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Finding A Voice: Transition From *Jane Eyre* To *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Abstract

The 19th century canonical text, *Jane Eyre*, written by Charlotte Brontë in 1847 is set in England and displays some attitudes of an English writer of her times. Yet more importantly, the novelist moves to a greater awareness of a changing world and is in fact a part of the change. She sets out to redefine some of the commonly held norms of the time, especially in the recasting of roles of women who had been marginalized for centuries. This novel serves as a source of inspiration for Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* written in 1966 - more than a hundred years after Charlotte Brontë's novel. The novel picks up the story of Bertha Mason, who, in *Jane Eyre*, had not been given a voice and was presented as a mad

woman who was confined to the attic at Thornfield Hall. Rhys gives us in detail, the point of view of Bertha, a Creole and sets her novel in West Indies. The action moves to England only at the end of the novel after Antoinette is declared mad. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* new perspectives on feminism emerge. Issues of race and colonialism that were only suggested in passing in the older novel, take the center stage in the 20th century novel. The objective of this paper is to juxtapose these two novels and see how their authors raise questions about issues of marginalization, feminism, race and colonization. The inter-textuality opens out a new arena for re-defining, re-locating and re-emphasizing older boundaries.

Keywords: Feminism, Racism, Colonialism

Charlotte Brontë, (1816-1855) the Nineteenth Century canonical writer hardly needs an introduction. She, along with her sisters, Emily and Anne, published initially under male pseudonyms, paved the way for later writers to overcome prejudices against women and women writers of the time. Out of the four novels written by Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* is considered to be her finest work, lending itself to a variety of interpretations and readings. The initial response to the novel was highly critical. Matthew Arnold's comment "The writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage, and therefore that is all she can, put in her book." (quoted by Read) is one such example. One can understand that a work like this would ruffle the sensibilities of the Victorian readers. It raised far-reaching issues such as the role of women and social mobility and set about redefining them.

Brontë's novel takes in the center stage, the plain dependent Jane, an orphan who breaks her constraints in Gateshead and gets educated albeit at a charity school. She chalks out her destiny as a governess and takes her life decisions herself. The first person narrative is Jane's, a soulful voice communicating directly with the readers and inviting them to share her

experience. The form of the novel is a bildungsroman, a novel of growth and there are several autobiographical elements in it.

Rochester, the love interest of the heroine, is depicted as a person who is wronged by his family, cheated out of his inheritance, and cornered into marrying Bertha, who has inherited her family's wealth and madness. Rochester confines his mad wife to the attic and keeps this as a dark secret, hiding it from Jane too. He reveals her existence only when he is compelled to do so. Jane loves him but she leaves him, only to return much later after circumstances have changed.

Jane Eyre, posits protest against the patriarchal norms of the times. Jane emerges as a new woman, educating herself and moving on to economic independence as a teacher and governess. Twice, she rejects relationships that do not suit her and will accept marriage only eventually and on her own terms. Rochester has to mature and change to be worthy of Jane before she decides to marry him.

In an oft quoted passage Jane says, "women feel just as men feel: they need exercise for their faculties, and afield for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; . . . and its narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, . . . It is thoughtless to condemn them. . . if they seek to do more. . ." (Brontë 111)

In addition, we see that patriarchal figures such as John Reed, Brocklehurst and St John Rivers are critiqued as well as women like Mrs. Reed, who propagate the concept of male superiority.

In spite of transgressing traditional boundaries, Brontë's novel is a Nineteenth Century work and has its limitations. One of the weaknesses of the novel and a problematic area for modern readers is the portrayal of Bertha Mason. We hear only Rochester's version of the story of Bertha. She is associated with a ghostly presence and is depicted as a wild

animal and can utter only guttural sounds. When she is finally presented in the novel as Rochester's wife, she is shown as mad and it is suggested she is confined to the attic because she is "intemperate and unchaste" (Brontë 270). Charlotte Brontë indicates little concern for her; as this would detract sympathy from Rochester, the partner of her heroine.

Published in 1847, *Jane Eyre*, nevertheless continues to inspire readers and writers of the modern times. More than a hundred years after the publication, one such writer, is Jean Rhys (1890 -1979), a Dominican born British writer of stories and novels, who read *Jane Eyre* after publishing her second novel in 1939. For years Rhys worked on a response to it and finally came out of her literary hibernation with her novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966. This novel won the Royal Society of Literature Award and W. H. Smith Award of the year, besides other honors for the writer. Rhys was considered a writer of repute and her retelling of the classic text brought her great fame. In the words of Alexis Lykiard, Rhys in her novel, "was to extend, explore and modernize, while also rendering timeless, that cry, that yearning, and all those other vital elements she rediscovered in Brontë's novel" (quoted in Jenkins 8)

Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 'writes back' to *Jane Eyre* and recasts the story of Bertha, and tells us about her childhood and adolescence and her marriage to the unnamed man (Rochester). Therefore the novel is a prequel to *Jane Eyre* and is set predominately in the West Indies. It takes the viewpoint of Bertha Mason, a white Creole and not Jane's and this formulates its main deviation from the original novel. As Antoinette, she is the heroine of her own story now and will struggle to remain so in spite of other dominating forces.

As author Danielle McLaughlin writes for *The Paris Review*: "The novel didn't just take inspiration from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, it illuminated and confronted it, challenged the narrative". Or, to quote novelist Michele Roberts, (*The Times*) "Rhys took one

of the works of genius of the nineteenth century and turned it inside-out to create one of the works of genius of the twentieth century”.

“Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* can each be seen as feminist texts when considering their social and historical context, but *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents a more post-modern form of feminism.”(Lewkowicz) This is apparent in many ways. Jane’s singular, first person narrative gives way to a multi-vocal narrative. Antoinette / Bertha is not the only narrator. In all fairness, Rhys gives a chance to Rochester to tell his version of the story and the readers get a glimpse into his mind. Grace Poole is given a narrative voice and other narrative devices such as reported speech, letters, dialogues and fragments of song are used also. Through all these narrative techniques, Rhys attempts to provide objectivity to the subjective narrative of Antoinette. Still the most powerful voice is Antoinette’s. The voice is fragile, sensitive and sensual but unmistakably her own. Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, who had been relegated to voiceless entity, finally finds her voice in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Antoinette’s consciousness may be a fractured and precarious one but it is driven to madness by Rochester. Subjected to patriarchal dominance, Antoinette is wronged by Rochester in many ways. His insistence of changing her name from Antoinette to Bertha is destructive for her. She objects, saying, “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name.”(Rhys 95) and later again, “Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass.”(Rhys 116) This is the turning point of the novel, as with the change of name, she cannot even recognize her physical self. Her personal identity is diffused and she will soon lose her cultural identity too; these are the reasons for her madness. The fragmentation is complete.

Moreover, Rochester listens to rumors about Antoinette and her family, even to the extent of believing the half-truths and falsified accounts of Daniel Cosway. He also, commits adultery with Amelie, with his wife being in the next room and this destroys Antoinette completely. He forces Antoinette to leave West Indies thereby taking away of her cultural identity too. In England, he pronounces her mad and confines her to the attic, erasing her existence from his personal life as well as from the social world.

Rochester feels that Richard Mason has deceived him about the fact that there is madness in Antoinette's family. This is counter acted by the fact that Rochester, has also, deceived the Mason family about his marriage for reasons of gaining wealth. Rochester is to blame for damaging his own life as well as his wife's.

In keeping with the Nineteenth Century's notions of madness and its treatment, it is suggested in *Jane Eyre* that Bertha's sexual transgressions, have led to her madness. Rhys does not alter the broad outline of the original novel, as this is the point where they intersect. Yet she questions the concept of madness. In her novel madness exists and sanity is shattered but this is displayed in other characters of the novel not just Antoinette. Characters, including Rochester, Christophine and Daniel Cosway seem to have shades of insanity too. Yet it is Annette, Antoinette's mother, as well as Antoinette, who both are confined. The two women lead a fragile and isolated existence as a part of the colonial system, which is by now falling apart. Both Annette's husbands are exploitative and indifferent to her and have corroded Annette's sanity. Madness is not only hereditary; it is enforced by "patriarchal dominance and colonial systems."(Jenkins 12)

The next part of my paper, deals with racism and colonialism in both the original and the Twentieth Century novel. In the earlier novel the issue of colonialism is left on the periphery. Charlotte Brontë is a writer of her times and shares the prejudices of Victorian

England. She is restrictive and limited in her treatment of colonial issues. This is demonstrated through the instances listed below.

We have seen how Bertha Mason is presented as a deviant and so is marginalized doubly as a mad woman. She is also shown as the racial ‘Other.’ She is not English but a Creole from the West Indies. Charlotte Brontë distances the monster of the book, to a far off land and can cast her as ghastly and violent as possible. When she dies, it is perceived with a sense of relief and the threads of the novel are neatly tied up without sparing many thoughts to her.

Moreover, Charlotte Brontë describes the culture and social setup in the West Indies in a derogatory ways. Rochester says – “This life ...is hell: this is the air - those are the sounds of the bottomless pit” (Brontë 305) and only the winds from Europe are considered “sweet” and “fresh”.

One must remember that both Rochester’s and Jane’s fortunes are gained through riches in the West Indies, one from his wife and the other as the legacy from her uncle. Both accept this wealth without any guilt about its source, which is likely to be gained through slave trade.

The latent racism and the dismissive attitude of Charlotte Brontë in the original novel is what Jean Rhys is concerned with in her novel. In an interview in 1968, she says, “Charlotte Brontë must have something against the West Indies and I was angry about it” (Jenkins 9) Rhys sets her novel away from England, except the very end and places it in the Caribbean, in itself an act of aligning physically and geographically with the colonized.

West Indies is described in vivid detail as a place of visual beauty, of multifarious scents, colors and sounds. Antoinette revels in its culture, in its dreamlike atmosphere and celebrates it, even its magic or obeah. Antoinette in the Twentieth Century novel is symbolically associated with the intense and wild beauty of the Caribbean, especially with

the sun. She is alive in the hot and sultry weather but in England, her vitality is completely lost.

Rhys writes a historical novel setting the time frame to a few years after the Emancipation Act of 1833 banning slavery and thus the novel is a postcolonial one. Once the slaves are free, they are not sure about how to rebuild their lives and some continue working as servants. The whites and the Creoles had wealth gained from slave trade, but now their houses and possessions are ruined. Some like Mr. Luttrell commit suicide, some go mad like Annette and some are dispossessed like Antoinette. It is not possible to escape the taints of colonialism.

Even in childhood, Antoinette notices the multi-racialism in West Indies and all races are acceptable to her as she is more comfortable with the blacks slaves than her own race. On one level, she identifies with the colonized subjects and wants to be like them. She befriends Tia, who lessens her loneliness but in two separate incidents, disappears with her clothes and then later hurls a stone at Antoinette. As a Creole, Antoinette is identified as a 'white cockroach.' The resentful but by now, free slaves, set her beloved house at Coulibre on fire. Her brother dies as a result of the fire and eventually she loses her mother due to this too. She is subjected to reverse racialism even though she never practiced racialism herself.

If she cannot be like the colonized blacks, she cannot be like the white colonizers either. She as a Creole, a native, of mixed blood and has no fixed racial identity. She is never fully accepted by either the blacks or the whites. She is also identified with the racial 'Other' by Rochester who stresses her difference from him. In her comment about a song, she says, "It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I [sic] often wonder who I am and where is my

country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all.” (Rhys 63) Rochester never accepts her anguish and thinks only about himself.

To Rochester’s mind Antoinette is a representation of West Indies - be it the people, the obeh, the weather, the sights, the sounds, the smells and the culture. He says, as he is leaving the West Indies –

“ I was tired of these people. I disliked their laughter and their tears, their flattery and envy, conceit and deceit. I hated the place. I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and its cruelty which was a part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and loveliness.” (Rhys 112)

Rochester’s speech against all that Antoinette stands for shows his biased attitude to races and cultures different from his own.

Rochester has dominated Antoinette as a woman and has also treated her as a colonial subject, exploiting and dispossessing her. Even at the very end of the novel she cries out, “What am I doing in this place and who am I?”(Rhys 116) and this highlights her rejection at all levels. There is no one to listen to her now in her English prison. Antoinette/Bertha is silenced again, in keeping with her presentation in the original novel. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jane is absent and silent but Antoinette - has had her say. The literary revenge is complete.

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