in her homeland not only takes away the illusory English self, but also severs native memory, and the dual identity dissolves together. Moreover, the deprivation of the mirror breaks the possibility for Antoinette to know and find herself, blurs her self-cognition, and pre-constructs the narrative tone of the protagonist's tragic fate.

2.2. Stripping of basic power

After marriage, the entire inheritance of 30,000 pounds that Antoinette inherits from her stepfather Mason falls into Rochester's hands. This inheritance is the material foundation of all power that Antoinette possesses. It can maintain a relatively equal status between the two in marriage, and also gives Antoinette the capital to leave—she can return to Jamaica to continue her life with the money after finding the marriage unhappy. Aunt Cora once tried to help Antoinette keep part of the inheritance:

"It's shameful. You are handing over everything the child owns to a perfect stranger.… She should be protected, legally. A settlement can be arranged and it should be arranged. That was his intention [6]."

At that time, Britain implemented the doctrine of coverture: unless a prenuptial agreement was signed, all the wife's real property income and personal property belonged to the husband after marriage. Aunt Cora wanted to agree on a property settlement to ensure Antoinette's property security, but her stepbrother Richard refused to implement this guarantee, and the entire inheritance was then possessed by Rochester. The deprivation of property means that Antoinette loses the material basis for independent survival and has to depend on Rochester. This makes her lose the autonomy of survival, and her power in marriage begins to decline.

Letters are another object that plays an important role in the process of Antoinette's power stripping. They are not simply media for transmitting information, but "non-human actors" with narrative agency, and the transfer of their control constitutes a field of power struggle. Words are attached to the material carrier of letters, endowing those who possess the physical letters with the power to define the meaning of the text. After marriage, Daniel writes to Rochester, saying that Antoinette's "family has a history of madness [6]", sowing discord between the two and planting the seed of suspicion in his heart. Rochester also writes to Sheriff Fraser to inquire about obeah witchcraft, and the reply states that Christophine is a "most dangerous person [6]", which prompts Rochester to drive her out of the house. By then, the only person Antoinette can trust is gone. The circulation of letters is gradually controlled by Rochester, while Antoinette's right to speak is stripped away. She can neither send nor receive letters freely, nor can she defend herself against the stigma brought by letters. She can only passively bear the destruction brought by others' letters, which makes her lose the channels to seek help from outside and defend herself, and falls into a state of isolation and helplessness.

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The plunder of inheritance deprives Antoinette of economic freedom, while letters deprive her of the power to speak and seek help spiritually. The two types of "things as agents of action" echo each other, jointly revealing the dissolution of colonial women's power through the control of key materials in the oppressive system intertwined with colonialism and patriarchy, and laying the foundation for further power displacement and confinement.

3. Displacement of things: identity deconstruction and power subversion

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, many things around Antoinette are gradually replaced later. This not only constitutes the change of environment, but also participates in the completion of implicit violent acts such as colonial oppression and marital discipline. It is the second factor that pushes Antoinette's fate to tragedy after the deprivation of things. If the deprivation of things violently cuts off the connection between Antoinette and her native identity and basic power, then the displacement of things completes the reshaping of her individual identity and the subversion of gender power relations in a more gentle, hidden and gradual way. "Unfortunately, in the past we usually regarded things only as the background of human activities, so we did not pay much attention to deeply excavating the meaning of things and their narrative value. … The author proposes three modes of thing-narrative and its research: … Second, "things as agents of action", exploring how things in narration act on human activities as active participants (rather than just as the background of human activities) and promote the narrative process… [5]".

3.1. Generation of alienated identity

"Philosophically speaking, identity is sameness. Identity recognition is to find the foundation of individual existence, that is, the reason why 'I' am 'I' [1]." This foundation of existence does not only exist in the inner world of people, but is also reflected in the cultural environment and material life of the individual. Therefore, the construction of identity cannot be separated from native culture, living habits, spiritual memory and other aspects, and various things closely related to daily life are the most intuitive "things as agents of action" that shape individual identity. In the work, after Antoinette gets married, a displacement of daily things unfolds quietly. They gradually dissolve Antoinette's native identity and turn her into a "madwoman" drifting between two cultures with split self-cognition.

Costumes are the external embodiment of identity characteristics and aesthetic concepts, bearing the growth environment and cultural belonging of the individual. When Antoinette and Rochester are newly married, she also has some native costumes, such as the wreaths of frangipani on the bed [6], which is a local custom to wear. But Rochester says it "hardly suits my handsome face [6]", and steps on the wreath when he leaves [6]. Later, Antoinette puts on the white dress that Rochester "had admired [6]". Finally, when she is imprisoned in the attic, all the costumes representing her native identity become English-style clothes like the "grey wrapper [6]". Antoinette has lived on the land of Jamaica in the Caribbean for a long time, and costumes with tropical customs and local characteristics intuitively shape her native identity. After marriage, under Rochester's intervention, those vivid and bright costumes are replaced with plain-colored clothes with strong English characteristics. This seemingly simple change of costumes actually builds a bridge from the dissolution of native identity to the generation of alienated identity. Plain-colored clothes represent the introverted and obedient traits of English women, and are the materialized expression of the oppression and discipline of British colonial civilization, which is completely different from the warm, unrestrained Caribbean customs. The displacement of costumes forces Antoinette into the

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behavioral norm system of English women, forcing her to strip off her native identity with regional cultural characteristics, so as to meet the aesthetic standards of British colonists.

In addition to costumes, furniture, as core things deeply involved in daily life and bearing specific regional cultural characteristics and living habits, is also a "thing as agents of action" that can actively affect people's identity cognition and mental state. Its replacement further accelerates the demise of Antoinette's native identity and the formation of her alienated identity. During the honeymoon at Granbois, the estate is full of various native furniture. There are "small palm-leaf fan coloured blue and red at the edges [6]", "a press made of some beautiful wood [6]" Rochester does not recognize, "a crude bookshelf made of three shingles [6]"… These pieces of furniture, together with some other Western-style furniture, form a relatively harmonious material system, carrying Antoinette's regional belonging and identity support. When she is imprisoned in Thornfield, exquisite and cold Western-style furniture completely replaces native furniture, so that Antoinette can no longer gain a sense of homeland belonging and self-identity from daily things, and loses the material field that carries her self-identity. Antoinette is gradually integrated into the colonial system and develops an oppressed and disciplined alienated identity.

The replacement of old and new "things as agents of action" is not only a change in dress and living habits, but also a systematic dissolution of native identity by colonial culture. This displacement of things strips away Antoinette's native cultural identity layer by layer, completing the identity alienation from "Antoinette" to "Bertha".

3.2. Reconstruction of power relations

While participating in identity construction, things also intervene in the power game in marriage and gradually complete the reconstruction of marital power relations. After Coulibri Estate is destroyed, Antoinette falls seriously ill, and Christophine gives her arrowroot [6] to induce sweating and reduce fever. After Daniel's letter makes Rochester begin to estrange Antoinette and even torment her mentally through infidelity, Christophine uses thick soup, milk and fruit [6] to help Antoinette recuperate her body so that she can sleep peacefully. These are the power supports for Antoinette to control her own body and mind and achieve spiritual self-salvation. On the way Antoinette is forcibly taken to Thornfield by Rochester, a waiter gives her an unknown medicine, saying "drink this and you will sleep [6]". Unlike the things previously taken to treat Antoinette, this unknown medicine is used to force her to sleep to prevent her from resisting, and is a tool for Rochester to paralyze, suppress and domesticate her. The displacement of calming things directly makes Antoinette lose the power to treat and regulate her body and mind, leaving her mental state completely under Rochester's control, and Rochester becomes the dominant figure in the marriage relationship.

Rum is a characteristic wine native to the Caribbean region, with strong native cultural characteristics. It is closely connected to Antoinette's process of self-salvation and can intervene in the development of marital power relations by affecting her mental state and behavior. After marriage, drinking becomes an important way for Antoinette to relieve marital depression and soothe her loneliness. Alcohol gives Antoinette the strength to resist patriarchal and colonial discipline and balances gender power in marriage, but it also becomes one of the reasons for Rochester to slander her and label her as a "madwoman". On the journey to Thornfield, rum has been replaced by other food, and Antoinette does not drink rum again during the subsequent imprisonment. She can only sneak a taste from Grace Poole's bottle when the maid is asleep [6]. The displacement of wine cuts off Antoinette's channel of spiritual catharsis, making her a passive

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dependent in the marriage relationship. The original power relationship is completely subverted, forming a power pattern dominated unilaterally by Rochester.

The implicit way of thing displacement gradually disintegrates Antoinette's spiritual support, turning her from a "mistress" on Caribbean land with potential advantages into a "madwoman" who can only depend on Rochester under suppression and control. Rochester, on the other hand, shakes off his relatively weak position as an "outsider" and becomes the one in control of power in the gender relationship.

4. Confinement of things: identity sealing and power shackles

"Non-humans should be given 'a more open subjectivity than traditional natural causality [9]', so that humans and non-humans together form a network of actors that jointly bear responsibility for social change, thus denying that humans are the only or most important subject of social change [5]." Things are not passive backdrops, but important forces involved in constructing character identity, adjusting power relations and shaping character fate. As non-human actors, various things in the work, through being deprived and displaced, dismantle Antoinette's original material foundation, promote her to become the disadvantaged party in marriage, and initially form the alienated identity of "Bertha". In the end, the things that enter the estate with Antoinette are confined, completely sealing her native ego and disintegrating all her subjective power, and the tragedy of fate is thus irreversible.

4.1. Complete concealment of the ego

In a room of Thornfield Hall, there hangs a tapestry. There is a figure on the tapestry, and Antoinette mistakes her for her mother. "The dressing-room is very small, the room next to this one is hung with tapestry. Looking at the tapestry one day I recognized my mother dressed in an evening gown but with bare feet. She looked away from me, over my head just as she used to do [6]." This misperception is the mental trauma left by long-term deprivation and displacement of things. After Coulibri Estate is burned down, Antoinette is separated from her mother, and things carrying family memories gradually disappear. Long-term isolation and loneliness plunge her into a state of memory blankness. The tapestry, as an "actor" intervening in this state, with its soft and elegant female image, makes her involuntarily project the remaining and vague impression of her mother in her heart onto it. Later, it is mentioned that "the door of the tapestry room is kept locked [6]". "'Things' can also become a certain cultural symbol, a certain subject or ontology, helping us construct or deconstruct our own cultural identity [10]." The tapestry is a false spiritual bond for Antoinette to connect with her relatives and homeland in the strange estate, and an important carrier to dispel loneliness, repose longing and maintain self-cognition in adversity. Its confinement makes it difficult for her to even obtain this illusory salvation. This blocks Antoinette's connection with native warmth and the emotional foundation supporting her ego identity, making her cultural identity completely hidden under the dual oppression of patriarchy and colonial system.

Also confined is the red dress that Antoinette likes. Unlike the plain and gentle English-style dresses after marriage, this dress has "the color of fire, the color of sunset, the color of flamboyant trees [6]". This strong red represents the warm and unrestrained local customs of the Caribbean, and is the expression of Antoinette's wild, vivid and unrestrained self. Under the oppression of marriage and the discipline of the colonial system, the red dress is the spiritual support for Antoinette to retain her ego identity, and also the last "non-human actor" that helps her stick to herself and resist oppression. But Rochester thinks wearing this dress makes her "look intemperate and unchaste [6]",

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so it is locked in the wardrobe after entering the estate, out of Antoinette's sight and reach, and only the maid's key can take it out. The confinement of the red dress completely separates Antoinette from the things representing her native identity, permanently hiding her true self and completing the final confinement of her ego identity.

The blockade of "things as agents of action" such as the red dress and the tapestry causes Antoinette to be completely disconnected from her native traits and emotional memories, reducing her to an empty individual with cognitive disorder, broken identity and lost personality, and completing the fall from personality alienation to ego extinction.

4.2. Complete fall of power

During her imprisonment, Antoinette secretly writes a letter to her stepbrother Richard, wanting him to take her away from the estate, but the letter is eventually found.

"I know him," I said, and jumped out of bed. "It's all here, it's all here, but I hid it from your beastly eyes as I hide everything. But where is it? Where did I hide it? The sole of my shoes? Underneath the mattress? On top of the press? In the pocket of my red dress? Where, where is this letter? It was short because I remembered that Richard did not like long letters. Dear Richard please take me away from this place where I am dying because it is so cold and dark [6]."

Antoinette places all her hope of help on this letter, and deliberately caters to Richard's preference for reading by not writing a long letter. But in the prison room under all-day surveillance, the letter can hardly escape search, and is eventually confined forever in the attic, unable to be delivered successfully. Letters are the core "non-human actors" that help Antoinette pour out her feelings, seek help and speak out, and are her only channel of external communication in desperate situations. But these letters carrying all her appeals are hidden, meaning that her hope of seeking help from outside and expressing herself is shattered. She has to be trapped in the attic, accept the control of the patriarchal and colonial system, and her right to personal freedom and right to speak are completely confined.

During Richard's visit to Antoinette at Thornfield, the two have an argument, and Antoinette lunges at him with a knife, because Richard says "I cannot interfere legally between yourself and your husband [6]". He has no intention of rescuing Antoinette at all, and regards all the exploitation she has suffered after marriage as a matter of course, which infuriates Antoinette. As a things as agents of action with aggressiveness and destructiveness, the knife is the only tool that can help Antoinette break the confinement and resist oppression. To get this knife, she trades "the locket round her neck with a woman who drives a cart and horse [6]". It goes without saying how important the knife is, since Antoinette is willing to hand over one of the few possessions she has. However, the failure of the attack during the argument with Richard leads to the knife being taken under control. Without the physical tool of resistance, Antoinette's right to fight back is also confined.

With the previous deprivation and displacement of things as foreshadowing, in a closed and oppressive environment like Thornfield, "things as agents of action" such as letters and knives are confined one by one. This completes the double confinement of Antoinette physically and mentally, and becomes the final link leading to her complete loss of power. Antoinette no longer has the possibility to reverse her fate, and completely becomes a tragic individual who is imprisoned and controlled.

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5. Conclusion

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys completes and reconstructs the life trajectory of Bertha, the "madwoman" in *Jane Eyre*, and deeply exposes the tragic fate that marginalized women cannot escape under the dual oppression of colonial hegemony and patriarchal order. A series of things in the work not only serve as the background of the characters' activities, but also participate in the construction of the characters' identity and affect the power relations between them. Based on the theory of thing-narrative, this paper sorts out the three stages of development of these "things as agents of action", and finds that the deprivation of things initially shakes Antoinette's identity and dissolves her power materially and spiritually; the displacement of things further completes the replacement of living background and cultural symbols, intensifies her identity alienation in an implicit way, and reverses the gender power relations; the confinement of things ultimately realizes the double blockade of Antoinette's body and mind, permanently sealing her native identity, completely depriving her of the remaining rights to survive and resist, and plunging her fate into the mire of tragedy. This paper hopes to expand the interpretive perspective of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, bring inspiration to academic research on identity disorder and power operation under the theory of thing-narrative, and at the same time provide help for a better understanding of racial, gender and cultural conflicts and the construction of an inclusive and diverse modern society.

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