

Two Cultural Perceptions in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract

Re-telling a story from a different point of view is a process of deconstructing a culturally based assumption into a new one with new way of seeing. Jean Rhys in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* sets a debate or dialogue to revision or re-examine the history of Bertha the Creole who has been overlooked and silenced in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* for a long time. In giving a voice to Berth, Rhys cursors Brontë's failure to see the other as human with expectations and aspirations regardless to race, the color and religion.

Key words: self, other, patriarchy, alienation, social restraints, trauma, individuality.

1. Introduction

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is an investigative examining of Bertha Mason, Edward Rochester's first wife in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)—named Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It is a focused study of the sense of displacement experienced by the self as a result of existing in a world of denial, negation and oppression. Such self, who has been rejected and never been granted any recognition because of her race and the color of complexion, survives and gains her independent individuality by defying the brutal acts of one race against another in a world of dichotomy and hierarchy which denies acknowledging the other as a human being. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha, who has been represented as the mad woman, has been referred to as "it," "beast" and "wild animal."

1.2 Two Cultures and two Representations

Jane Eyre's Jane and *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s Antoinette, though they are divergently different characters, yet they own the same title of being Mr. Rochester's wife. Both suffer the patriarchal despotism of the Victorian assumed conventions of gender and the complexities of male/female relationship but their conceptual reaction toward such type of oppression is different. Jane is the Victorian figure who struggles for feminism to maintain the emotional and spiritual satisfaction in a society dominated by males. Shackled by the confines and restrictions of her Victorian social structures and male dominance which coerce her to be the slave angle in the house, Jane dresses like a "doll" and behave like a slave possessed by the male like a purchased property. During the nineteenth-century, female were voiceless and has no rights to express themselves. Power, authority and making decisions were limited exclusively to male as "in law a husband and wife are one person, and the husband is that person" (Jones 1994). What sharpens the female's dilemma in the Victorian society is her heartily acceptance of this submissiveness which accredits her to win the Victorian male's approval. Jane reconciles herself to slavery of being an odalisque in her subjection that is adored by the Victorian male. She willingly uses the simile of master-slave relationship to describe her bondage to Mr. Rochester, "He smiled; and I thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a *slave* his gold and gems had enriched." (*Jane Eyre*, p.271). The hierarchal male/female relationship in the Victorian society is not a relationship of bondage and submissiveness for the female only but rather it is a relationship that shackles both male and female into its confines. In this regard, Jane describes the female situation during the Victorian era as, "Millions are condemned to a stiller doom

than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot . . . they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation” (*Jane Eyre*, p.111).

1.3 Conclusion

During the nineteenth-century, the English strongly believed in the English superiority over the people of other races. It was an overwhelmingly and profoundly embraced belief that was inspired by the British Empire that dominated three quarter of earth. Such feeling and regrettable trait succumbed the English to excessive arrogance which resulted in narcissism and mental blindness in not seeing and acknowledging the other who has been a subject to negation, violent and brutal acts. Both Rochester and Jane have played their parts in the colonial project against Antoinette/Berth being an outsider. Rochester’s brutal acts in appropriating Antoinette/Berth wealth, accusing her of being mad and imprisoning her in the attic room stem from social forces and political agenda to maintain the prestige of the English personality as a master and the British Empire as the invincible empire. Jane, and due to her bondage to the colonial society of the British Empire and her dream of gaining Rochester as a husband, chooses to be silent concerning Rochester’s acts against Bertha. She decides eventually that Bertha should die in the fire to make her dream come true and provide herself, and Rochester, with the sense of relief from her rival the ‘mad and evil’ woman in the attic which has been kept in the dark, unvoiced, unacknowledged and never been given a chance to speak up throughout the thirty-eight chapters of Brontë’s novel.

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